



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

Suitability Assessment Tips: Safeguarding Refugee Children Who Arrive without Parents

Refugee children without parents are among the most vulnerable populations in need of assistance. Some enter the United States in order to reunite with a relative or another adult, some join parents here after an extended separation. They may also travel to this country in the company of an adult designated to care for them upon arrival. This document uses the internationally recognized term “separated child” to refer to such a minor, and the term “responsible adults” to refer to the adult designated to care for a separated child, as well as other caregivers for the child.

To protect separated children, a suitability assessment is conducted by the local resettlement agency before or upon the minor’s arrival. Every agency has its own approach to such assessments, which are often tailored to address cultural considerations and ensure the best assessment possible. The following tips are intended to support agencies in this assessment process.

The vulnerable position of separated children often calls for ongoing assessment and assistance, even years after resettlement services have concluded. Therefore, other agencies, such as mutual assistance associations, may find that these tips provide a useful framework for some of their services.

A QUALITY ASSESSMENT CAN CHANGE A CHILD'S LIFE

- ◆ Children separated from their parents are at higher risk of being abused or exploited, or of having their needs overlooked. Observing and investigating troubling signs can help reduce the possibility of children being neglected, abused, or abandoned.
- ◆ A suitability assessment is intended to ensure that the responsible adult is willing and able to care for the separated child and can provide a safe and appropriate living environment.
- ◆ Assessment provides an opportunity to ensure that the family has made necessary plans, has realistic expectations, and understands the challenges and responsibilities of caring for the separated child.
- ◆ Quality assessment helps the case manager to decide what additional supports and services a family needs to best care for the minor.
- ◆ If family reunification or placement would put the separated child at risk and is unsuitable, the child may be referred for foster care. Contact information is in the final section of this document.



Prepare for the Assessment

- ◆ Learn about the culture of the responsible adult(s). Use the Internet, library, friends, and others in that culture to learn about religious customs, male/female roles, family relationships, parenting and discipline practices, and who is considered to be a relative.
- ◆ Given cultural information, decide how best to handle sensitive situations, such as asking to see sleeping arrangements for the separated child.
- ◆ Determine if there are any cultural questions you wish to ask the family, such as
? *“What is the role of children in the family at different ages?”*
Ask neutral questions that foster respect and trust.
- ◆ Find out local laws regarding housing for minor children, child abuse and neglect, guardianship procedures, and when it is allowable to leave a minor alone at home.

General Suggestions

- ◆ The suitability assessment should take place in the home where the separated child will live. If there is another close family member involved in the child’s case, it is best to have that person present as well.
- ◆ Agency staff should conduct the suitability assessment.
- ◆ Explain the purpose of your visit and how you would like to carry out the interview. Emphasize that you are a supporter for the minor, and that your job is to look out for the child’s well-being.
- ◆ Observe the responsible adult(s)’ facial expressions and body language. Do they appear relaxed, natural, and earnest, or do they appear nervous, anxious, and uncertain? Consider cultural and other factors as you interpret their behavior.
- ◆ Be flexible with the wording of questions. Write notes *after* the meeting as needed.
- ◆ If the family is coming from overseas, ask what they did at home in their country. For example, did they visit with other family members, or play sports? Who were their friends? The answers will give you a better understanding of the family, and of whether the children are used to interacting with people outside of the family.

Evaluate the Relationship between Separated Child and Responsible Adult(s)

- ◆ Ask how long the responsible adult(s) have known the separated child, and when they last saw the child. Ask if they have kept in touch by phone or mail.
- ◆ Ask about their relationship with the minor, and how other family members in their household are related to the minor. Ask about other family members’ reactions to having the child join the household.
- ◆ Find out how and when they became the separated child’s caregiver, and what happened to the child’s parents and siblings.
- ◆ Go to the airport to observe the reactions of the responsible adult(s) when they see the separated child. Are they happy and excited?
- ◆ During the first home visit, ask detailed questions about the relationships, and then check to see if the information given matches written data.
- ◆ If the description of the relationship is confusing or changes over time, create a family tree.

If you have concerns, follow up.

Evaluate if the Family Is Willing and Able to Care for the Separated Child

- ◆ Ask the responsible adult(s) what they think the commitment to care for the separated child will involve.
- ◆ Ask if they are willing and able to change their lives and make sacrifices for the child.
- ◆ Explain that they need to treat the separated child in the same way as their own children, or as a biological child in the household. This includes sharing toys, assigning chores, helping with homework, and so forth.
- ◆ Determine if the responsible adult(s) have the parenting skills, time, health, and finances to adequately care for the minor, and what extra supports or services they will need.
- ◆ Explain that it is a serious responsibility to take in a separated child, including the financial, psychological, and legal aspects of their care.
- ◆ If the responsible adult(s) have been in the U.S. less than six months or if the separated child is coming as part of a “free” refugee resettlement case, remember that the adult(s) will be coping with their own adjustment issues.
- ◆ Ask what kind of plans (school and other) they have for the child and how they are going to make these plans happen.
- ◆ Ask how the family plans to support the minor financially, and pay for extra food and clothing, school, and refugee travel loan expenses.
- ◆ If finances are not secure, look around for other support for the family. In some states, children without parents may be eligible for financial or other social service supports. These programs may be called “child-only grants,” “subsidized guardianship,” or “kinship care.”
- ◆ Discuss the family’s schedule and explain when it is allowable by law to leave children at home alone. Discuss plans for when school is not in session.

Determine if Sleeping Arrangements are Acceptable

- ◆ Use your knowledge of cultural issues to guide your approach to viewing sleeping arrangements. For example, all family members may need to be out of their rooms before you enter them.
- ◆ Walk through the house and view every room. Find out where the separated child will sleep and who else will sleep in the child’s room.
- ◆ Look out for unsafe situations, such as
a separated child sharing a room with a teenager or adult of the opposite sex.
Sleeping arrangements must comply with local housing laws and standards.

Meet with the Child Separately, as well as with Other Household Members

- ◆ Find a way to meet individually with the separated child, such as when taking him/her to an appointment.
- ◆ One option is to meet with the responsible adult(s) separately, and use that opportunity to have another staff person speak with the minor. Sometimes this is a better approach than asking directly to meet separately with the minor.

- ◆ When meeting individually with the child, ask about his/her prior relationship with the family. Compare the child's answers to those given by the responsible adult(s), in order to verify that they are related to one another as documented.
- ◆ When meeting individually with the minor, find out how he/she feels about living with the family now. Ask how the family treated him/her before coming to the U.S., and whether anything has changed.
- ◆ Observe how the minor interacts with the responsible adult(s). Does the minor seem afraid to speak, angry, distrustful, or to shrink from the adult's presence? Does the minor seem quiet and respectful? Does the minor seem relaxed and happy around the adult(s)? Consider cultural factors as you interpret the child's behavior.
- ◆ Does the separated child look comfortable playing with the other children in the household?
- ◆ If an interpreter or another staff person is present, ask them to observe how the separated child reacts to questions you ask the responsible adult(s), and the responses.

Opportunities for Continued Assessment

- ◆ Check with the school to see how the child is doing, and how the responsible adult(s) are responding to homework and communications from the school.
- ◆ Maintain good relationships with schools, social services, and health services, in order to have many ways of getting information on the separated child's well-being.
- ◆ During home visits, evaluate whether the minor is being treated the same as other children in the household.
 - ? *Are chores being divided as if the child were a biological child in the home?*
 - ? *Is there enough emphasis on how the child is doing in school compared to other children in the household?*
- ◆ If you are concerned about the minor's relationship with other members of the household, call the house when the responsible adult is away, to help detect the attitudes of the other household members toward the minor.

Be Aware of Higher Risk Situations

- ◆ While every case is different, teenage minors who are used to a high level of independence before resettlement and who must adjust to living with a strict adult sometimes face greater risks of neglect or even abandonment.
- ◆ Be aware that separated children in the following situations may also face greater risks: the blood relationship to the relative is distant, the relationship is by marriage rather than blood, the true relationship differs from what is documented, or no blood relationship exists at all.
- ◆ While it may be rare for such problems to occur, it is important to guard against girls being brought into the United States for arranged marriages or with the intention that they become unpaid household help. A female minor being reunited with an older male relative may be at higher risk of this.

- ◆ Always consider what is in the child's best interests. If the responsible adult is not committed to care for the child, or if the child does not feel safe with the adult, follow up with your national office. Consult with public or private child welfare agencies in your area. Children's Services staff of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) can also be useful resources in discussing options, and can be reached as follows:
 - Children's Services, LIRS: 410-230-2746
 - Children's Services, USCCB/MRS: 202-541-3114

Remember:

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