



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

ACCULTURATION and ADJUSTMENT for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)

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The goal of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Program is to help “*unaccompanied minor refugees develop appropriate skills to enter adulthood and to achieve social self-sufficiency*”¹ through successfully navigating the process of acculturation. Today, the URM Program serves a range of foreign-born children, including unaccompanied undocumented children in the custody of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (almost all from Central America) and victims of human trafficking.

What is Acculturation? Acculturation is the process of cultural change that involves:

- **Balancing both the new U.S. culture and the heritage culture.** Acculturation is not an either/or process—becoming more American does not necessarily require giving up one’s heritage culture.² Having **skills and knowledge of both U.S. culture and one’s heritage culture** are important resources for the development of immigrant children.³
- **Changes in language, behavior, identity, and values.** Language and behavioral changes happen more quickly, identity and values change over a much longer period of time.

What is Adjustment?

To prepare for a successful transition to adulthood, refugee children need to **achieve psychological well-being**, develop positive **social relationships** with family and peers, and experience **academic success** at school. The **family and school** are key contexts in children’s lives. In school, immigrant children encounter adults and peers from the U.S. culture, learn the language and culture, and to socialize with others to become a member of U.S. society.⁴ In the family, the challenge is to overcome the cultural distance between immigrant children and parents so that parents can be a resource for the child’s development and adjustment.⁵

✓ **Psychological Well-Being.**

Refugee children who have experienced trauma can benefit from positive social relationships with adults and peers.⁶ Acculturation to **both the U.S. and the heritage culture** helps their psychological well-being because children who speak both languages and are familiar and comfortable with both cultures have access to more social support from both Americans and their own ethnic community.⁷ Refugee children who feel a sense of belonging within their school exhibit fewer symptoms of trauma and greater psychological well-being.⁸

✓ **Positive Social Relationships.**

Family relationships. For foster families, overcoming the cultural gap between the U.S. foster parents and the refugee minors can be a great challenge. At the same time foster parents can help the child with both becoming more acculturated to the **U.S. culture** and maintaining their **heritage culture**. For U.S. acculturation, foster parents can serve as a bridge between the home and the schools. Parent-school relationships are linked to children’s academic success⁹, and foster parents can help the child anticipate cultural challenges at school and advocate for sensitivity on the part of the teachers and others in the school toward the particular cultural background of the foster child. Foster parents can also find ways for the child to maintain native language skills by providing opportunities to interact with others from the same

refugee community. Attending a heritage language class which may be available through an ethnic community organization, can help children further develop these skills by learning age-appropriate vocabulary and concepts in their native language, and by reinforcing bilingual abilities as a skill to maintain. Foster parents can also assist the child in preserving their native culture by providing opportunities to participate and interact with others from the same refugee community. Engaging in activities that promote the heritage culture, such as festivals or attending language classes, allows the foster parents and child to connect on a cultural level and conveys that the child's heritage culture is valued.

Peer Relationships. Having social support and positive relationships with peers is important for successful psychological adjustment.¹⁰ Children who are acculturated to **U.S. culture** have more satisfying relationships with U.S. peers who can help orient them to the new culture, and link them to important age-appropriate information and activities.¹¹ Acculturation to the **heritage culture** is related to more satisfying relationships with co-ethnic peers who are going through similar experiences and understand their background and culture.^{12 13 14 15}

✓ **Academic Success.**

Research suggests that both U.S. and heritage acculturation promote greater academic success. **U.S. acculturation** helps refugee children have the cultural skills and knowledge to navigate requirements of U.S. schools^{16 17}, so that they can achieve academic success by behaving in the expected ways in the classroom, having positive relationships with U.S. teachers and peers¹⁸, and feeling a sense of belonging to school.¹⁹ Also, maintaining competence in the child's **heritage language**^{20 21 22 23} and being bilingual is associated with academic achievement *in English*.²⁴ Becoming proficient in English in cognitive-academic tasks takes as long as 5-7 years (children learn conversational English much faster).²⁵ In the meantime, maintaining their native language can speed up learning, which can then be transferred into English.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Acculturation to **both** U.S. and heritage culture is important for psychological well-being, social adjustment, and academic success of refugee students.
- Having opportunities to socialize with others from their **heritage culture** is important for refugee children. Activities may include: attending events involving the refugee community, social clubs or "hanging out" with co-ethnic peers, and heritage language classes.
- Providing access to activities that help with **U.S. acculturation** is important for development of refugee children. Activities may include: after school activities, summer camps, sport teams and clubs, and attending school-sponsored events such as concerts and proms.
- Mentoring programs can help support **acculturation to both U.S. and heritage cultures**. Newly-arrived unaccompanied children and youth may benefit most from mentors who are U.S.-born or have lived in the U.S. for some time, and who can teach them about U.S. culture (e.g., tutoring, practicing English, riding public transportation, etc.). Children and youth who have lived in the U.S. longer may benefit from mentors who are from a similar ethnic or language background but have lived in the U.S. for long enough to successfully negotiate both their heritage and U.S. cultures, and can thus provide a role model for healthy acculturation.²⁶



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PRACTICAL RESOURCES:

BRYCS OVERVIEW: *New Directions in Mentoring Refugee Youth*

<http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/BRYCS-BRIEF-Mentoring-Summer-2010.pdf>

Although mentoring programs typically match youth with adult volunteers from the larger community, newer approaches to mentoring may be of special benefit to refugee youth. This BRYCS resource provides an overview of these approaches as well as two featured Promising Practices: (1) Culture Connect and (2) Los Angeles Team Mentoring. Also included is a list of Highlighted Resources on Youth Mentoring.

MENTOR TOOLKIT: *Mentoring Immigrant and Refugee Youth: A Toolkit for Program Coordinators*

http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_1197.pdf

Mentoring Immigrant Youth: A Toolkit for Program Coordinators is a comprehensive resource designed to offer program staff important background information, promising program practices and strategies to build and sustain high-quality mentoring relationships for different categories of immigrant youth. This toolkit acts as a supplemental guide to MENTOR's How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice—a step-by-step toolkit that provides tips and strategies for developing and strengthening youth mentoring programs.

BRYCS PROMISING PRACTICE: *Bethany Christian Services, Grand Rapids, MI, URM Mentoring Program*

<http://www.brycs.org/promisingpractices/promising-practices-program.cfm?docnum=0030>

Refugee Foster Care Mentoring Program of Bethany Christian Services, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Through coordinated mentor relationships, support groups and casework services, the mentoring program enables refugee youth to become self-sufficient by emancipation from foster care at age 21.

LITERATURE REVIEW, PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Birman, D., & Morland, L. (2013). Immigrant and refugee youth. In M. Karcher and D. Dubois, Eds., The handbook of youth mentoring, Sage Publications, pp 355-368..

BRYCS HIGHLIGHTED RESOURCES LISTS:

Promising Practices in Refugee and Immigrant Youth Mentoring

http://www.brycs.org/promisingpractices/programs.cfm?q=%20mentoring&start=0&sortType=L&num=10&site=BRYS_promising&rfields=&pfields=&dquery=mentoring

Youth Mentoring

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Youth-Mentoring.cfm>

¹ United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement (2012). *Unaccompanied Refugee Minors*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/unaccompanied-refugee-minors>.

Please note that we use the term “refugee” throughout this publication to include all child populations served by ORR, including Unaccompanied Alien Children, Cuban and Haitian entrants, and victims of human trafficking.



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- ³ Birman, D. (1998). Biculturalism and perceived competence of Latino immigrant adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(3), 335-354.
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- ⁵ Smokowski, P. R., Rose, R., & Bacallao, M. L. (2008). Acculturation and Latino family processes: How cultural involvement, biculturalism, and acculturation gaps influence family dynamics. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 57, 295-308. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00501.x
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- ¹⁰ Berndt, T. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1989). *Peer relationships in child development*. John Wiley & Sons.
- ¹¹ Birman, D., & Morland, L. (2013). Immigrant and refugee youth. In M. Karcher and D. Dubois, Eds., *The handbook of youth mentoring*, Sage Publications.
- ¹² Birman, et al., 2002;
- ¹³ Oppedal, B., Røysamb, E., & Sam, D. L. (2004). The effect of acculturation and social support on change in mental health among young immigrants. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 28(6), 481-494. doi:10.1080/01650250444000126
- ¹⁴ Birman, D. (1998). Biculturalism and perceived competence of Latino immigrant adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(3), 335-354.
- ¹⁵ Birman, et al., 2005
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