

WELCOMING REFUGEE FAMILIES

Respect and genuine empathy go a long way toward building trust. After reflecting on any biases you may have and greeting the family with a smile, it's important to look for and build on the family's strengths. When caregivers see families as experts in caring for their children, families feel welcomed and valued. And when caregivers honestly seek to learn from families, a partnership may slowly develop.

This type of partnership between parents and caregivers can not only help to lessen the effects of separation anxiety and culture shock, but can also help caregivers to learn more about the child, including how to comfort them and how to integrate them into the program.

Increasing Comfort Levels:

- Assign one caregiver to interact with families at the start and end of the program to begin building a trusting relationship. Understand that some parents will need time to gain confidence and warm up to you.
- Make an effort to learn how to say “hello” or “thank you” in Arabic (or in the other languages spoken by Syrian families in your program).
- Learn and use the parent's name.
- Be patient. Promote settlement by gradually introducing changes to help the refugee child and family feel comfortable.
- Reflect on any biases you may have and rethink stereotypes.

Facilitating Communication:

- Provide parents with materials that are translated and/or written in simple English or with visuals. Recognize that not all families may be able to read Arabic, even though they may speak it fluently.
- Try not to overwhelm the parents with too much paperwork and registration information all at once. You may choose to modify your registration process to collect and provide information over time, with a focus on immediate needs, health and safety first. Think about the basic information that you need to be able to care for the child and gradually gather all other registration information.
- Speak about one topic at a time (e.g., one key point) and keep conversations short.
- Reduce language and add props and gestures to explain your needs. For example, hold up a diaper and show two fingers if you want the parent to bring an extra diaper tomorrow.
- Find out basic information about the child but avoid asking too many questions or being intrusive about their past.



- Be aware of differences in nonverbal communication and communication styles. These can vary tremendously across cultures. Eye contact, physical space, touch, animation and voice tone are some of the differences that may lead to miscommunication and/or misunderstandings. For example, Syrians may communicate in an intense way; standing close, speaking in loud voices and using large gestures. In Canada, we might consider this to be rude or aggressive, but this is likely not the parents' intention.
- Share simple information daily on the child's activities, mood and achievements. Match your language to that of the family. Keep your speech simple and speak slower (but not louder) for parents with less English. Use consistent language and check for comprehension.
- Where possible, use an interpreter but be sensitive to the fact that some parents might not want to share personal information with anyone. Never use children as interpreters.

Drawing on the Parents' Expertise:

- Always try to find out about the parents' methods before imposing your own. For example, ask for their advice about how to help their child eat or use the washroom. Watch how the parent comforts the child so you can more closely imitate their actions. You can also ask the parent for suggestions on comforting their child.
- Focus on positives and what the child/family can do. For example: When you introduce the child and family, avoid saying "They don't speak English." Instead, say "This is Rasha. She speaks Arabic."
- Respect different methods of child-rearing, as well as family goals and knowledge. Consider your biases and understand that there is no one "right" way.
- Be aware that physical disciplining is an acceptable practice in Syria. Parents will need assistance in understanding different expectations in Canada.
- Respect efforts and celebrate successes with children and their parents

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

