

Ways Teachers Can Help Refugee Students: Some Suggestions

1. Provide a stable, comforting environment and be available to listen. Students may want to ask questions and perhaps to tell you about some of their experiences. Help students know how to approach you by being specific about how and when it is appropriate to talk (e.g., "You may come up to my desk any time after class and ask to talk to me.")
2. Provide access to tutors for refugee students. Extra academic help may be very beneficial for a refugee child or adolescent who may already feel additionally stigmatized by poor academic performance. A good relationship with a tutor can also provide a helpful personal connection.
3. Provide a safe community in the school and classroom. Show that diversity is welcomed and appreciated, not feared.
 - a. Display welcome signs in different languages.
 - b. Display photographs/items from different countries represented within the student body.
 - c. Lead class discussions about stereotypes and prejudices (keep the discussion general, not focused on particular students.)
4. Be consistent with rules and expectations to help students gain a sense of mastery in their daily lives.
5. The youth in *Children of War* testify to the healing value of telling one's story and having it taken seriously. However, children and adolescents may need to disclose information in their own time and in their own way. Never pressure students to tell their stories in an open classroom setting. Let students know that you appreciate and take seriously their powerful experiences, and are available to listen if and when they are ready.
6. Provide creative opportunities for children to tell their stories or explore their backgrounds. Voluntary assignments could be to interview one's parents, provide a report on one's home country, provide a favorite food from one's home culture, etc. Some students may not want to showcase their differences, so these activities should be totally voluntary, with other acceptable alternatives. Some students may not be able to tell their stories, due to the trauma they experienced.
7. Be aware that some students may react to trauma by acting out and others by becoming withdrawn. Pay as much attention to those students who are withdrawn and quiet as to those who are acting out.
8. Make sure school and classroom rules are clear. Some behaviors that American teachers might take for granted, such as the need for promptness or quiet in the classroom, might not be obvious to a student from another culture. If a student continues to have trouble, consider a referral to a school counselor to assess whether the "acting out" is the result of traumatic stress or other emotional problems.

9. Help your students channel their feelings into prosocial activities. The adolescents who participated in the play *Children of War* expressed their wish to help others, to make meaning out of their experiences, and to make a difference in the world. Engaging in prosocial, constructive activities, whether volunteering for an environmental group, helping in a political campaign, or volunteering at a homeless shelter or hospital, can be very restorative for a child or adolescent whose trauma has led to a loss of faith in society.
10. Be sensitive to the experiences of refugee children in your classroom when teaching history or social studies lessons that pertain to war. Some students may have strong reactions to the topic. If appropriate, include information on displacement and the refugee experience as part of your curriculum
11. Consider establishing a peer support group that stresses positive solutions and a connection both to countries of origin and to new communities. A community member, a social worker, or an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher might be willing to lead the group.
12. Talk to other teachers to share strategies and successes. ESL teachers are often good resources.

Ways Schools Can Help Refugee Families

1. Do not make assumptions about what constitutes a family unit. Refugee children may be living with their biological parents, other relatives, or family friends. Family members may have come to the United States at different times and under varied circumstances. Whenever possible, meet with a student's caregivers early in the school year to better understand the child's living situation and to begin establishing a positive relationship with the caregivers.
2. Don't assume that everything is fine once a family has reached America. Some parents may be suffering from their own traumatic stress reactions, which may have an impact on the child. Some families may need help with basics like shelter, medical care, and so forth. These needs may overwhelm children and families, and activities like homework may not be a priority. Refer families to community agencies that can help.
3. Communicate respectfully with parents who may not understand English, American culture, or expectations of parents by American school systems. Use a translator if at all possible to avoid encouraging role reversal among children and parents, already a common challenge for immigrant and refugee families.
4. Refugee trauma may affect a child's or family's relationship to authority and institutions. A child who has witnessed torture and brutality in an oppressive regime may find it difficult to trust authority. Help children and their families by explaining the roles of teachers, principals, and other school authority figures.
5. Provide a school orientation as a social gathering for parents/caregivers who are new to your community. Offer them an opportunity to meet school administrators, counselors, and teachers to build a relationship *before* a problem may need to be addressed.

6. Explain the role of parents in American schools and the expectation that parents/caregivers will be involved in the educational environment. In some cultures, parent involvement with problems occurring at school would be seen as inappropriate.
7. Develop partnerships with community organizations, particularly those that represent the cultural communities of the student body. Adults from immigrant and refugee backgrounds who are more established in the United States may be able to act as "culture brokers" and provide some cultural context to teachers so they can better understand what children may have experienced in their countries of origin. These partnerships can help bridge misunderstandings and expectations that arise from differences in cultural perspective and may also provide adults who can mentor refugee children and give them extra support and tutoring.
8. Identify mental health experts on refugee trauma in your community so that you have resources available for children who may be having trauma-related problems.