



Understanding Refugee Trauma: For Child Welfare

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Who are refugees and immigrants?

People leave their home countries to come to the United States (US) for a variety of reasons. Although not exhaustive, some of the reasons include war or political violence, fear of persecution, and/or pursuit of employment or educational opportunities. Migration is typically distinguished as either forced or voluntary displacement.

There are many terms to describe persons who migrate to the US. Certain terms indicate specific legal protections; providers should know and consider these common terms:

Refugee:

Children who are “outside any country of [their] nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion”ⁱ

Immigrant:

A person who has come to live permanently in another country. INA, 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42) (2012).ⁱⁱ

Asylum-Seeker:

Children are eligible for asylum if they meet the definition of a refugee. Asylum seekers must show that they have a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group and are unable or unwilling to seek protection from authorities in their home country.ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike refugee children, asylum-seeking children do not have legal status upon arrival to a new country.

Unaccompanied Minor:

Children who arrive at the border who “(A) [have] no lawful immigration status in the United States; (B) [have] not attained 18 years of age; and (C) with respect to whom—(i) there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States; or (ii) no parent or legal guardian in the United States is available to provide care and physical custody.”^{iv} An Unaccompanied Alien Child (“UAC”) may be an asylum seeker. If she/he is not seeking asylum, she/he may be eligible for other forms of legal relief including Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), a T-Visa, or a U-Visa (more detail provided below).

Undocumented Immigrant:

A person residing in a country without sufficient legal documentation to do so.

Mixed Status Families:

A family constellation in which different family members have different immigration statuses.



An individual’s ability to obtain legal immigration status and corresponding rights and benefits in the United States is determined by federal law.

2 Potentially Traumatizing Events

The factors that drove an individual/family to migrate can be complex. For refugees and immigrants who have left their home countries involuntarily, many have been exposed to potentially traumatizing events across each phase of migration (before, during, and after). This may be true for those who migrated voluntarily as well.

Non-Exhaustive List of Potentially Traumatizing Events Throughout Migration		
Before migration	During Migration	After Migration
Direct/indirect exposure to war or other severe violence, conflict, or destruction	Separation from family/community Hazardous travel (often long distances by foot or unsafe transportation)	Discrimination based on racism, xenophobia, and explicit or implicit bias
Persecution based on a component of one’s identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, tribe, sexuality, or religion)	Direct/indirect exposure to violence	Community violence
Extreme poverty	Kidnapping	Family violence
Physical destruction of home/community	Robbery and financial exploitation	Physical neglect
Lack of food, water, shelter, or medical care	Forced labor	Separation from family/community
Sexual assault/gender-based violence	Trafficking	Robbery and financial exploitation
Imprisonment/torture	Sexual assault/gender-based violence	Extreme poverty
	Imprisonment/torture	Homelessness
	Physical injuries, infections, and/or disease	Natural disaster
		Hate crimes
		Lack of protection from harm or institutional violence by government

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Involvement in the Child Welfare System

All children living in the United States are eligible for child welfare services regardless of citizenship status. Below are four specific examples of how children without legal status can obtain services:

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (“SIJS”) is a form of immigration relief for children who cannot be reunified with one or both parents due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment and it is not in their best interest to return to their home country. Children must be under 21, unmarried, and a juvenile court is required to make specific findings before children can apply.^v

T Nonimmigrant Status (T-Visa) is a temporary form of immigration relief that allows victims of human trafficking to remain in the United States for up to four years if they have assisted law enforcement in an investigation or prosecution of human trafficking. Certain T-Visa recipients may be able to adjust their status and become lawful permanent residents. Certain family members, such as children under 18, may be eligible to become derivative U-Visa recipients if the primary petitioner’s application is approved.^{vi}

U Nonimmigrant Status (U-Visa) is a form of immigration relief for victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity. Certain U-Visa recipients may be able to adjust their status and become lawful permanent residents. Certain family members, such as children under 18, may be eligible to become derivative U-Visa recipients if the primary petitioner’s application is approved.^{vii}

Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM): A child under 18 who is eligible for resettlement in the US and does not have a parent to care for him/her. URMS, as part of the URM program, receive foster care services. The goal of the URM program is to transition these children to adulthood and independence.

In addition, some refugee and immigrant families become involved with the child welfare system secondary to care and protection concerns.

PROVIDER TIPS

The U.S. Child Welfare System is built upon the concept of *parens patriae*—a legal term that asserts that government has a role in protecting the interests of children and in intervening when parents fail to provide proper care. This is not necessarily the case in other countries where refugee and immigrant families are coming from. In other countries, “unofficial means” (family and community members) are often utilized to handle reports of abuse. These alternative responses have been operating for generations, sometimes as the only response to child abuse within a given country, and consequently have become the “normal” way to respond to allegations of maltreatment

PROVIDER TIPS

Understand the three national goals for child protection through the lenses of migration and culture by asking such questions as the following:

Safety: How might safety be understood in the context of violence and experience of abuses by authorities, systems, and/or adults? How might cultural difference in parenting practices impact the way in which “safety” is defined and cultivated within the home environment?

Permanence: How might the idea of a “permanent home” or “permanent family” be different for a child/family with a history of forced migration and sequential traumatization? How might termination of parental rights uniquely impact this child/family? How might different cultures define and value permanence?

Well-Being: How might different cultures define well-being? How might well-being be understood in the context of migration? How might a person’s cultural background affect how he or she interprets and responds to life experiences?

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Notions of Safety, Permanency & Well-Being are Shaped by Culture

- The three national goals for child protection—safety, permanency and well-being—must be understood through a migration and cultural lens.
- Refugees and immigrants come from countries throughout the world. Each country or region has a unique culture with different values, beliefs, and norms than the US majority culture.
- The terms *safety*, *permanency*, and *well-being* are culturally-bound. This means that a specific cultural group will assign meaning to these terms based on its shared values, beliefs, and norms.

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Factors That Could Potentially Elevate the Risk of Child Welfare System Involvement

Refugee and immigrant parents must be recognized, first and foremost, for their determination, strength, and strong sense of personal and family responsibility. These qualities are demonstrated by parents making the migration journey to US, often in the hopes to make a better life for their children. At the same time, many parents resettled in the U.S. face a great challenge in recognizing and readjusting parenting assumptions that are no longer shared by the wider society in which they live. They are also frequently dealing with major resettlement stressors, such as learning a new language, financial struggles, housing instability, and difficulties accessing healthcare. The prevalence and acuity of these resettlement difficulties only increase the family's vulnerability to stress. When faced with all of these stressors and numerous unknowns, it is more likely that refugee and immigrant families will rely on parenting practices that are familiar and comfortable to them. As such, it's important to consider the following:

- **Familial protective factors.**
Familial protective factors associated with refugee and immigrants may include strong parental supervision, strong religious beliefs, supportive community networks and access to extended family.
- **Cultural protective factors.**
Cultural protective factors associated with refugee and immigrants may include identification and connection with the cultural values and beliefs of the country of origin, as well as continued connection to family and friends in one's country of origin, which is often a source of strength. For many cultures, behaviors that hold value often appear grounded in religious beliefs, faith in a religion or general spirituality, which proves to be protective and related to well-being among refugee and immigrants. Religious institutions, often revered, serve as a great resource of support for refugee and immigrant families and youth as they adjust to a new country.
- **Isolation from Traditional Support Networks.**
Upon resettlement, many parents feel isolated from familiar support networks and other sources of traditional support or influence over a child. Linguistic and transportation barriers might only increase this sense of isolation. This isolation can lead to heightened distress and greater risk of exploitation.
- **Financial Stressors.**
Time-limited financial assistance and other financial stressors can place children and families at greater risk of exploitation
- **Different Cultural Norms.**
Many cultures value and enforce respect and modesty. Consequently, expectations for the child might conflict cultural protective factors associated with refugee and immigrant families, which is typical of U.S. culture. Also, certain cultural norms may be illegal in the U.S., such as corporal punishment or leaving children alone without an intentional arrangement for supervision.
- **Parental Mental Health.**
Parents might be struggling with trauma-related mental health issues secondary to traumatic exposure prior to, during, and after migration. Additionally, difficulties adjusting to a new culture might increase parenting stress and/or increase a parent's vulnerability to mental health problems.



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Special Considerations for Child Sexual Abuse

Culture can dictate the ways in which sex, sexuality, and gender norms are discussed in both family and service systems. For example, culture can shape definitions of “safe” versus “unsafe touch”. In addition, there are many cultures where it is very uncommon for families or school systems to provide education on body safety and sexual development. Many cultures also emphasize respect for elders, authority figures, and men, which might make it harder for a child to accurately assess safety and/or to regard an experience as “abuse.” Several other factors can make it challenging for refugee and immigrant children to disclose experiences of maltreatment. These include:

- **Family honor and reputation.**

For example, in some cultures, a young girl’s virginity is tantamount to her marriageability.

- **Shame.**

In some cultures, shame around sexual experiences (voluntary or coerced) can create great barriers to disclosure and may make it difficult for either parents to seek help or for children to disclose experience of sexual abuse.

- **Fears of escalating conflict.**

In some cultures, when the sexual abuse of a child is discovered, men in the family will feel obligated to avenge this dishonor through perpetrating violence publicly against the alleged abuser. As such, a child might be advised by other caregivers not to say anything about the abuse for fear of a retaliatory and/or violent response.

- **Fears of victim blaming.**

In some cultures, it is also common to blame the victim for the abuse and even to commit violence against the victim. It is important to note that victim blaming is not necessarily motivated by malintent; rather, it can be the result of cultural values around honor, gender norms, and/or fears of status loss.

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Barriers to Service Access and Engagement

- **Lack of Service System Knowledge:**

Every country has its own system for responding to care and protection concerns. Therefore, an individual’s historical knowledge of and experience with these systems in his or her country of origin might shape his or her expectations of the child welfare system in the United States.

- **Service System Fears:**

The migration journey for refugees and immigrants is often one of filled with the experience of potentially traumatic events, including negative interactions with both federal and legal systems. This might lead to fear and/or distrust of authorities and systems.

- **Fears of Further Family Separation:**

Many children and parents are afraid of disclosing conflict or maltreatment due to fear of inciting yet another family separation. In addition, children might be afraid of upsetting or disappointing parents who have been through so much already in order to protect their children.

- **Acculturation/Acculturative Stress:**

Adapting to a new country and its culture can be challenging and stressful for refugee and immigrant families, particularly for those with whose ethnicities, languages and religions are distinct from the US majority.

- **Cultural Shifts:**

Refugee and immigrants must learn about and negotiate the cultural and societal expectations and standards of the US while also relying and retaining the cultural knowledge and traditions of their country of origin.

- **Religiosity:**

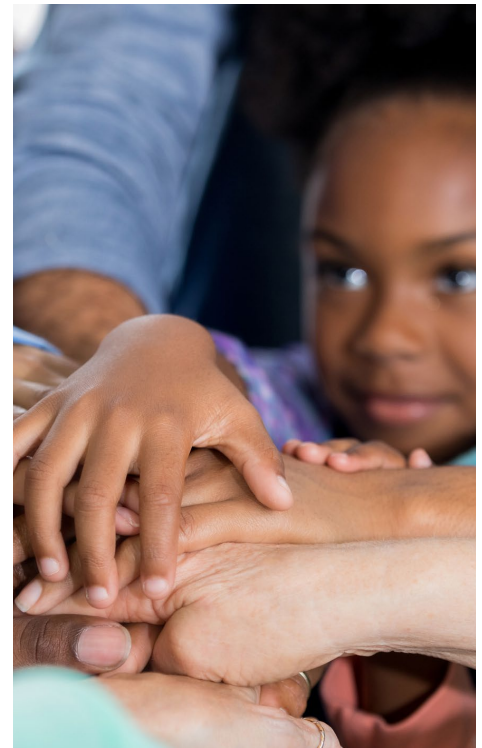
Despite being protective, religious norms and practices can also complicate disclosures of maltreatment. For example, a child with certain religious beliefs might pray for abuse to stop and accept their abuse as “fate” if it continues. Additionally, a child or parent might regard experiences of abuse as retribution or a misdeed committed in a previous life.

- **Language:**

English is the majority language for service provision, which may not be the preferred language of the family. In addition to no or limited English proficiency, in some cultures there are not even words for specific parts of the body that might be referenced as part of the child’s disclosure or to describe what happened to them.

- **Immigration Status:**

Fear of deportation in families with family members without sufficient documentation.



8 System Considerations

What Can the Child Welfare System do to Enhance Service Provision to Refugee and Immigrant Children and Families?

At the institutional level

- **Recognize and create a safe space to discuss biases and expectations.**

Professionals’ value system, theoretical orientation, class biases, and even presumed knowledge of another culture can influence their actions and ability to connect with a client.

- **Recognize that the child welfare system is reflective of mainstream US culture.**

Mainstream US culture is primarily defined as White, English-speaking, middle class, Christian, cisgender, and heterosexual. Refugees and immigrant families may not fit this definition; one’s own cultural frame influences how youth and family cultural practices are viewed.

- **Develop partnerships with refugee resettlement agencies^{vii}.**

Resettlement agency staff play an important role as a cultural bridge for newly arrived refugees. They can carry out several critical functions, such as assisting the child welfare worker in securing an interpreter for the family, providing consultation to the worker on the family’s culture, and/or explaining child welfare procedures to the family.

- **Consider the need for structural changes to support culturally-responsive practices.**

Reflect on your answers to the following questions as a starting place:

- Does the agency employ professionals whose lived experience reflects that of the population they serve?
- Are high quality trainings in cultural issues available for staff and prospective foster parents?
- Does supervision regularly include a cultural lens?
- Are interpretation and translation services easily accessible to staff and families during investigations and delivery of interventions?
- Do families have access to documentation in their preferred language?
- Have partnerships been established with local community-based organizations serving the needs of the families in your region?

PROVIDER TIPS

There are times where cultural norms might make it hard for a child or parent to talk openly about their experiences. For example, in some cultures it is expected that children not talk to authorities. In this case, interviewers may need to directly challenge assumptions that children will be silent with authorities. A gentle challenge in response to this cultural norm might be, “In many situations, adults don’t want children to speak a lot. Here, I really need to hear what you (the child) have to say.”

- Do the foster families you recruit represent the families involved with child welfare?

PROVIDER TIPS

At the provider level

Practice cultural humility by asking yourself questions such as...

What are that values, attitudes and beliefs that I have that may be impacting my work?

How can I increase the cultural relevance of service provision to refugee and immigrant children and families?

How is immigrant status and/or social discrimination creating barriers to service access and engagement?

How can I reduce these barriers?

- **Practice cultural humility.**

It is invaluable to approach working with refugee and immigrant children, adolescents, and families from a stance of cultural humility. It is a process-oriented approach to an increased understanding of intersectionality and the impact of provider implicit biases in service delivery. According to Tervalon and Murray-Garcia's definition of cultural humility, this approach is guided by three factors:

- Lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique;
- A desire to fix power imbalances where none ought to exist; and Institutional accountability.

- **When interviewing children and families of diverse cultures:**

- Orient the child/family to the interview, being explicit about process and expectations.
- Address confidentiality concerns.
- When possible, ensure the interview setting is welcoming and/or comfortable for people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
- Make sure people have an opportunity to interview in their preferred language, and consider the pros and cons of ethnic matching (i.e., the child/family and caseworker share the same ethnic and/or racial background).
- Be mindful of personal biases and assume an open, curious, and nonjudgmental approach.
- When indicated, gently challenge cultural taboos.

- **Considerations for case planning and service delivery:**

- Identify the specific family challenges and include interventions for reducing parental stress, increasing social supports, and decreasing the child and family's isolation as appropriate.
- Recognize that skill deficits are often the result of parenting in a new country and the absence of proactive parent coaching upon resettlement. As such, it's may be important to embed parent education and skill development into any service plan, and to consider whether these supports can be offered prior to removing the child from the home.
- Be mindful of the acculturation gap between parents and children, while simultaneously helping family members align around common goals.
- Consider if relationships can be fostered and/or strengthened across borders. For children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds, it's often important to develop and support the maintenance of connections across borders despite the distance, particularly for mixed status families where an undocumented parent has been deported.
- Consider cultural values and strengths that can be emphasized to facilitate responsive interventions and safety for the child.
- Consider that a caregiver's lack of immigration status may cause them to be fearful of going to a court hearing.

i Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), 8 U.S.C. S 101(a)(42)(A).

ii Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42) (2012).

iii U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Form I-589, Application for Asylum and Withholding of Removal. Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/system/files/force/files/form/i-589.pdf?download=1>.

iv 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2) (2012).

v Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27)(J) (2012); 8 CFR § 204.11 (2012).

vi Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1101 (a)(15)(T) (2012); 8 C.F.R § 214.11(p) (2012).

vii Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15)(U) (2012); 8 C.F.R § 245.24(b)(2)(i), (ii) (2012).

viii <https://find.usahello.org/#/welcome>; Visit the website USAHello to find a refugee resettlement agency or other agency serving refugee and immigrants near you!