



BRYCS BRIEF

Winter 2009

Suggestions for Interviewing Refugee and Immigrant Children and Families¹

"Biases, cultural differences, and linguistic misunderstandings have the potential to exert a powerful influence in interviews with immigrants—even when interviewers have the best of intentions." (Fontes 2009, p.7)

Interviewing recently-arrived refugee or immigrant children and families in such settings as the school, social services office, health clinic, or early childhood program can take special sensitivity and preparation. Agencies that receive federal funds of any kind are required by law to provide services of an equal quality to people who have Limited English Proficiency (LEP).² To provide equal quality services, it is vital to allow LEP children and families to use the language that they are most comfortable speaking. When a bilingual interviewer is not available, agencies must rely on a foreign language interpreter.

Whether the topic is child abuse, education, health, or other issues, the following list of suggestions can help service providers prepare to interview refugee and immigrant children and families.

- 1. Arrange for an interpreter in advance.** For interviews with children and families whose first language is not English, arrange for a qualified foreign language interpreter ahead of time. Find out what language the child actually prefers to speak; it may not be the language you think. Choose a trained interpreter with knowledge of the topic. See [BRYCS Highlighted Resources](#) for more information about finding and working with a qualified interpreter. Prepare the interpreter beforehand for any sensitive topics that may be addressed.
- 2. Be sensitive to family values and structure.** [Refugee and immigrant families](#) often have structured hierarchical roles. Try to find out who knows the child best and who has the power to make decisions in different areas. For example, it may be the father or the grandmother—living in another country—who makes important medical decisions. It is also important not to grant children power over their caretakers in the interview by over-relying on them for information. Although the children may be more Americanized and more comfortable in English than their parents, remember their place in the family.

*Avoid using informal interpreters, such as family members, friends, office workers, etc., when at all possible, due to the importance of accuracy, confidentiality, and neutrality in interpretation. **Minor children should never be asked to interpret for their parents.***

¹ Special thanks to Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD, [BRYCS Technical Assistance Provider](#), who authored these suggestions. For more information on this topic, see her recent brief article, [Interviewing Immigrant Children for Suspected Child Maltreatment](#) (Fontes 2009), available from the BRYCS Clearinghouse for free download, and her book, [Interviewing Clients across Cultures: A Practitioner's Guide](#).

² This requirement applies to all activities conducted by any agency receiving federal funds, either directly or indirectly (e.g., through a subgrant, Medicaid payments, etc.). See www.LEP.gov, the official Web site of the Federal Interagency Working Group on Limited English Proficiency, and the [BRYCS Highlighted Resources](#) list on using interpreters when interviewing refugees and immigrants for more information and resources on this mandate.

3. **Tune in to the child’s physical state.** Children are highly influenced by how they are feeling physically. Avoid interviewing children who are overly tired or hungry. Try to have available a healthy, culturally acceptable drink and snack, and make sure the child is comfortable using the restroom, if needed. Tending to children’s physical needs will help them focus and increase their comfort in an interview.
4. **Set expectations for the interview.** Make sure the child and caretakers are clear on the purpose and context of the interview, including the role, position and organization represented by everyone present. Let interviewees know how long the interview will take. Let them know the nature of their relationship to the interviewer—if it is a one-time interview or the beginning of a long-term helping relationship.
5. **Address confidentiality with both interviewee and the interpreter.** Rumors, jealousy, privacy, and reputation are often crucial issues in close-knit ethnic communities. The concept of “confidentiality” does not even exist in many languages, and may need to be explained. Using simple language, explain to the interviewee where the information will go and who will know about what is discussed. For instance, a school counselor might tell a refugee mother that the information she provides will stay within the school, unless she learns that the child is at risk of harm. Keep in mind that, due to experiences in their countries of origin with oppressive governments or discrimination here in the U.S., refugees and immigrants may assume that any information they provide will be relayed to the immigration authorities or police.
6. **Obtain as much information prior to the interview as possible.** Gather relevant information and documentation about behavioral or health issues with others who have worked with the child, such as teachers or social workers. Be sure to respect the interviewee’s privacy as you make inquiries. For many refugee and immigrant children, important papers may not be readily available (for example, birth certificates may be difficult to get in their country of origin, or they may not have traveled with such papers or school records). For an example of ways to address lack of documentation, see [this BRYCS resource](#) on assessing the age of refugee children.
7. **Connect directly with the interviewee.** If you are using an interpreter, she or he should sit slightly behind the interviewee to ensure that there is direct eye contact and body positioning between you and the child and family members. Look at and address the interviewee directly, saying, for example, “How are you feeling?” rather than “Ask her how she is feeling.” An interpreter channels your words, but the relationship is established directly between you and the interviewee. It is often best for interviewers to truly open their hearts and humanity to the interviewees, so that the caring expressed is genuine. Be acutely aware of tone, attitude, word choice, and body language to avoid any possible demonstration of disrespect.
8. **Encourage questions.** Be sure to give the child or family members ample time to ask questions. Sometimes refugees and immigrants are hesitant to question people in positions of authority. It may be more fruitful to say, “Now it’s your turn to ask questions,” and allow silence, rather than saying, “Do you have any questions?”
9. **Take your time and keep it simple.** Interviewers should keep their questions short and direct. Only one person should speak at a time. If using an interpreter, interviewers should pause between sentences, allowing the interpreter to speak. Interviewers will need a great deal of patience for this process; using an interpreter requires extra time, particularly when the interviewee is a young child. Every so often, interviewers should ask if the interviewee understands the conversation.
10. **Check your own emotional responses.** Given the frequently traumatic experiences many refugee and immigrant children have endured prior to and during their migration journeys, and their difficulties in this country, it is normal to experience strong emotions in response to difficult information shared by a child. Remain calm and avoid expressing feelings such as horror, anger, or pity during the interview. Children require time and emotional space to express difficult feelings and experiences. Interviewees will stop talking if they feel they are disbelieved or are upsetting an interviewer or interpreter.

“Research has found that when interviewers are warm and friendly, their interviews will be more likely to produce correct information, and the interviewees will be more willing to correct the interviewer’s mistakes when necessary.”
 (Fontes 2009, p.9)



Often the quickest, most reliable source of qualified interpreters is a **telephone interpreting service**.³ For a national listing of interpretation and translation services, see this [detailed list](#) compiled by The National Health Law Program and The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care.

Collaboration between Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare Agencies

BRYCS regularly highlights collaborations between [refugee resettlement](#) and child welfare agencies, demonstrating the ways in which some resettlement and immigrant-serving agencies can provide interpretation and other culturally relevant services to public and private agencies.

Promising Practice: *The collaboration between the International Institute of St. Louis and the St. Louis Department of Social Services is one example of a creative response that grew out of the need to serve an influx of refugees from Bosnia. Similarly, New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services developed partnerships with a broad range of community-based agencies, providing increased access to interpretation and other culturally-appropriate services for their refugee and immigrant families. See [New Americans and Child Protection](#) and [Collaborative Partnerships to Enhance the Well-being of Foreign-born Children in New York City](#) for descriptions of these two collaborations, including interviews with two of the leaders behind these efforts, [Frances Johnson](#) and [Ilze Earner](#).*

A number of refugee-serving agencies have developed initiatives solely devoted to providing interpretation and translation services.

Promising Practice: *Catholic Charities, Diocese of Fort Worth, Inc. developed the [Translation and Interpretation Network](#) (TIN), which has been providing interpretation and translation services to public agencies, including child welfare, in the Dallas-Fort Worth area since 1999. TIN interpreters speak a total of 72 different languages, and services include both in-person and telephone interpretation, and document translation. TIN also provides training for interpreters and those working with interpreters, consultation services for organizations interested in duplicating its service model, as well as bilingual trainings. All TIN interpreters go through extensive training and testing prior to being invited to join the Network. TIN was made possible due to funding from the Texas Department of Health, and is now an income-generating business venture of this local Catholic Charities.*

When refugee-serving agencies ensure bilingual staff are trained as interpreters, and develop a structure for contracting out these services, collaboration between these agencies and public child welfare can be of great benefit to America’s increasingly diverse communities today.

If you work for a refugee-serving agency interested in developing interpretation services, or a public agency interested in connecting with the resettlement agency nearest you, [contact BRYCS](#) for assistance.

See BRYCS [Highlighted Resources on Interpretation: Serving Refugee and Immigrant Children](#) for additional information about interviewing children using an interpreter and other practical resources.

³ Telephone interpreting services are used by many agencies today and have advantages and disadvantages. [This article](#) provides an overview of these issues and information that can assist administrators in making decisions about how best to use these services.