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Welcome to the *ANCIE Bulletin*, a monthly electronic newsletter that explores different topics about newcomer children living in BC, including immigrants, refugees, international students, and children of temporary foreign workers. This e-bulletin focuses on refugee children.

What is a Refugee?

The Geneva Convention (1951) defines a refugee as a person who, owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality, and who is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [or herself] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In Canada, there are three types of refugees:

- **Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs)** – The federal government relies on the UNHCR to identify and refer refugees who are either living outside their home country and cannot return because of a well-founded fear of persecution, or are living in a previously defined source country, are affected by civil or armed conflict, and face continued persecution. GARs may have experienced trauma in their own countries or may have spent most of their lives in refugee camps.
- **Privately Sponsored Refugees** – Along with the UNHCR, the federal government also relies on private sponsoring groups, such as church groups, to identify and refer refugees for resettlement to Canada. Under an agreement with the federal government these groups promise to provide funds and carry out certain duties for the refugees during their settlement transition period.
- **Refugees Claimants/Asylum Seekers** – Canada offers refugee protection to people already in Canada who fear persecution or whose removal from Canada would subject them to a danger of torture, a risk to their life, or a risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. Claims can be made at any port of entry or inland Citizenship and Immigration Canada office. Officers assess the claim and decide if it will be sent to the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) for further decision. If the claim is eligible, the refugee claimant will be allowed to stay in Canada temporarily until a decision is made by the IRB.

FACTS

- Of the 9,832 refugees that arrived in British Columbia between 2004 and 2008, 43% were government assisted refugees (GARs), 12% were privately sponsored refugees, and 32% were refugee claimants/asylum seekers. ([WelcomeBC](#))
- Between 2004 and 2008, 6% of refugees were children under the age of five and 18% were between the ages of six and twelve. Only 31% of these primary school aged children arrived with knowledge of an official language. ([WelcomeBC](#))
- Between April 1 and June 30, 2010, 37% of GARs settled in Surrey, 25% in Vancouver, 22% in Burnaby, 8% in the Tri-Cities, and 3% in North Vancouver. ([ISSofBC](#))
- Between April 1 and June 30, 2010, the top five source countries for GARs to British Columbia were Myanmar (21%), Iraq (20%), Somalia (18%), Afghanistan (15%) and Iran (11%). ([ISSofBC](#))
- In Canada, the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (IRPA), Section 30(2), states that school districts in British Columbia are mandated to provide refugee children with an education, even if they are in the process of having their claims reviewed. ([Citizenship and Immigration Canada](#))





Differences Between Refugees And Immigrants

IMMIGRANTS	GOVERNMENT ASSISTED REFUGEES	REFUGEE CLAIMANTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal business is taken care of before leaving home country. 	<p>Government assists with personal business, but most of it is left unresolved after a long-period of time spent in displacement.</p>	<p>Personal business in the home country is left unsettled after leaving in a hurry.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education usually continues uninterrupted. 	<p>Education has been interrupted for many years due to conflict in country of origin and long-term settlement in a refugee camp.</p>	<p>Education may continue uninterrupted, or it may be interrupted or postponed.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to prepare for the transition allows for development of an awareness of the new country and its culture. 	<p>Government offers settlement and integration assistance, but many still face difficulties during the transition process into Canadian society.</p>	<p>Transition into Canadian society may be more difficult or confusing for refugee claimants. They may be unsure of legal processes and their rights. The claim may take years to be processed, and the outcome is often uncertain.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of loss and trauma is not necessarily present. 	<p>The sense of loss and trauma may be profound. This is due to conflict in the country of origin and prolonged time spent in a refugee / internally displaced person's camp. Losses may include family members or personal property.</p>	<p>The sense of loss and trauma may be profound. This may be due to a number of reasons, such as conflict in the country of origin or fear of persecution. Losses may include family members or personal property.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Returning home is a personal choice. 	<p>Returning home is often not an option unless the situation has stabilized or ended.</p>	<p>Returning home is often not an option unless the situation has stabilized or ended.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families may be intact, or one or both parents may live and work in the country of origin while remaining family members are in Canada to enable children to complete their education. 	<p>Effort is made to keep families together, but in leaving their home country and living in a displaced setting the family may have been separated.</p>	<p>Children may arrive to Canada without their parents, or without a legal guardian.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrangements likely have been made for basic requirements, such as food, housing, and medical and dental care. 	<p>The federal government provides financial assistance through the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) for transportation to Canada and basic requirements for the first year. However, financial assistance is repayable after one year.</p>	<p>Once the refugee claim is deemed eligible, basic requirements are provided through the Government of BC's social assistance program.</p>

Modified from "[Students from Refugee Backgrounds – A Guide 2009](#)," BC Ministry of Education.





Challenges Faced by Refugee Children and their Families

Refugee children and their families have often experienced many difficulties and challenges in their countries of origin and/or refugee camps, and continue to face more after arrival to Canada. Not only do they need to meet their basic needs, such as finding shelter, clothing and food, but they also need to learn the laws, language and customs of the new country. GARs must prepare to pay back transportation loans to the Canadian government, while refugee claimants must wait to find out if they are able to remain in Canada. It also takes a long time before they can be reunited with their families. This may affect physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as confidence and identity.

- **Refugee Family Reunification** – Refugees are sometimes forced to wait years to be reunited with their families due to the narrow definition of family in the IRPA. Once reunited, the relationship between family members may be strained, as connections could be lost after years of separation. For example, a parent who left a young child behind may now see a teenager. Children feel abandoned and betrayed, and it is not easy for them to build back trust. ([Canadian Council for Refugees](#))
- **Refugee Transportation Loan** – Canadian policy requires GARs to repay the costs of their travel to come to Canada for resettlement. The average transportation loan debt is more than \$3,000 and can reach \$10,000 for families with several children. Refugees are expected to start repaying the loan after one year and have it repaid within six years. The pressure intensifies to repay the loan before interest starts after three years. The burden of the loan forces parents to work multiple jobs, and sometimes their children must even work. It reduces their ability for them to pay for their basic needs, or to provide their children with much needed supports at home. ([First Call](#))

Case Study From: Yaya de Andrade, PhD

ES was an eleven year old boy who lived with his grandparents, parents and older brother. His parents came from Cambodia with his mother's parents after surviving torture, starvation, and the murder of the father's entire family during the Pol Pot regime. After arriving in Canada ES's father, a wealthy businessman in Cambodia, was only able to find work at a gas station and his mother was no longer able to play as a concert pianist due to injuries sustained during torture. ES's family, like countless others, faced numerous traumatic events that had an acute affect on their present psychological health. They experienced flashbacks, hallucinations and delusions of being attacked.

As a child, ES was happy and playful. His early physical and psycho-social development was normal, but when he was eight years old, he was observed sticking himself with sharp objects. He underwent psychiatric evaluation and was treated with various medications. He began having major mood swings – he went from being sedated to having unpredictable explosive anger outbursts with uncharacteristic screaming. ES had difficulty making friends and socializing in school. He was disinterested in social activities and spent most of his time playing select video games. ES tended to hum loudly to himself, apparently oblivious to the ridicule by peers or re-direction by adults.

ES started to attend a behavioural program at school, as well as group counselling for children and adolescents. He was often quiet during group discussions, but when asked questions, he indicated that he was present. He was clearly interested and involved in group activities. It was also at this time that he discovered his talent in drawing cartoons. He continued school and completed grade 12, and has since found a job in a warehouse. He currently lives with his parents and continues to take his medication. Recently, when speaking about his grandfather's death, he was also able to bring up a more positive memory about running into an old friend from his newcomers' group.





Refugee Children And Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Refugee children who have been victims of war, violence, torture or crime may suffer from trauma that leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or they could be affected by their parents' PTSD (Greenidge). However, not all refugee children will experience stress in the same way, nor will they react in the same way to the same experiences. It is important not to make assumptions until a child has been diagnosed by a professional.

Understanding and patience is often tested when working with individuals with PTSD. Trauma may lie hidden or manifest itself in seemingly unrelated behaviours. It may be months, or even years, before symptoms occur. Refugee children who suffer from PTSD may exhibit some of the following behaviours: difficulty concentrating, anxiety, irritability, tiredness, preoccupation with violence, anger, denial, and separation distress. New occurrences may remind them of negative experiences in their homeland. For example, the sound of a school bell could trigger anxiety in a refugee child suffering from PTSD.

Schooling

Refugee children often face challenges adapting to the Canadian school system. Many refugee children have grown up displaced from their homes and have little history or formal education. Education may have consisted of make-shift schools in refugee camps or none at all. For example, Muslim girls in Afghanistan were unable to attend school under the Taliban unless their families could afford to pay for schooling – in most cases the family could not. This leads to refugee students having fewer literacy and content skills, different behavioural expectations and more safety concerns than other students. Refugee children may also suffer from culture shock, discrimination, health concerns or disruptions to their family structure, which in turn can affect their success in school. This can also lead to increased vulnerability to abuse, or limit their ability to contribute to the communities in which they live.

Schools face the challenge of assisting refugee children with their integration into the school system. They are required to teach about school culture, and are accountable for children's academic progress. School districts are required to submit student numbers twice a year to the Ministry of Education – in September and February – which determines the amount of funding available to provide additional supports. Approximately 50% of GARs arrive between mid-September and mid-December, so the numbers submitted in September do not include those GARs arriving in the fall, and additional supports for refugee students may not be available until after the second count in February.

For more information on the challenges faced by refugee students, please see [*Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools*](#).

What Can You Do?

Refugee children display incredible amounts of strength and hope, and these qualities are integral for building a successful future. Many individuals, groups and organizations across Canada provide services to assist refugees with their settlement and integration into Canada society. The following is a list of what you can do to support refugee children:

- Understand where children are coming from – some come from war-torn situations or refugee camps where they may not have a sense of a “normal” life.
- Reflect the needs and show cultural understanding in services provided to refugee families. Some refugees may need to decompress and/or share their stories before they are able to integrate into Canadian society.





- Describe expectations or provide materials on raising children to refugee parents, as they may be unaware of Canadian laws around supervision, discipline, safety, or educational participation. For example, [*Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook*](#) could be provided to parents
- Understand what culture shock is. For example, refugee children may have great survival skills and other talents, but may not know how to use a crayon or use a Western style bathroom.
- Clearly state expectations with children. For example, let them know that it is okay to run in the gym but not in the classroom, drawing in some books is alright but not in others, bells signal a change in activity, and it is okay to be separated from family during school.
- When focusing on behaviour focus on the positive, model positive behaviours, cue, build routines and have clear consequences for misconduct. A reward system may also work.
- Use visual aids, physical activities or small group activities. Start small and build skills incrementally.
- Pair refugee children with other children for activities or to provide mentoring with a “buddy”.
- Integration into the larger school community and mainstream classrooms is important for refugee children. It will help them learn school activities and how to interact with other children.
- Communicate with everyone working with the refugee student. Teachers, settlement workers in schools (SWIS), service providers and/or parents may notice different behaviours and could provide ideas or support.

The above has been adapted from

[*Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education: Identifying Challenges and Strategies.*](#)

Further Reading

BC Statistics. [*Special Feature: Refugee Immigrants to British Columbia.*](#)

Birman, Dina. [*Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education: Identifying Challenges and Strategies.*](#)

Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services. [*Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook.*](#)

British Columbia Ministry of Education. [*Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools.*](#)

Canadian Council for Refugees. [*More than a Nightmare: Delays in Refugee Family Reunification.*](#)

Canadian Council for Refugees. [*'Wish You Were Here...': Campaign for speedy family reunification.*](#)

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. [*Refugees.*](#)

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. [*Cultural Profiles Project.*](#)

de Andrade, Yaya, PhD. Registered Psychologist, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Diab, Soha. [*Beyond Borders: Unaccompanied Refugee Minors and Access to Refugee Protection.*](#) McGill University.

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. [*Campaign to Repeal Refugee Transportation Loan Requirement.*](#)





Greenidge, Janice. Manager, Newcomers' Centre for Children and Families, MOSAIC, BC Canada.

Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia. [*Faces of Refugees: Settlement Patterns in the Greater Vancouver Regional District \(GVRD\). January 2003-December 2006.*](#)

Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia. [*Government-Assisted Refugee \(GAR\) Bulletin – January 2010, Statistical Highlights, January 1, 2009-December 31, 2010.*](#)

Kirmayer, Laurence J. et al. "Common mental health problems in immigrants and refugees: general approach in primary care." [*Canadian Guidelines for Immigrant Health.*](#)

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. [*Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.*](#)

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. [*A Statistical Profile of Government-Assisted Refugees.*](#)

United Nations Association in Canada. [*Refugees: A Canadian Experience - Teacher's guide*](#)

Vargas, Claudia Maria, PhD. [*War Trauma in Refugees: Red Flags and Clinical Principals.*](#) Here to Help.

Welcome BC. [*Refugee Immigrants to British Columbia 2004-2008.*](#)

Information on refugee children, including research and resources cited in this bulletin and more, can be found [here](#) under "Refugee" in the "Groups" section.

For more information about AMSSA's Newcomer Children's Advocate Program, please visit: www.amssa.org/ancie.

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About AMSSA:

The Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA) is provincial not-for-profit, non-partisan umbrella organization representing and serving over 75 immigrant settlement and multicultural agencies in British Columbia. AMSSA members are mandated to address a broad spectrum of multicultural and immigrant settlement and integration issues in their communities. AMSSA acts as a central resource for member community agencies working in large urban centres and smaller communities. AMSSA's services and engagement extend to all levels of government, as well as to relevant public institutions, the private sector, community groups, and the general public. For more information, please visit www.amssa.org.

For more information about AMSSA's Newcomer Children's Advocate Program, please contact Rishima Bahadoorsingh at newcomerchildren@amssa.org.

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