

SUPPORTING REFUGEE FAMILIES THROUGH GRADUAL SEPARATION



Having to say goodbye can be difficult at the best of times, but it can be particularly painful for refugee families who may have experienced trauma. As a caregiver, you can support both parents and children by understanding separation anxiety and using strategies to help families learn to say goodbye.

The separation process may take anywhere from several days to several weeks and must be handled carefully. An abrupt or forced separation can be much more than just upsetting to the child—it can be harmful to their long-term development and can affect their ability to trust others.

Staff should have a plan in place that encourages parents to stay and participate in program routines and activities with their child in the beginning. This will help the child get comfortable with the program, caregivers and routines.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR EASING SEPARATION ANXIETY:

- Allow time for gradual separation. Full separation can take longer for families who have experienced violence and trauma.
- Assign one consistent person to work with the parent and child. Consistency in staffing will provide refugee children and families with the opportunity to bond with one person on your team, helping them to build a trusting relationship.

MAKING A SEPARATION PLAN:

- Plan for separation anxiety and take the time to help children settle—but be flexible. Each child is unique and the ways to settle them will vary.
- Communicate a plan for gradual separation with the parent. Use an interpreter or do your best to support and build on simple language with gestures and props.

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INVOLVING THE PARENT:

- Help the parent find an area of the room where they feel comfortable (e.g., the literacy area) and encourage them to sit down and stay sitting until their child wants to explore other parts of the room. Sitting down helps the child understand that their parent will stay. From this secure anchor, they may gain more confidence to explore or watch others.
- While the parent is participating in the program with their child, observe their interactions. How does the parent comfort the child and how do they engage in play? Learn the words the parent uses for “washroom,” “water,” “hungry.” Observe how they feed their child.
- Gradually move closer and engage the child in play.
- Watch children’s cues for readiness. When the child can play for five minutes on their own without needing the parent, they are ready for a first short separation.
- Start with short separations and gradually build up the time that children are separated from their parents.
- Suggest that the parent leave their coat. It helps to reassure the child that their parent will be coming back.
- Invite the parent to bring in a comfort object (e.g., a teddy or blanket) or a familiar object such as a scarf. The child can hold this item when the parent is away and it may help them to feel more secure.
- Help parents to understand that regression is perfectly normal. It’s okay if their child regresses back to wearing diapers or wetting the bed. They have been through stress and trauma.

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Advise the parent to avoid sneaking out when the child is distracted. This can confuse and frighten a child and can reduce the trust the child has with the parent. Stress the importance of saying goodbye.
- Avoid sending the child mixed messages. After a parent says goodbye to their child, instruct them to leave quickly and not to keep coming back for another hug.
- If a child refuses comfort from you as a caregiver, give them space. It’s important to recognize that a child’s rejection of comfort is a response to the stress they are experiencing and is not personal.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs to support refugee families through first separations, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, the child and the family.

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