

HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

CARE FOR
NEWCOMER
CHILDREN
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SERIES



The stress and trauma that some refugee children and families have faced can interfere with daily routines and activities and can cause emotional struggles. This can be difficult for adults to handle, but it is even harder for children, who may not yet be able to identify all of their emotions, let alone have developed strategies to cope with them.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE STRESS IN REFUGEE CHILDREN

A change in behaviour is usually the first sign of difficulty.

Look for:

- Whining, clinging, poor listening, biting, kicking, crying;
- Hair pulling/twisting, thumb sucking, daydreaming;
- Hiding, blank stare/"flat" emotions, inability to engage in play, disinterest in others;
- Fighting with peers and family;
- Becoming restless, impulsive or overly-cautious;
- Poor concentration, lack of appetite or excessive eating;
- Frustration, sadness, oversensitivity;
- Becoming forgetful, showing poor concentration, being easily distracted;
- Becoming fearful, angry, sad, or reacting strongly to loud noises.

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8 STRATEGIES FOR HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN TO COPE WITH STRESS

- 1. Give them tools to communicate their emotions:** Consider using visuals or a program like [Zones of Regulation](#). Show labeled pictures of children experiencing different emotions. You can then have the child point to the emotion they are experiencing.
- 2. Build relaxation time and physical activity into your program:** A quiet time or short period of exercise can help to alleviate stress. Activities with repetitive actions, like rolling a ball back and forth, action songs, jumping, children's yoga or beading work especially well.
- 3. Offer them activity choices:** When a child makes a choice about which of two activities they would like to do, it empowers them to feel confident and encourages them to be purposefully engaged in their daily activities.
- 4. Give them your full attention when they make attempts to communicate:** This helps to build trust, which is essential to good mental health.
- 5. Provide familiar materials and demonstrate how to use materials that are new to them:** Children may not be familiar with new foods, books, toys, art materials or utensils, or with things like self-feeding and sensory play. By demonstrating how to use new items or do new things, you will help to increase children's comfort levels.
- 6. Monitor the use of music in your program:** Avoid having music on all the time. Children learning a new language need to hear the sounds and words that their caregivers and peers use to communicate. Loud music can also add to their stress.
- 7. Enhance the sensory activities and materials in your environment:** This might include activities like clay and bubbles, as well as the addition of a variety of soothing textures in all areas. For example, you can have a small pillow or soft blanket available for when children need a break from the busy classroom.
- 8. Provide options for story time and include plenty of books that foster social-emotional development:** Have a number of different books available that help children talk about and understand emotions. Be sure to include both calming storybooks and more active stories.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs support the refugee children and families that they work with. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.

Visit cmascanada.ca for more resources to support your work with newcomer families



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