



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment

FROM:

**Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children:
A Resource for Meeting the Special Needs of Refugee Youth and Children,
Appendix 1**

By

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)
Baltimore, MD

and

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and
Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS)
Washington, DC

BRYCS

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BRYCS is a joint project of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and
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888.572.6500

info@brycs.org

www.brycs.org



Appendix 1

Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment

Refugee and other foreign-born children in foster care have many special needs. As they adjust to living in a new family or another setting, they are also adjusting to a whole new culture in America and sometimes a new language. In addition to processing their own personal tragedies and experience with persecution or war, refugee children may struggle to develop a healthy and positive sense of self.

This information sheet compiles suggestions for recruiting, training, licensing, and retaining refugee foster families. Although most of the information contained in this information sheet applies to minors of all ages, most children in the specialized refugee foster care system funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement are adolescents. The term “youth” is used for instances that apply more to adolescents than to children. The term “bicultural staff” is used loosely to refer to staff of the same ethnic group or country of origin as the children in care as well as to those who share some facet of the culture, language, or religion of a refugee group. Most bicultural staff have personal experience adjusting to a new culture and draw on that experience in helping refugee children do the same. Similarly, for brevity the term “refugee foster families” refers to foster families in which the parents are refugees or other foreign-born persons, such as asylees or immigrants.

Developing refugee foster families can be an important strategy for serving refugee children. Including refugee families in the pool of foster care placement options increases the likelihood of being able to make an appropriate placement if a refugee child is found to have special needs relating to his or her language, culture or ethnicity. It can help such refugee children draw on their cultures, languages, ethnic affiliations, and religious faith as supportive and protective factors while they adjust to life in the United States.

For more suggestions on how to meet the needs of refugee children in foster care, see the BRYCS information sheet *Serving Refugee Children in Foster Care: Fundamental Considerations*.

Benefits in Having Refugee Foster Families Among Placement Options

Many refugee families become foster parents because they understand the pain of family separation and upheaval, experiences that are common to most refugees. Most refugee foster families have a desire to help their own community, and they feel compassion for the children who have lost or have been separated from their own parents. In situations in which refugee children have been placed with refugee foster families, the following benefits have frequently been observed (note that other types of families can provide these benefits as well; this information can serve to provide goals for placement of children with specific needs):

- Better communication and less misinterpretation due to language or cultural barriers
- Better reactions to certain negative behaviors
- A strong ethnic identity
- Familiarity with food, language, and customs
- More emotional support
- Increased stability of placement when there is a shared common culture
- Awareness of the situation in the child’s country of origin
- Reduced need for caseworker intervention due to cultural or linguistic misunderstandings.

Every child is different, and the most appropriate placement will ultimately depend on the needs of the individual child and the strengths of the individual placement.

Differences in Adjustment Attributed to Same-Culture Placements

- Many refugee children are more comfortable in same-culture placements because of similar history, understanding, and philosophy of life.

- The initial emotional transition has been smoother for some children in refugee foster families.
- It may be easier for children to maintain their language, culture, and ethnic ties in same-culture placements.
- When children and families have a shared faith, attending church, mosque, or temple together provides good family time; this time can be vital for religious minority children.

Types of Families Best Suited to Fostering Refugee Children

The most eager families are not necessarily the best suited to serving as foster families for refugee children. Agencies report that families with the following characteristics seem to make good foster families:

- Open minded
- Interested in expanding their world and learning about other cultures
- Interested in two-way learning, instead of seeing themselves as rescuing the child
- Nurturing
- Able to be good advocates
- Willing to teach the child skills for independence
- Willing to help the child stay connected to family in the home country.

Community Resources for Recruiting Refugee Families

Agencies can use various methods to recruit refugee and other newcomer foster families. The most successful technique appears to be *word of mouth from foster families who have had positive experiences*. It may take more effort to recruit the first refugee family, but that initial family can help the agency recruit additional families from the same ethnic community.

Generally Effective Outreach Methods

- Establish linkages with ethnic community-based organizations, also known as mutual assistance associations (MAAs). These organizations can be found by contacting the office of your State Refugee Coordinator or a local refugee resettlement program.
- Establish linkages with refugee resettlement programs and English as a second language (ESL) programs.
- Establish linkages with ethnically based and non-ethnically based houses of worship. Use presentations about the need for diverse foster families; fliers in bulletins; and relationships with religious, spiritual, or other leadership.
- Use ethnic media, such as radio, television, and newspapers targeting a particular group.
- Encourage bicultural staff to recruit within their own community.
- Develop brochures and translate materials into the language of the group you are trying to reach.
- Use resource fairs to disseminate information in refugee communities.
- Interact directly with the community you hope to reach by participating in community activities or meeting with community leaders.
- Develop public service announcements for mainstream radio or television.
- Recruit through local schools.
- Work with civic groups and other community-based organizations involved in local government.
- Offer a finder's fee to encourage more word-of-mouth recruitment.

Generally Ineffective Outreach Methods

- Group information sessions: Language, religious, or cultural barriers may keep refugee foster families from participating in such activities.
- Mass mailings or merely distributing written information: Such techniques are rarely effective because even literate refugees often value verbal communication more highly than written materials.

Tailoring Outreach Methods to Specific Groups

Some outreach methods will be effective with a particular group but will not work with others. Below are some tips for appropriately tailoring your outreach methods:

- Learn about the ethnic communities in your area, such as their history of migration to the United States, where they are concentrated, and what divisions exist.
- Look for connections or common interests with existing community institutions. For example, some groups might feel a connection due to religious beliefs, cultural history, or language.
- Do some research about appropriate cultural practices. Can men and women shake hands or sit next to one another? How is eye contact perceived? Is it customary for women to cover their heads in the home or for everyone to remove shoes upon entering the home? Remember that some cultures respond better to face-to-face contact.
- Coordinate with and use the knowledge base of the following entities:
 - Mutual assistance associations (MAAs): civic groups that are locally organized to provide mutual aid within a particular ethnic community. Such groups may receive state or federal financial support.
 - State Refugee Coordinators: the designated state entity or individual that oversees resettlement of refugees in a state.
 - Refugee Resettlement Programs: private voluntary agencies that contract with the U.S. Department of State to provide resettlement services to newly arriving refugees.
 - Informal ethnic community networks or institutions: locally organized groups serving a subgroup of an ethnic community, such as a house of worship or sports club.

If you do not know how to locate such groups in your area, start with the office of your State Refugee Coordinator. A list of State Refugee Coordinators is available on the Office of Refugee Resettlement Web site (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/partners/coordina.htm).

Agency Resources for Recruiting Refugee Families

Bicultural staff act as cultural brokers for refugee children, program staff, and foster parents. They help explain the unspoken mores and standards within a culture that can only be fully understood by a person living in it. They are valuable to children because they understand the cultural context of the child and have made an adjustment to life in the United States themselves. Bicultural workers assist mainstream workers by bridging the gap between the cultures; they interface with leaders within their communities and help create opportunities for children to develop positive ethnic identities by staying connected to their cultures, languages, and religions.

Bicultural staff can greatly assist with the adjustment of refugee and refugee children. They help build strong alliances with local ethnic communities and increase the cultural sensitivity of a program. In addition, they serve as positive role models for children, having balanced their culture of origin and the culture of their adoptive home. In the words of one foster care program employing bicultural staff, “We could not function without them.”

Keys to Training and Retaining Bicultural Workers

- If English is not the worker’s first language, allow more time for or assistance with paperwork.
- Provide good supervisory support.
- Value bicultural staff equally with other staff; recognize the contribution they can make to the team (i.e., do not limit their work to language interpretation).
- Be flexible with work schedules so that bicultural staff can pursue training or continuing education to qualify for higher level positions; offer assistance in finding financial aid resources.
- When possible, have more than one bicultural staff member on the team for support.

Recruiting, Training, and Licensing Issues

A variety of issues face agencies that seek to recruit refugee foster families, including building rapport and trust with families, the licensing process itself, postlicensing problems, and family burnout.

Rapport and Trust

- Refugees may be slow to develop trust as a result of broken promises and mistreatment during their refugee experience.
- Building rapport and trust may be more difficult with refugee families due to language and cultural barriers.
- Developing trust is most difficult with the first foster family in any refugee community.

The Licensing Process

- Families may find it strange to talk about intimate family details with a stranger.
- Newly arrived refugees may have difficulty meeting physical space and financial stability requirements.
- Some families will struggle with the logistics of obtaining medical clearances for all family members.
- Families may be unable to follow through with paperwork due to lack of English proficiency or lack of familiarity with terminology associated with the licensing process.
- Families may be uncomfortable during the training process due to language barriers.
- Muslim families may have concerns about modesty in the home for women, especially in considering placements for adolescent males.
- Like many American-born families, some refugee families may only want to foster a child from the same ethnic or tribal group.
- Families may find certain licensing requirements culturally insensitive, such as the common requirement prohibiting children older than age 2 from sleeping with parents.
- Work schedules may be barriers to families following through with the licensing process, because refugees often work multiple jobs.
- In many refugee and immigrant families, the legal status of family members may vary; family members may therefore be ineligible for or fearful of the licensing process.
- Families may be unable to obtain sufficient references unless they have roots in the community.

Postlicensing Problems

After a family is licensed, certain problems commonly arise; resolving them generally requires additional staff time for explanation and facilitation. The following issues commonly arise:

- Busy work schedules of refugee families
- Authority issues with adolescents (Some refugee families may be less disposed to work through these negative experiences because they often have many other tasks to fulfill.)
- Impatience with certain problematic behaviors (Families may expect children to obey, and they may be intolerant of American adolescent behavior because such behavior was not accepted in their country of origin.)
- Lack of follow-through with training schedule
- Rigid expectations of male and female roles (For example, females may be expected to clean the house and care for children; male foster children may not be taught those skills in preparation for independence.)
- Expectations that the child will follow the foster parent's path to success; lack of acceptance of individuality in youth
- Reluctance to take advantage of mental health services for refugee children.

Family Burnout

Burnout can be a problem for refugee foster families. Below are some steps that can guard against the problem:

- Keep caseloads low so that workers can be in the home frequently.

- Provide counseling.
- Use mentors, tutors, and volunteers.
- Be easily accessible even after normal business hours. Provide cell phones for caseworkers; often, a phone call can calm a situation until the worker can physically come to the home.
- Identify issues before they escalate.
- Provide fun activities with food to allow foster families to meet informally.
- Provide child care and mileage reimbursement to encourage participation in group activities.

For more information on the specialized refugee foster care programs funded by ORR that provided information for this document, search the BRYCS clearinghouse (www.brycs.org) using the term “Unaccompanied Refugee Minor.”

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