

TIPS FOR CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR REFUGEE FAMILIES

For refugee children who have experienced trauma, changes to the environment, routine or staff can be frightening. To feel safe, refugee children need:

- a safe environment,
- a predictable routine,
- a consistent caregiver,
- clear expectations, boundaries and consequences.

When working to create an environment that feels safe:

- Minimize clutter and create a welcoming entry where families can observe the program and join in at their own pace.
- Be sure to greet the family with a smile. A warm, personal greeting can help families to feel welcomed and valued, and can generally set them at ease.
- Welcome both the parent and the child, if the child is not stressed by your attention.
- Learn and use the parent's and child's names (including the correct pronunciation).

When working to achieve a predictable routine:

- Ensure a very gradual separation between the child and parent. A separation plan needs to be developed together with parents. For more information on how to ease the transition, see A Parent's Guide to Gradual Separations.
- Use visual cues before and during transitions (i.e., visual schedule, photos, gestures).

When working to provide consistent caregivers:

- Assign one staff member to take the lead with each family. This fosters stability, relationship building and trust for the parents and children.
- Introduce the family to the caregiver who will help their child settle. Show the family the room, where their clothes are stored and the indoor and outdoor play spaces. Introduce them to the other families, helping them to make social connections.
- Welcome each family personally each day, and give them your full attention. Asking how they slept or how they are feeling helps the parent realize that you want to know them better. Daily, friendly chats of 1–2 minutes are more effective than less frequent, longer conversations.



When working to provide clear expectations, boundaries and consequences:

- Guide the child through the daily routine, introduce them to activities and expectations, support their interactions with the other children, consistently re-direct behaviour that is harmful, respond calmly to emotional upset, and generally help the child to understand realistic boundaries and consequences.

Things to avoid:

- Having too many staff members help settle the child.
- Too many toys, transitions and/or long wait times.
- Overwhelming the family with a lot of information.
- Making judgements. Check your biases.
- Using children as translators for the parents.
- Responding emotionally to behaviour that challenges you. If you can't respond in a calm, unemotional way, step away if possible.
- Using different words to describe the same thing (e.g., toilet, bathroom or washroom). Pick one word and use it consistently.
- 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.
- Trauma reminders/triggers. Think about your program and whether there might be any triggers that you need to plan ahead for. This might include toys with loud, sharp bursts of noise; lights that flicker; loud commanding voices or school bells and fire drills. Consider how you might be able to avoid the trigger or to support the child and family when the trigger happens.

