



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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Serving Refugee Children in Foster Care: Fundamental Considerations

FROM:

**Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children:
A Resource for Meeting the Special Needs of Refugee Youth and Children,
Appendix 2**

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Appendix 2

Serving Refugee Children in Foster Care: Fundamental Considerations

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

This information sheet contains suggestions for meeting the special needs of refugee children in out-of-home care; that is, ways to help them draw on their culture, language, ethnic tradition, and religious faith as supportive and protective factors while they adjust to a new life in the United States. 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 (ORR) are adolescents. The term “youth” is used for instances that apply more to adolescents than to children. The phrase “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 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.

For more suggestions on how to meet the needs of refugee children in foster care, see the BRYCS Information Sheet *Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment*.

Factors Affecting Refugee Children’s Adjustment to Foster Care

Before Arrival

- Mental health of the child
- Level of trauma from war and flight
- Physical health conditions following war and flight
- Type of care received during flight and refugee camp (e.g., care by a relative, institutional care, or no adult supervision)
- Location and safety of the child’s immediate relatives
- Developmental stage at time of trauma, flight, and resettlement (e.g., circumstances of child during onset of puberty or the age of the child at the death of a parent or sibling)
- Strength of child’s family system in home country (e.g., a child from a strong and loving family may be able to adjust better to a home environment in the United States; a child who lived on the street may have more difficulty adjusting to a family system here)
- Child’s birth order (e.g., the oldest child may struggle more with guilt or a sense of responsibility about the care and condition of younger siblings).

After Arrival

- Foster family’s knowledge of child’s past experience
- Foster family’s cultural sensitivity and level of acceptance of the child
- Child’s ability to maintain contact with family, friends, and peers from refugee camp or home country (residing in either in the United States or overseas)
- Amount of contact between caseworker and the child and foster family
- Cultural competence of foster care staff
- Reception from and influence of American-born peers.

Characteristics of Foster Families That Are Appropriate for Refugee Children

- Open minded
- Interested in world affairs and in learning about other cultures
- Interested in two-way learning, instead of seeing themselves as rescuing the child
- Nurturing
- Able to be good advocates (e.g., within educational or health systems)
- Willing to teach the child (especially adolescents) skills for independence
- Willing to help the child stay connected to his or her culture of origin and birth family, including family members overseas
- Able to maintain confidentiality about the child's situation (especially important for foster families from the same ethnic community).

Key Components of Successful Child Welfare Services for Refugee Children

Bicultural and Culturally Competent Staff

Bicultural staff can uniquely understand the adjustment challenges faced by refugee children in foster care. They can help ease the adjustment of a refugee child while bridging cultural differences with staff and foster families. In addition, such staff have the following assets:

- They have experienced cultural adjustment firsthand.
- They can act as cultural brokers between children, foster families, and program staff.
- They can serve as valuable role models for refugee children and help them develop a positive ethnic identity.
- They can work with ethnic community leaders to create opportunities for positive ethnic identity development and help maintain cultural, linguistic, and religious connections.

Bicultural and Culturally Competent Foster Homes

Foster families from the same cultural background as a refugee child can greatly ease his or her adjustment to foster care and life in the United States. Other types of foster families may also be able to meet a refugee child's unique adjustment and cultural needs; this information can serve to provide goals for placements of children with specific needs. Foster families with the same cultural background, or who are culturally sensitive, have been noted to have the following attributes:

- They understand what the refugee child has experienced during war and flight.
- They have an interest in the culture and background of the refugee child.
- They can enable better communication and less misinterpretation due to language or cultural barriers.
- They provide familiar food, language, and customs.
- They provide religious continuity and support, when the family is of the same faith. This trait can be especially important for religious minorities and religiously observant children.

It may be easier for children to maintain their language, culture, and ethnic ties in same-culture placements. Every child is different, however, and the most appropriate placement will ultimately depend on the needs of the individual child. Some children may prefer an American-born family in order to learn English faster, whereas other refugee children may feel most comfortable with a family of the same cultural background.

The Importance of Ethnic Identity Formation: Helping Children Maintain and Integrate Their Two Cultural Identities

In addition to becoming licensed foster parents, many refugee families help meet the needs of refugee children in other ways, including mentoring, tutoring, interpreting and translating, recruiting children for local cultural activities or ethnic organizations (e.g., a Sudanese youth choir or a Latino soccer league), and supporting youth in independent living programs. As with any volunteers working with foster care children, families should be appropriately screened and trained before involving them in the lives of these children.

Local Universities and Houses of Worship

Local universities and houses of worship can also be a source of diverse volunteers. Partnering and collaborating with a local university may also be useful for the following activities:

- Engaging college students as “big brothers” or “big sisters”
- Recruiting college students to earn credit for volunteer work with refugee children (such as community service or foreign language conversation)
- Involving professors in trainings, grant writing, or research or connecting with academics who are knowledgeable about a particular language or culture.

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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