

CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

After the trauma of fleeing their home country, it's important that Syrian families feel that the childcare room is a safe and stable environment. To create this kind of “safe haven”, programs can develop a space where children can hear English but are not pushed to use it, and where they can observe activities and are encouraged to join in but are not required to.

There are also many other things you can do to reduce stress and help ease this difficult transition for families.

Preparing Staff:

- Ensure all staff have the information they need on what to expect and tools for success. Do they understand culture shock and its stages? Are they aware of strategies for addressing it?
- Assign one staff member to take the lead with the family.
- Identify strategies for communicating with the parent. Take the time to learn some words in Arabic (or in the other languages spoken by the Syrian refugees in your program) to support early communication with parents and children. Choose words that are important such as greetings, soothing words, “yes/no” and “bathroom”; words that will help children communicate their physical needs and will help them to feel comfortable and cared for.
- Have translated materials available for parents. Provide information as needed, but also make sure that translated materials are visible and accessible so parents can access information and resources for themselves.
- Keep some extra clothing on hand in case the child has an accident due to behaviour regression or the parent does not bring what is required (e.g., socks, weather-appropriate clothing).
- Be prepared to do frequent head counts and/or divide a large group into smaller groups for supervision.

Adapting Your Space:

- The entrances to programs can often be busy and overwhelming. Try to minimize clutter and create a welcoming entry where families can gradually enter the program.
- Make sure you have a quiet area where children can retreat when they don't want to be part of the busy program. Make simple, attractive, age- and culturally appropriate books available in this area. Huge pillows with washable covers work well.
- Be sensitive to the possibility that a large amount of open space and too many activities may be overwhelming to the child.
- Avoid playing music all day long. Play only soothing music for a limited amount of time (10-15 minutes) each day. Too much background noise increases stress levels, which can make children irritable. It also makes it hard for them to hear and understand things being said to them when they are learning the new language.



Adapting Your Program and Routine:

- Be flexible about routines and expectations and try to minimize transitions.
- Use visual schedules and clear, simple pictures to give children clues about what to do. This reduces stress for children and caregivers. For example, tape a photo of a toy on a toy shelf so the child knows where to put the toy when tidying up.
- When settling new children, remove toys that require too much supervision or that are hard to put away. Keep favourite toys and frequently used equipment out for extended lengths of time.
- Make sensory areas appealing and readily available (e.g., warm play dough). Do not use food in the sensory area and avoid water play for the first few weeks. For many children who have spent time in refugee camps, there have been food and water shortages and/or water may have been unsafe.
- Children should have a choice to participate in activities or not to (e.g., to come to a group time or use the toilet or sit for snack). Having a good non-punitive alternative to each activity is respectful.

Think about your program - Are there any triggers that you need to plan ahead for?

For example:

You run a childcare centre in a school and have a refugee child who has just started in your program. As usual, the 10:40 school bell rings. The child becomes upset. He cries and hides. You try to comfort the child but he doesn't settle down until his grandmother comes to pick him up almost an hour later. It may be that the bell triggered memories of traumatic events the child was exposed to. What could you have done to avoid this?

- *Think in advance about any loud sounds that happen regularly in your program.*
- *Talk to the parent ahead of time so that the parent can help to prepare the child.*
- *Have staff go to the child five minutes before the bell is scheduled to ring. Remind/warn the child that it is about to happen and support them to prepare for it. For example, ask "Do you want to cover your ears?" or "Do you want to sit on my lap?"*
- *If the bell signals a transition time, you might be able to find a way that the child can engage with and help with the transition. For example, he could ring a different bell or shake a maraca at the same time as the bell rings.*

NOTE: *The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs create a safe and welcoming environment for refugee families, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work for the unique challenges and strengths of your program and families.*

