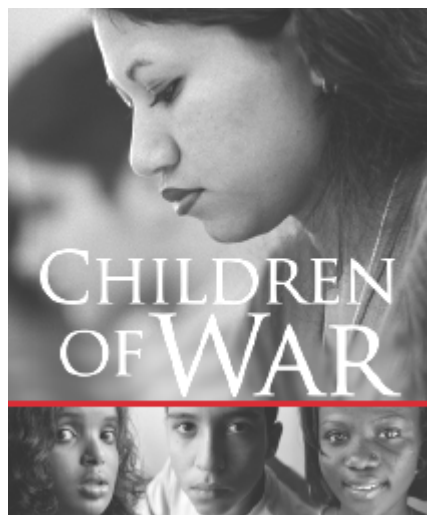


NCTSN

The National Child  
Traumatic Stress Network



# A Video for Educators

Now that you've watched the video . . .  
**A Resource Guide**

From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
Refugee Trauma Working Group  
Children of War Production Committee

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US  
Department of Health and Human Services.

**Children of War:  
A Video for Educators  
Resource Guide**

**From the**

**National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
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On the cover:

Large photo: Yarvin Cuchilla. Small photos, left to right: Awa Nur, Adul Hakim Paigir, and Fatu Sankoh. These youth appear in the play *Children of War*.

**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**  
[www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)

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The National Child Traumatic Stress Network is coordinated by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC. Address queries to [info@nctsn.org](mailto:info@nctsn.org)

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# Children of War – A Video for Educators Resource Guide


*Now that you've watched the video . . .*

## Discussion Questions



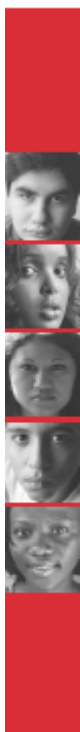
1. What did you learn about refugee children? Did the youth in the play remind you of students you have taught in your classrooms or have known in your school?
2. The participants in *Children of War* speak of reacting to loud noises or disturbances in school as if they were immersed once again in life-threatening conditions of war. As Fatu from Sierra Leone says, “I know I’m here but my body doesn’t believe it.” Have you ever observed a student reacting this way? What could a teacher do to help?
3. Refugee children learn a new language and become acculturated more rapidly than their parents, often becoming the “culture brokers” for their families. This situation may force unwanted adult responsibilities on children and adolescents. What can teachers and schools do to help?
4. Children sometimes feel torn between the cultures of their homelands and their parents and the new American culture of their peers. Have you ever observed a student struggling with this dilemma? How can teachers or schools help students integrate these possibly conflicting cultural identities?
5. How can teachers invite children or adolescents to share their experiences and celebrate their own culture without making them feel put on the spot and singled out as “different?”
6. What challenges has your school faced in addressing the needs of refugee students? How has your school met these challenges?
7. Do you know of resources in your community that can provide specialized help for refugee children?

## Ways Teachers Can Help Refugee Students: Some Suggestions

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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


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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.


## Definitions




**Immigrant:** A person who voluntarily leaves his or her country of origin to seek a better life, reunite with family members, or for other personal reasons. Migration is usually planned in advance.







**Refugee:** A person who flees his or her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Flight is often unplanned and conducted under duress. Individuals who flee their countries because of civil wars or natural disasters may not be eligible for refugee resettlement under US law and may face an involuntary return to their country of origin.




**Unaccompanied Refugee Children:** Children who are separated from both parents, and who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, has responsibility to do so. These children are particularly vulnerable to further victimization during the process of exile and relocation.



**Asylum Seeker:** A person of non-US citizenship who asks to remain in the United States, usually after having entered illegally (without documentation) and is unable to return to his/her country of origin because of a well-grounded fear of persecution.



## Statistics



Between 1988 and 2001, more than 1.3 million refugees were admitted to the United States.

In 2003, over 10,000 refugee youth under the age of 18 arrived in the United States. In the first half of 2004, that number rose to almost 15,000 refugee youth. These numbers do not include children and families seeking asylum or immigration as a voluntary move. (Source: US Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration)

In the past decade, more than 2 million children were killed in war and conflict. Another 6 million were wounded. One million were orphaned, losing one or both parents.

Twenty-five million of the world's children have been uprooted. Some remain within their own countries; many flee to other countries as refugees. More than 300,000 youths, many of whom are less than 10 years old, serve as child soldiers. Many girl soldiers are forced into sexual slavery. (Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

## War and Traumatic Stress

Children and adolescents who have faced the violent conditions of war or civil unrest often suffer from traumatic stress reactions that may endure for months or years after the danger has passed. Children can heal from these experiences with the support of caring adults, the security of a safe environment, and access to appropriate care. Educators can help refugee children develop hope for the future and the skills to meet their goals.

**Re-experiencing:** Dwelling on or having to ward off unbidden thoughts, memories, sights, sounds, and other sensory impressions of past traumatic experiences. Everyday school and classroom events can serve as *traumatic reminders* to a vulnerable child. A buzzer sounding, fire alarm ringing, or even a locker door slamming can re-immense a child in the experience of trauma. A child or adolescent reacting to a traumatic reminder might dive under a desk, freeze, start to shake, or withdraw from classroom activity.

**Avoidance:** Avoiding talking or thinking about anything associated with the past trauma. This avoidance may cause a child to seem rigid or emotionally withdrawn. To avoid strong feelings, a child may become cut off or detached from other people or be unable to form healthy relationships with peers. In the classroom, a child may seem disinterested in schoolwork or unwilling to make commitments.


**Hyperarousal:** In the wake of traumatic events, a child may suffer from nervousness or hypervigilance—a state of being on the alert for danger and of interpreting mundane events as dangerous. A traumatized child may startle easily or be quick to interpret neutral events as potentially dangerous or negative



**Sleep Disturbances:** Refugees of war and unrest may suffer from insomnia or from frequent nighttime awakenings, night terrors, or nightmares. They may appear tired or listless during the day because they are not getting enough sleep at night.

**Traumatic Bereavement:** Many refugee children have lost parents, siblings, other family members and peers, often in violent acts committed before their eyes. Traumatic bereavement occurs when a child or adolescent becomes so preoccupied with memories, images, and thoughts about the circumstances under which the person died that he or she cannot go through a normal grieving process. It is not unusual for a refugee child or adolescent to dwell on and re-experience these traumatic events or to fantasize about reversal, revenge, or returning to bring to justice those responsible. Some children may need to work with a therapist who specializes in grief or trauma issues.

## Effects of Traumatic Stress on School Performance



Traumatic stress can have a negative impact on school performance by interfering with a child's ability to concentrate or to remember new information. Exposure to traumatic events may also undermine a student's ability to trust authority figures such as teachers and to interact with peers. Adolescent refugees may have lost their faith in society or their ability to plan productively for their own futures.

Refugee and immigrant children may also have spotty educational histories, with months spent without any education while in relocation camps or in transit. Some children have had no formal education at all. When a family's focus is on meeting basic needs, education may fall by the wayside.

## About the Play *Children of War*



Playwright Ping Chong developed *Undesirable Elements*, a theater production about the contemporary immigrant experience. When Dennis Hunt, PhD, director of the Center for Multicultural Human Services (CMHS), attended *Undesirable Elements* he saw parallels with the unique experiences of refugee children and adolescents served by CMHS. CMHS has met the mental health and other needs of refugee and immigrant families since 1982. Now a member of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, CMHS serves more than 6,000 individuals and families per year in 34 languages.

CMHS brought Ping Chong together with five refugee adolescents living in the Washington, DC area, and a CMHS counselor who was herself a refugee from Iran. *Children of War* is the result of the collaboration among these refugee students, the playwright Ping, and CMHS. *Children of War* is based on their stories about war, trauma, displacement, and resilience.

“This play serves a therapeutic end to the extent that it works as a kind of testimony,” says Hunt. “One of the principles in recovering from trauma is to pull a very frightening, fragmented memory of things into a coherent story and then have others witness that story.

Members of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, with funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, produced this videotape to bring the stories of refugee children to educators. Its purpose is to help educators better understand the refugee children in their classrooms and schools.

### Participants in *Children of War*

In order of appearance in the play and, top to bottom, in the image bar throughout the Resource Guide:

Dereen Pasha, 15, Iraq  
Awa Nur, 15, Somalia  
Yarvin Cuchilla, 18, El Salvador  
Adul Hakeem Paigir, 14, Afghanistan  
Fatu Sankoh, 15, Sierra Leone  
Farinaz Amirsehi, CMHS therapist, Iran (not shown)

### About the Playwright Ping Chong

Ping Chong’s parents immigrated to the United States from China and never learned English. “I know what the immigrant story is, and I certainly know what it means to be Other in this country,” he says. Chong has created 20 original works in his *Undesirable Elements* series that tell the stories of various immigrant communities. Chong conceived *Children of War* as a “chorale” in which the participants’ stories and voices are interwoven to form a tapestry of words and histories. According to Chong, each child gained strength from hearing his or her story voiced by others and by the power of their stories coming together as one.

Ping Chong’s theater company, (Ping Chong & Company, a.k.a. The Fuji Company) was founded in 1975 to create innovative works of theater and art that explore the intersection of race, history, culture, and technology in the modern world. The company tours widely in the United States and throughout the world and has received numerous honors and awards.

## Web Resources



<http://www.nctsnet.org/refugees>

NCTSNet.org is the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, providing information on aspects of child trauma, such as refugee trauma, maltreatment, exposure to community or domestic violence, disasters, and terrorism. For specific information about refugees, including more information on *Children of War*, go to the [www.nctsnet.org/refugees](http://www.nctsnet.org/refugees) address.

<http://www.brycs.org>

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) is a national technical assistance project working to broaden the scope of information and collaboration among service providers in order to strengthen services to refugee youth, children, and their families.

<http://www.itvs.org>

This website includes *Beyond the Fire*, audio and flash-animated movies that tell the real-life stories of 15 teenagers who have survived war in seven war zones, and are now living in the United States. *Beyond the Fire* also includes print materials and a curriculum for using the materials with secondary and high school students.

<http://www.usaforunhcr.org>

The USA for UNHCR, a nonprofit organization that supports the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, maintains this website, which includes a wealth of information and educational materials.

<http://www.unhcr>

The website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees contains many resources, as well as access to *Refugees* magazine.

<http://www.refugees.org>

The website of the US Committee for Refugees includes information about US government policy as it pertains to refugees.

<http://ajaproject.org/sandiegoproject.html>

This website follows refugee students from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sierra Leone.

<http://www.survivorsvic.org.au/>

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), a coalition of agencies that respond to the needs of survivors of torture and trauma who have come to Australia from overseas. The foundation provides direct care to survivors of torture and trauma in the form of counseling, advocacy, family support, group work, psycho-education, information sessions, and complementary therapies. This website includes resources for schools.

## For Further Reading



Blackwell, D, and Melzak, S. *Far from the Battle but Still at War: Troubled Refugee Children in School*. London: Child Psychotherapy Trust, 2000. (For more information on obtaining this book, contact the Child Psychotherapy Trust at [cpt@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:cpt@globalnet.co.uk).)

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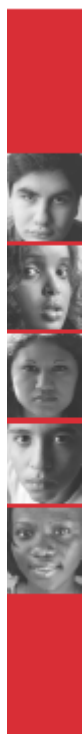
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Sutner, S. "How Teachers Can Help Refugee Students." *Harvard Education Review*, September/October 2002.

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## About the National Child Traumatic Stress Network



The federal government established the NCTSN to improve the quality, effectiveness, and availability of therapeutic services to traumatized children and adolescents. The NCTSN includes over 50 centers around the country. It is coordinated by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, based at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and Duke University Medical Center.

The NCTSN is funded through the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information, visit [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org).