

TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REFUGEE CHILDREN IN YOUR PROGRAM

Developing relationships and trust with the refugee children in your care is key to supporting their resilience and overall settlement.

Dr. Jean Clinton is a leading expert on Infant Mental Health. She once said that “every child in your program should have someone whose face lights up the moment they walk into the room.” This should be true of every child you work with—not just those who are easy to get along with, but also those who challenge you. Never underestimate the power of caring!

The children in your care will feel secure and accepted when you:

- Provide gentle and consistent guidance.** Provide clear boundaries/limits. Once the child understands the limits, balance correction with praise, redirect, and deliver consequences without negative emotions.
- Provide calm, consistent and soothing care** when the child needs comfort or is hurt, frightened, sad or angry. Acknowledge the child’s feelings in ways they can understand. Let them know they’re not alone with their big feelings and support them in developing healthy ways to soothe and calm themselves. This creates a sense of trust and security. It also helps them to feel closer to you and to learn healthy ways to soothe and calm themselves and others as they get older.
- Be respectful, be sensitive and adjust your approach** and expectations for each individual child. Don’t expect children to want to jump right into play. Be sensitive to each child’s needs. If they need an adult, try to stay close-by. If they need space to observe, give them space to do that.
- Keep in mind that children may be sensitive to touch.** Don’t approach the child from behind and touch them on the back. Instead, approach them from where they can see you.
- Carefully observe and get to know the child.** Which toys or activities seem to interest them most? When do they seem most comfortable? Play beside or with the child and offer attention and affection when they are ready. Learn to recognize signs of distress. If possible, learn a simple comfort phrase in the child’s home language and use it. For example, “Mommy’s coming back soon.”
- Reinforce and respond to cues.** Look for signs that might indicate the child needs a quiet space to retreat to or an opportunity for active play. You can then provide alternative activities to avoid upset and disruptive behaviours.



- Provide comfort.** If the child is upset, be there for them. Let them know that you're aware of their distress and respond to it appropriately by providing comfort if the child will allow it. If the child will not accept comfort, be respectful of that. Back away and try to offer reassurance from a distance. Invite the parent to bring in a comfort object (e.g., a blanket or toy) 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.
- Be calm, reliable and consistent.** It's important for children who have experienced trauma to have a calm, reliable, consistent caregiver. If staff take turns settling a child, it is likely to be more difficult and to cause the child more anxiety. This is especially true for infants and toddlers.
- Listen carefully and with interest**—even if the child is speaking another language. Try to respond in genuinely encouraging and positive ways, and learn the phrase “show me” in the home language. This lets the child know that you think what they have to say is important, even if you don't understand yet.
- Minimize the use of language when the child first arrives**, unless you speak the child's home language or the child understands some English. Use simple sounds and gestures to offer comfort. Do not ask too many questions and avoid unnecessary questions about potentially sensitive topics.
- Help children safely express, identify/label feelings** (glad, sad, mad, scared, etc.). Learn some of these words in the home language and pair them with English/French. Point out that other people have these feelings too. Read or tell children stories about people who show empathy, compassion, kindness and understanding for others.