



Students with Refugee Experience

A Guide for Teachers and Schools



All children have the right to education, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention Against Discrimination in Education, and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Quality education is a central goal of education development broadly, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and the 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action.

Access to quality education enables progress toward productive employment for individuals and sustainable economic growth for communities, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG8); toward full participation in society, as articulated in the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and toward peaceful and inclusive societies, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16).

The right to education for refugees is asserted in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and reaffirmed for both primary and secondary schooling in the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.

UNHCR Refugee Education 2030

In general, refugees are persons who seek refuge or asylum outside their homeland to escape persecution. The following is the Geneva Convention definition recognized worldwide and signed by Canada:



Geneva Convention Definition of a Refugee, 1951, 1967

A refugee is a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence..., is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

Source: “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, August 2007.

This document replaces the Ministry of Education 2015 *Students from Refugee Backgrounds Guide for Teachers and Schools*. The Ministry of Education would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of this guide over the years.

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Introduction

Families who arrive in Canada as refugees, or who claim asylum while on Canadian soil, have overcome great obstacles and adversity. They bring with them strengths, abilities, and qualities to share, with hope of thriving in their new home country.

Educator awareness and understanding of the backgrounds and needs of children and youth with refugee experience, as well as the individual strengths and cultural differences of these students, are important factors in student progress and success.

While adversity will impact an individual's future experiences and outlook, the resiliency of children and youth to survive traumatic experiences should not be underestimated. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from adversity. See [Appendix A](#) for an illustrative profile of a resilient child. A person may be able to recover from disruptions or misfortune without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional ways. Sometimes difficulties can be used as a springboard to positive development. It is important to note that the recovery process may differ for individual children and youth, depending on their ages and experiences.

Purpose

This guide is for educators with a focus on three goals:

- to provide background information about those with refugee experience
- to support all school staff in their work with children and youth with refugee experience
- to offer strategies for teachers working with children and youth with refugee experience and their families



1. Students with refugee experience: The Context

This section provides information about the circumstances of individuals with refugee experience.

International

In general, refugees are persons who seek refuge or asylum outside their homeland to escape persecution.

In 1950, the United Nations General Assembly created the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as part of its recognition of the importance of refugee demographics in our modern world. This agency leads and coordinates international efforts to protect the rights and well being of refugees.

Individuals seeking refuge or asylum are forced to flee from their home country into a life of uncertainty. A person may have no real sanctuary. The flight from their home country often leads to a difficult life in a refugee camp or an urban environment without status, often for many years. This may seem like the beginning of a long journey to nowhere. Refugee relief agencies work to bring a sense of normalcy to a new existence and stability in the face of uncertainty.

There is "... a refugee reality that does not always conform to what people imagine refugee reality to be. In the global imagination, most refugees are displaced temporarily, receive concentrated lifesaving support in camps and then return home to resume their briefly interrupted lives. In such a scenario, it is easy to imagine temporary education as well, one that mimics the education at home, even if it is not certified by authorities in the home country, because surely the displacement situation will be resolved next week or next month or next year. In any case: soon. The newly displaced frequently believe this as well. Assumptions that short term humanitarian support and approaches were sufficient shaped earlier approaches to refugee education. These were often based on use of country of origin curriculum, administered in parallel to national education systems that were neither supervised nor certified by country of asylum education authorities, and had no vision of students as eventual contributors to family or local economies.

These assumptions have given way to a new understanding that short term approaches to refugee education are insufficient and inappropriate to displacement realities, which require medium to longer-term development perspectives and opportunities for knowledge and skills acquisition that lead to economic inclusion well beyond the margins of informal economies

At the end of 2018, 15.9 million refugees were living in protracted situations. This represented 78% of all refugees, compared with 66% in 2017. Of this number, 5.8 million were in a situation lasting 20 years or more. In addition, there were 10.1 million refugees in protracted situations of less than 20 years, more than half represented by the displacement situation of Syrians in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey."

UNHCR Refugee Education 2030

Canada

Canada has two systems for providing protection to refugees: the Overseas Resettlement Program and the in-Canada Asylum System. There are also different subcategories of refugees within these systems:

OVERSEAS RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

SUBCATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Government Assisted Refugees (GAR)	Enter Canada as permanent residents and are supported by the federal government for up to one year from their arrival in Canada.
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR)	Enter Canada as permanent residents and are sponsored by private citizens. Private sponsors commit to assisting and supporting these individuals throughout their first year of residence in Canada.
Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR)	Enter Canada as permanent residents who receive six months of support from the Canadian government and six months of support from private sponsors.

IN-CANADA ASYLUM SYSTEM

Refugee Claimants (also known as asylum seekers, asylees, in-land refugees)	People who arrive to a Canadian border or are already on Canadian soil and claim asylum because they cannot safely return to their home country. These individuals have temporary status in Canada while awaiting the results of their refugee claim. Refugee claimants receive permanent residency in Canada only if their claim is approved.
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Source: Statistics and Open Data - Canada.ca

[Claim refugee status from inside Canada: About the process - Canada.ca](#)

[How Canada's refugee system works - Canada.ca](#)

Overseas Resettlement Program

Resettled refugees are individuals who have already crossed an international border, been identified as refugees by the UN or their host country overseas and are later resettled to Canada (e.g. Syrian refugees in 2016). Resettled refugees are screened abroad and undergo security and medical checks prior to being issued a visa to come to Canada. When they arrive in Canada, they are permanent residents. These refugees are directly sponsored by the Government of Canada or by private organizations, community groups or groups of Canadians, with pre-arranged supports for their first year in Canada.

Government Assisted Refugees receive direct support from the federal government to help them start a new life in Canada. They are provided with transportation loans for their travel to Canada and financial assistance for one year that include a start-up allowance, monthly support allowance, and a bus pass allowance. The loans are repayable after one year or when they become self-sufficient.

Privately sponsored refugees receive support from their sponsoring group in the first year of settlement in Canada, including pre-arranged housing, basic support allowance, and settlement and orientation support.

Blended Visa Office Referred refugees are jointly sponsored by the Government of Canada and private sponsors, with each party providing six months of financial support.



In-Canada Asylum System

The in-Canada asylum system offers refugee protection to people in Canada who fear persecution or whose removal from Canada would subject them to a danger of torture, a risk to their life or a risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. Refugee claimants (also known as asylum seekers) are different from resettled refugees. They are foreign nationals who arrive on Canadian soil (or are already here as temporary residents) and make a refugee claim to the Government of Canada. Refugee claimants may fly, drive, walk, take a train, a ferry, or a boat to Canada for the purpose of claiming asylum. Alternatively, they may arrive to, or be in, Canada as visitors, international students or foreign workers and choose to file a claim based on circumstances in their home country.

As refugee claimants and resettled refugees come to Canada through different immigration streams, those who are crossing the border irregularly and claiming asylum in Canada are not queue jumpers and are not taking the place of refugees who are coming to Canada from abroad for resettlement. All refugee claimants undergo health and security screening, including biographic and biometric checks as well as the initiation of security and criminality checks.

All eligible refugee claimants receive a fair hearing at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal. Each case is decided on its merits, based on the evidence and arguments presented. Only those who receive a positive decision on their claim receive permanent resident status in Canada.

The process of transition into Canadian society may be more difficult or confusing for refugee claimants than for other persons with refugee experience who have already been granted refugee status. Claimants may be unsure of legal processes and their rights. The claim process may take years and the outcome is often uncertain.

British Columbia

British Columbia welcomes refugee immigrants to the province every year. Currently, refugees are more likely to settle in the Greater Vancouver area.

The Refugee Experience

Through the years, educators in British Columbia have worked both with immigrant children and youth and those with refugee experience. While there may seem to be similarities between the two groups – they are new to the country, they must go through a process of adjustment – immigrants and refugees are different. The following provides general observations of differences and may not apply to all students:

REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS: Observation of Different Experiences

IMMIGRANTS	REFUGEES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal business is taken care of before leaving home country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal business in the home country is left unsettled after leaving in a hurry.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education usually continues uninterrupted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education may be interrupted or postponed due to strife in home country or a wait in a refugee camp.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to prepare for the transition allows for development of an awareness of their new country and its culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sudden transition to a new culture/country creates difficulties, confusion, or uncertainty.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of loss and trauma is not necessarily present. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of loss and trauma may be profound; losses may include family members or personal property and may have psychological impacts.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Returning home is a personal choice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Returning home is not an option unless the crisis situation has stabilized or ended.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are often intact, including parents and children, or other family members who are also caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children may be without parents, or even family guardians.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrangements likely have been made for basic requirements, such as food, housing, and medical and dental care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic requirements, such as food, housing, and immediate medical and dental care, may be urgently needed.

Children experience many different types of trauma during war and conflict such as:

- Intense war operations, civil war, bombings, shootings, and executions
- Destruction of homes, landmarks, cities, villages, and countryside
- Violent death of family or friends
- Separation from family, friends, and neighbours
- Physical injury, wounds, beatings, and deprivations
- Arrests of members of their families, or fear of discovery or arrest
- Being arrested, detained, or even tortured
- Being forced to join the army or militias, or being subjected to indoctrination
- Sexual trauma and rape, observing the rape of loved ones
- Serious shortages of food, water, or other daily necessities
- Betrayal by governments, neighbours, and other authorities
- Hostility and culture shock in new communities and countries
- Material deprivation in the present circumstance

Source: *Life After War - Education as a Healing Process for War-Affected Children*, 2012, Government of Manitoba

Settlement Issues

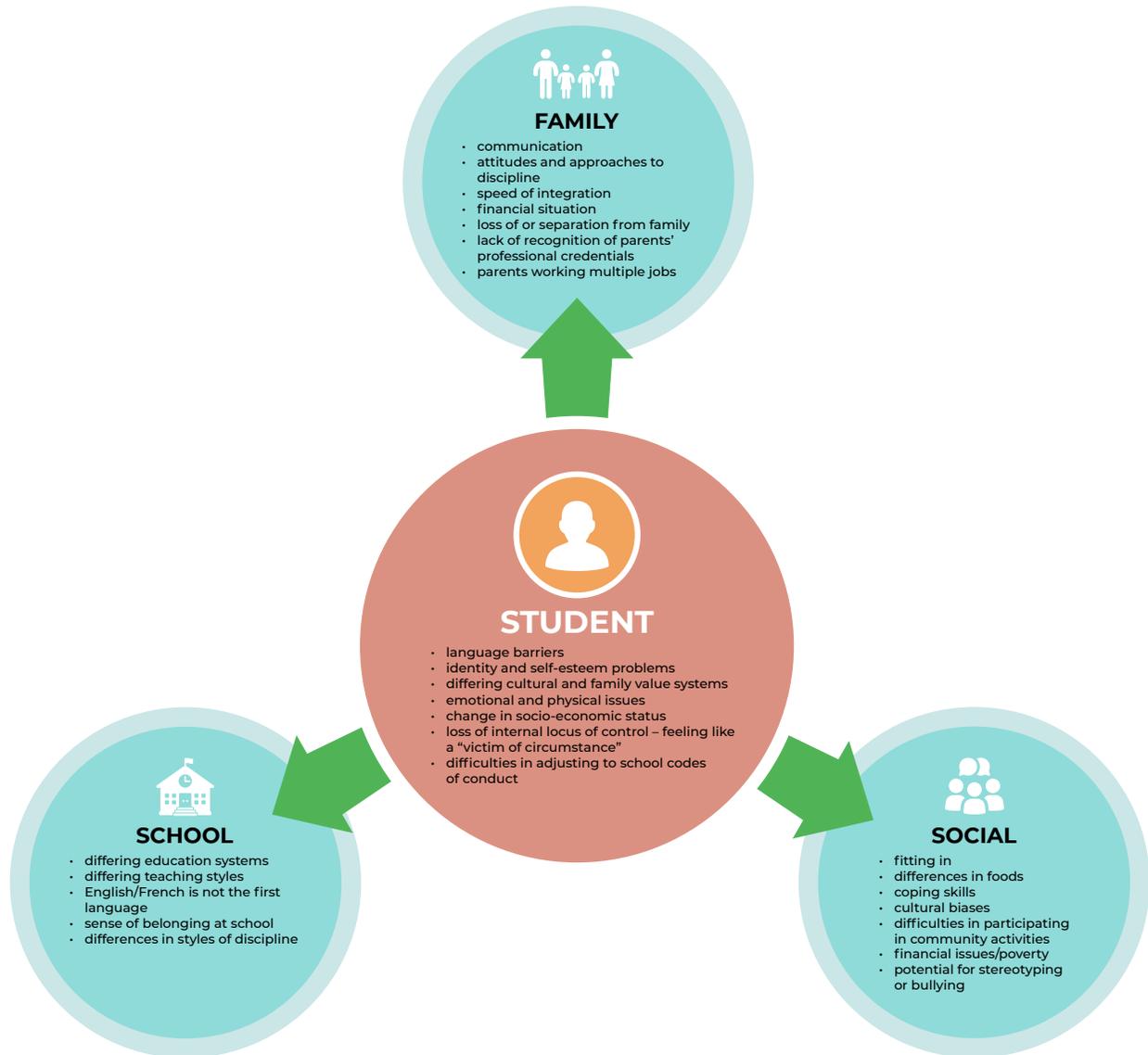
Many children, youth and families with refugee experience who settle in British Columbia may grapple with significant settlement issues. In recent years, changes in refugee characteristics and trends are a direct result of the humanitarian provisions in the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* and its emphasis on refugee protection and policy. The following table illustrates some general situations observed over the last decade:

Challenges for Children, Youth and Families with Refugee Experience

- more delays and prolonged time periods in refugee camps for individuals and families
- little or no formal schooling (sometimes for generations) resulting in innumeracy and illiteracy in the first language as well as in English or French
- limited labour market skills, including those needed in a technology-based society
- limited access to resources to address health issues in their countries of origin or in refugee camps
- larger family sizes
- families sometimes composed of several blended families because adults have been lost
- use of less common languages that are difficult to identify, causing communication barriers
- serious and multiple physical and mental health concerns as consequences of war or torture
- inhibited emotional development due to exposure to violence
- limited income, resulting in poor nutrition and health
- lack of awareness of the dangers of city life, such as traffic or strangers
- families with parents lost in conflict or war
- families, accustomed to different cultural norms, who struggle with role reversals, such as a woman as head of a family as opposed to a man, or children taking on adult responsibilities for their parents (from translation to employment responsibilities)
- isolation and loneliness for adults and children
- different parenting styles arising from cultural norms
- negative emotions and stress that have a detrimental effect on children and youth
- loss of identity and self-esteem

Personal Adjustment Issues

Along with overall settlement issues, students with refugee experience are grappling with many aspects of adjustment when they come to a new country, including those associated with self, family, school, and society.



Source: “Settlement Workers in Schools Module on Settlement and Immigration,” British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, pp. 8-11.

2. Students with refugee experience: The School

This section provides information for all school staff working with children and youth with refugee experience.

First Impressions

Many cultures in the world are represented in the population of British Columbia. In each cultural group, traditional beliefs, values, and customs may be retained to varying degrees by different individuals. Factors such as social class, religion, level of education, and rural or urban region of origin in the home country contribute to differences within immigrant groups. These factors influence:

- the beliefs of the student and the student's family about teaching and learning
- their expectations of teachers and school staff
- their willingness to seek help



School staff has the opportunity to make positive first impressions on families and set up students for early success.

While learning the English/French language is essential, children and youth with refugee experience have additional needs that may impact their ability to benefit from our school system. Coming to a new country and adjusting to a new way of life can be difficult and frightening. Older youth may be particularly challenged by starting life in a new country. The first year or two are very important. Schools can smoothen the adjustment process by providing suitable services and programs. School staff has the opportunity to make positive first impressions on families and set up students for early success.

Roles of School Staff

Teachers can begin to have a positive impact as soon as children and youth with refugee experience arrive by establishing and maintaining a positive, welcoming climate. Much of the children's introduction to school life and early relationship building may take place in the classroom with the support of the teacher, other school staff, and peers. It is important to recognize that teachers may need support and additional training to help the child deal with traumatic experiences. To best support the child, teachers should be one part of a team made up of various professionals:

- the principal
- school counsellors and/or other student support staff who may be accessed through the district's support services department, school administrators, or existing school-based teams
- English Language Learning (ELL) teachers
- settlement workers
- integration support teachers

Principals have a leadership role to play, ensuring students are provided with the supports and services they need and that the school is a welcoming place for all students. Counsellors can assist with additional information, support in understanding the emotional needs of the student and can assist with referral to youth mental health services and other community support agencies.

The ELL specialist teachers, along with classroom teachers, can play significant roles in helping children and youth with refugee experience learn English/French, adjust to a new way of life in a new country, and achieve success in school. As well, settlement workers offer information and support services to students and their families, helping to smooth their transition into a new school and community. Inclusive Education support teachers can provide classroom teachers with teaching strategies, inclusion support, and assistance with adaptation and modification of materials.

It is important for educators to be presented with professional development and in-service opportunities geared toward understanding and addressing the unique needs of students and families with refugee experience. Local immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies have expertise that may help (see “[Resources](#)” starting on page 28).

Compassionate Learning Communities – Supporting a Trauma-informed Practice

B.C. Ministry of Education [Resources for Compassionate Learning Communities \(mytrainingbc.ca\)](#):

- Online resources include four workshop packages, intended to support schools and districts to affirm their current trauma-informed practice and further develop compassionate learning communities that operate within a trauma-informed practice.
- These workshops are intended for anyone who wishes to host professional development sessions for staff, or awareness sessions with other groups, or for individuals to view on their own.
- The workshop packages are flexible and customizable. They can be used as individual workshops or as a whole professional development suite. School staff, parents/caregivers, and educators can also download brief tip sheets.
- The resources are to be used in whatever way they are needed.

Working toward the goal of providing specialized and additional services to students with refugee experience, keep in mind that the majority will eventually integrate into grade-level classes. When integrated, they will follow the prescribed curriculum of the Ministry of Education, and they will be expected to perform to the same standards as their English/French-speaking peers.

Suggested Strategies for Orientation to the School

Educators can begin to have a positive impact as soon as children and youth with refugee experience arrive by establishing and maintaining a positive, welcoming climate. Much of the children's introduction to school life and early relationship building may take place in the classroom with the support of the teacher, other school staff, and peers. It is important to recognize that teachers may require additional support and in-service to be able to help the child cope with traumatic experiences. To best support the child, teachers should be one part of a team made up of various professionals:

For students:

- introduce the school system gradually
- provide a tour of the school and grounds, possibly supported by a visual aid, such as a map
- provide accessible information on the school, such as information in the student's first language where available
- provide an introduction to the surrounding neighbourhood, and a map
- consider using a translator during initial contact
- get to know parents and siblings
- ensure that support services are in place
- provide a buddy for the new student
- minimize the number of teachers for the student, if possible
- provide an assigned locker or compartment storage space
- provide a smaller class in at least one circumstance where possible
- keep students informed about events at school so they feel included
- use consistent messaging about appropriate behaviour

For parents:

- introduce parents to the classroom teacher, settlement worker and/or multicultural worker, or principal
- consider using a translator during initial contact
- plan first language forums for parents, with helpful school and community information
- provide accessible information on cultural and school orientation, including some in the parents' first language where available

Key Points to Consider



Many children and youth with refugee experience were born and/or raised in refugee camps and have had little or no formal schooling. They may need extensive orientation. There are a number of things adults may take for granted that may be foreign for refugee students. The starting point for learning may be as fundamental as coping with the expectations of performing a task, or behaving in a set way. The examples below are of things with which children and youth with refugee experience may be unfamiliar; school staff may need to help and mentor students, so the students understand and become accustomed to these conventions:

- using North American bathroom facilities
- opening and closing doors
- waiting in line
- waiting one's turn
- sitting still
- speaking one person at a time
- staying in one room for long periods of time
- staying in school for long periods of time
- understanding common non-verbal cues
- recognizing the letters of the alphabet in any language
- recognizing that information in English is organized left to right, top to bottom
- holding a writing instrument
- using a book; copying passages from an original source
- using technology, such as cell phones and computers
- understanding the concept of mathematics
- accomplishing simple arithmetic

Learning Environment Checklist: School

The following considerations for introducing students to their new school are offered as a checklist to help with planning. There is a second checklist for teachers in Section 3 (see page 21). See also the complete Learning Environment Checklist in [Appendix D](#) (consider these in combination with “[Cross-Cultural Communication](#)” on page 23):

Social and School Adjustment

- appropriate access to social-emotional support
- program assignment/placement
- introduction to classroom teacher
- introduction to layout of the school and classroom
- assignment of mentor or buddy
- language assistance if needed
- consistent routine or schedule

Physical Needs

- school supplies
- textbooks/resource materials
- lunch/snack
- orientation to bell schedule
- access to a quiet area or place of refuge
- assessment of any medical needs, such as hearing and visionk

Social and School Adjustment

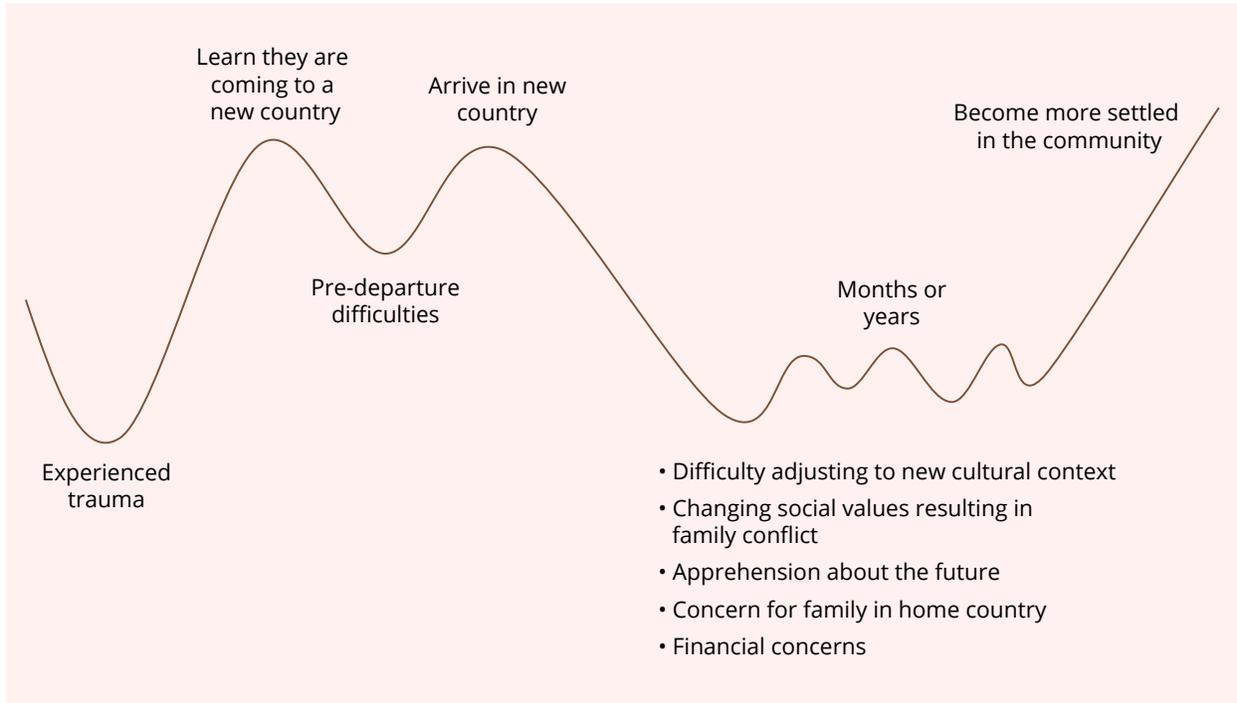
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Physical Needs

- school supplies
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- access to a quiet area or place of refuge
- assessment of any medical needs, such as hearing and visionk

Adjusting to a New Culture

Students and their families new to British Columbia's culture and schools and with a limited command of English/French will go through a period of adjustment and settlement. This may impact students' learning. A sense of dislocation, or the trauma that new arrivals sometimes experience upon leaving their homeland, can cause them to appear withdrawn, fatigued, or uninterested.



Source: "Count me in!: A resource to support ESL students with refugee experience in schools," Minister for Education, Literacy Secretariat, Government of South Australia, 2007.

Stages of Adjustment

While individual circumstances and personal responses will vary enormously, it is common for new arrivals to go through stages of adjustment. Within all stages there will be periods of 'silence'. During the early stages of settlement and adjustment, this 'silent time' may be due to a lack of vocabulary to respond in English/French. Later on, this silent period may be due to emotional transitioning. This is a time when students are trying to make sense of their new world.

Parents may also be silent for a variety of reasons:

- lack of English/French language
- translating between the first and second languages
- feelings of inadequacy about knowing the communication norms when talking with English/French-speaking adults or persons in positions of authority
- embarrassment at having to rely on their children as interpreters and communicators
- different cultural views of the role of parents in relation to teachers and school
- unfamiliarity with the social or school context

The following is one model of the stages of adjustment, and includes four stages:

1. The Honeymoon Stage

This takes place when people first arrive. Individuals may demonstrate the following traits:

- enthusiasm, fascination, curiosity
- optimism, excitement, and hope for a new life
- unmistakable foreignness
- little identification with British Columbia
- fatigue
- anxiety regarding the future
- superficial attempts to adjust

To help the students, school staff can: find out as much as possible about students' backgrounds and cultural (see pages 20 to 22) and inform the parents or guardians about schooling and programs.

2. The Hostility Stage

After about four to six months, reality can set in. This is most often the time when culture shock becomes evident. Newcomers know a bit about getting around and have begun to learn how to manage, but where they are now is not like their home: the food, appearance of things, life, places, faces, and ways of doing things are different. Some may begin to feel that they hate their new country and want to go back home. Individuals may demonstrate the following traits:

- culture shock
- feeling the 'strangeness' of BC schools
- little verbal communication, except with others who speak their language
- slow second language retention
- distraction by unsettled family life or growing family problems
- confusion over Canadian social norms and expectations
- frustration and possible withdrawal or depression
- inexplicable or erratic behaviours
- difficulty sitting still
- possible cultural disorientation and misunderstandings, both verbal and non-verbal

At this stage, school staff can: help the students and families to set realistic goals and expectations; create opportunities to build students' self-esteem; encourage students to take pride in their heritage and language; show compassion and understanding; and highlight student success.

3. The Humour Stage (or Coming to Terms)

Gradually, newcomers work toward resolution of their feelings and their sense of being torn between the old and the new. They begin to accept their new home and to find friends. They begin to discover that there are good things about where they are living and come to terms with both the old and new ways of life. Individuals may demonstrate the following traits:

- proficiency in conversational English/French
- disengagement from English/French as a Second Language classes
- peer influence at its greatest
- some attitudinal and value changes
- parent-teen conflict at its worst
- behavioural problems
- improvements in economic situation as at least one parent finds acceptable employment

During this time, school staff can: help students to see the value in their original culture as well as in their new culture; present opportunities for students to communicate about their past; and offer students the opportunity to become role models and peer supporters.

4. The Home Stage (Integration)

This is the stage at which students and families realize they are here to stay. This last stage may take years, and for some will never fully take place. Students may still respond in unexpected ways to particular classroom situations or events, due to cultural conditioning or because their cultural values and beliefs differ from those of other students. Individuals may demonstrate the following traits:

- proficiency with both their first language and with English
- appreciation of cultural symbols of original and adopted countries
- viewing him or herself as an integral part of a multicultural society
- friendships with individuals from different ethnic origins
- participation in school and community activities
- acceptance and identification with host culture, without giving up on original identity

School staff can: take pride in the role of supporting each student's unique process of adjustment and integration.

Emotional Considerations

Children experience many different types of trauma during war and conflict. The list that follows summarizes these:

- Intense war operations, civil war, bombings, shootings, and executions
- Destruction of homes, landmarks, cities, villages, and countryside
- Violent death of family or friends
- Separation from family, friends, and neighbours
- Physical injury, wounds, beatings, and deprivations
- Arrests of members of their families, or fear of discovery or arrest
- Being arrested, detained, or even tortured
- Being forced to join the army or militias, or being subjected to indoctrination
- Sexual trauma and rape, observing the rape of loved ones
- Serious shortages of food, water, or other daily necessities
- Betrayal by governments, neighbours, and other authorities
- Hostility and culture shock in new communities and countries
- Material deprivation in the present circumstance

Source: Life After War: Education as a Healing Process for Refugee and War-Affected Children, p. 23, Government of Manitoba, represented by the Minister of Education, 2012

Post Traumatic Stress

Those who have been victims of war, violence, torture, or crime may suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Not everyone in a war environment, however, will experience stress in the same way, nor will they react the same way to the same experiences. Some may be able to deal with their experiences and move on with their lives. Others may no longer be able to deal with their lives in meaningful ways because the horror of their experiences is too much to bear. Most adults and children fall somewhere in the middle, exhibiting post traumatic stress in a variety of ways and at different times in their lives.

Trauma

The role of the educator does not include the provision of therapy; however, school staff will likely need to support some of the behaviours and associated feelings related to trauma and PTSD in students.

Trauma may lie hidden or may manifest in seemingly unrelated behaviours. These behaviours may be emotional, cognitive, physical and/or interpersonal. There may be delayed onset of the symptoms of trauma and grief, which may occur in response to unrelated stressful situations or reminders of traumatic events. It may be months, or even years, before symptoms occur.

Traumatic experiences may also have an indirect effect on other immigrant and refugee children, children whose relatives have been or are refugees, children with relatives unable to leave war-torn regions, school staff, or other students in the school.

Recognizing when to refer children or youth for additional services is critical. If you are concerned about a student, connect with your school counsellor or school-based team regarding school and district services that are available to help students who have experienced trauma.

Associated Behaviours

The following are possible behaviours manifested by refugee children and youth with refugee experience who have experienced trauma:

- difficulty in concentrating and completing tasks
- tiredness because of lack of sleep
- avoidance of particular activities and situations
- physical ailments, such as headaches, vomiting or stomach aches
- irritability or hyper-alertness
- impaired memory
- exaggerated startle responses
- preoccupation with violent events (conversations, drawings)
- unrealistic worries about possible harm to self and others
- excessive distress upon separation or when anticipating separation from parent
- recollection of traumatic events

Students who manifest the above behaviours may be experiencing

- violent nightmares or flashbacks
- disturbing memories
- feelings of being in danger
- feelings of betrayal
- anger
- denial
- pervasive or generalized anxiety

Source: "PTSD in Children and Adolescents" and "Survivors of Natural Disasters and Mass Violence," National Center for PTSD, August 11, 2009.

Triggers

For children and youth with refugee experience in particular, occurrences in their new school-based environment may remind them of negative experiences in their homeland or of leaving their homeland and may have detrimental effects. The following are some of these school-based triggers:

- dark hallways
- uniformed policeman coming to or being in school
- sound of boot-like footsteps
- harsh language
- bells
- earthquake drills or any evacuation procedures
- groups of children talking loudly
- situations that may seem out of control, like children "horsing around"
- other children staring at them
- not understanding English, or some of the other languages children speak outside the classroom
- body language that may be misinterpreted
- unfamiliar festivals and celebrations, such as Halloween with masks or firecrackers

Source: Dr. Y. de Andrade, personal communication, July 26, 1999.

Buffers



CLASSROOM
SCHEDULE



CLASSROOM
ROUTINES



DISMISSAL
BELLS



COMMUNITY



CHANGES IN
TEACHERS



PEER
CONNECTIONS



LEARNING
GAMES

One way to counteract or avoid an unwanted trigger experience is to create predictive experiences, or buffers:

- following a schedule
- classroom routines
- knowing that dismissal bells go off at the same times every day
- providing a sense of community
- minimizing changes in courses and teachers
- cooperative learning, facilitating peer connections
- learning through games

Source: Dr. Y. de Andrade, personal communication, July 26, 1999.

3. Students with refugee experience: The Classroom

This section provides information for educators working with children and youth with refugee experience.

Understanding Diversity

Teachers, students, and families all bring their beliefs, expectations, and practices to the education process. When the process involves a student from another cultural background, it may be important to explore the student's cultural experiences, values, and attitudes in order to effectively assess the student's learning needs.

Every culture is dynamic, with shared beliefs, values, and experiences among people from a given cultural group as well as widespread diversity within the group. This diversity prohibits generalized assumptions about individual beliefs and responses to specific circumstances. The degree of adaptation to a new life in Canada does not necessarily compare with the length of residence in the country, and integration in aspects of Canadian life does not imply a rejection of traditional ways.

Knowing some of the key characteristics in the traditional cultures among us may improve mutual understanding and ability to work effectively with students from different cultures.

A Warm and Welcoming Environment

Teachers have the opportunity to create a warm, friendly, and safe environment with an appropriate educational program and opportunities for interaction and understanding.

Setting the Stage for a Smooth Transition

A child's first impression of the learning environment is affected by the way they are welcomed and introduced to their new life. This can be a very vulnerable period for students. Teachers can help by carefully monitoring students' social, emotional, and cognitive development.

A predictable routine and stability are very important for students who have experienced many challenges as refugees and are starting a new life in a new school environment, all the while dealing with the trials of growing up.

For the first few days at school, especially for those unaccustomed to the North American school setting, it may be difficult for some students to stay in school or one classroom for long periods of time. While keeping safety in mind, it may be necessary for flexibility in some students' daily timetables.

Learning Environment Checklist: Classroom

The following are considerations for introducing students to their classroom and educational program, offered as a checklist to help with planning. This is a continuation of the checklist for the school in Section 2 (see page 13). See also the complete Learning Environment Checklist in [Appendix D](#) (consider these in combination with tips for "[Cross-Cultural Communication](#)" on page 23):

Cross-Cultural Communication

Newcomers are trying to adapt but may not yet share Canadian cultural values. We have to help them understand these values and provide an educational program that will meet students' needs. To do that, we may need to increase our understanding of their values. Our body language may confuse those who do not understand its meaning in the new cultural context, so it is necessary to be aware of reactions to body language and make adjustments accordingly.

The following are some tips to help facilitate communication:

Communication Tips

- Speak slowly.
- Speak clearly.
- Write down key information (points, details).
- Keep your vocabulary and sentences direct and simple.
- Avoid the use of metaphors, jargon, or popular sayings.
- Allow time for a response.
- Acknowledge and support the student's efforts to communicate.
- Check for comprehension frequently.
- Repeat and paraphrase patiently.
- Link verbal and visual cues.
- Use visuals (diagrams, photographs, etc.) whenever possible.
- Use examples to illustrate your point.
- Avoid making assumptions about people and resist stereotyping.
- Make sessions short and concise since communicating across languages is demanding and tiring.
- Be patient.

Source: "Settlement Workers in Schools Module on Cross-Cultural Communication," British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, pp. 14-16.

Some Cautions

As noted earlier, children with refugee experience often have experienced extremely traumatic or chaotic situations. Therefore, some typical school tasks may not be appropriate for them in the beginning stages of their adjustment:

Show and Tell

This activity may prove to be a painful reminder of what they no longer have.

Current Events Discussions

Current events are a part of daily work in many classrooms. However, it would be ill advised to ask students with refugee experience to share their experiences in refugee camps, discuss their views of the war in their homeland, or comment on refugees in general. When students are prepared to discuss the more sensitive areas of their past, they will do so.

Detentions

Giving detentions may be an alien concept, both to the students and their parents. It may also be construed as a form of arrest.

Busy Work

Giving work to students that simply has them filling in worksheets is not recommended. All work should clearly relate to the subject area and language needs of the lesson.

Seating

Many students with refugee experience have little or no school experiences. They need to be placed next to a good role model and close to the teacher so these students can learn how to conduct themselves in schools and classrooms and so comprehension can be monitored.



Field Trips

Using the word “camp” in any school field trip may create apprehension and bring up a host of bad memories. An explanation needs to be provided about all field trips, especially “camps”.

Families may not understand the need for field trips, and it may be a challenge to have permission forms signed and returned to the school. An explanation about the value of field trips may be needed.

Cultural Views on Gender

There are different cultural views on gender. Some students with refugee experience may not want to participate in activities that include both genders (e.g., physical education and group projects).

Clubs

There may be a misunderstanding with the word “club”. Parents’ understanding of the word may only apply to a night club. An explanation about school clubs such as “drama club” or “chess club” may be needed.

Providing Opportunities for Peer Interaction and Learning

Children and youth learn best by interacting with their peers and practicing what they have learned. Classroom interaction also helps teachers ascertain the level of need of individual students. This is an area that will help teachers to discern how well the children and youth with refugee experience are managing their adjustment to Canadian society, and can provide an opportunity for helping these children and youth begin to cope with their traumatic experiences.

Children and youth who are shy need to be encouraged to participate in the context of an accepting, safe learning environment, in which class members can confidently express themselves. Children and youth who are reluctant to interact with others need to be encouraged to work in situations where they have a significant role to play in the success of the group. It is through meaningful interactions that children and youth develop friendships.

Instructional Strategies that Facilitate Classroom Interaction

- Vary group size: pairs, triads, small groups, circle of knowledge.
- Use cooperative learning strategies: brainstorming, role playing, jigsaw, think-pair-share.
- Use questioning strategies.
- Provide opportunities to practice conflict resolution techniques.
- Focus on similarities among children and cultures; as children learn about the things they have in common with others, they develop a sense of belonging and overall comfort in the classroom.
- Communicate that school-wide rules and behavioural expectations apply to all children equally and equitably.
- Be explicit about classroom rules and post them.

Sources: "The Multiple Intelligences Handbook," B. Campbell, 1994, p. 50; "Educating Everybody's Children," R. Cole, 1995, pp. 24, 38, 65, 146, 149, 152; and "Teaching to Diversity," M. Meyers, 1993, pp. 72-82.

Older Youth with Refugee Experience

Older youth coming to Canada in their mid to late-teens or early adulthood with little or no English/French and limited formal or interrupted education and/or work experience in their home country may need help with the following issues:

- ambitious academic goals and aspirations as they arrive as well as the frustrations that may follow if these are not immediately achieved
- inability to meet BC graduation requirements within the expected time
- social isolation
- lack of knowledge about BC learning, vocational training, and recreational opportunities
- need or desire to enter the work force before they are able to acquire adequate BC education or orientation
- vulnerability in the labour market (e.g., with little opportunity to move beyond minimum wage employment)
- in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, negative outlook for the future or vulnerability to problematic behaviour, including violence, gang membership, criminal activities, and substance abuse

Possibilities to Consider for Older Students

- Encourage and support students to stay in school as long as possible.
- Connect students with adult education programs and clearly explain opportunities for school completion as an adult – see www.aved.gov.bc.ca/abe.
- Provide time for students to complete all work in class, rather than assigning homework.
- Offer support blocks where necessary.
- Consider work experience programs as appropriate.
- Focus on literacy and work skills programs for those not able or not intending to graduate.
- Provide translated information where possible.

- Discover and nurture student interests.
- Display posters and signs reflective of the diversity of students.
- Offer interpreter-supported clubs, e.g., homework or computer.
- Recognize efforts or accomplishments, formally and informally.
- Encourage peer supports and buddy systems.

Grade to Grade Transitions

In addition to the challenging adjustments that newcomer students face, like all students, they will experience significant transition points throughout their education. Transitions from home or daycare to kindergarten, from class to class, school to school, from school district to school district, and from school to post-secondary or work situations are all time in which students may need support.

In establishing procedures for transition points, school district personnel should keep in mind that the transition process:

- is continuous
- should occur as part of a planned education program
- requires preparation, implementation of supportive strategies and evaluation
- benefits from awareness and use of support services by school teams

Transition planning involves individual transition plan development, follow-up with students, and long-range planning. It is essential that school districts and individual schools establish procedures to support collaborative consultation in the transition into, within, and from the school system. Planning should involve school personnel, district staff, and representatives from community services, such as pre-schools and post-secondary institutions, professionals from other ministries, parents, and students.

Community Connections

Many communities have immigrant-serving agencies that offer various supports for immigrant and refugee families (for a complete list refer to www.amssa.org). Making these community connections can be of great benefit to students, their families, and the school. Your school or school district may already be closely associated with these organizations or may be involved in special projects to promote the settlement and immigration of families new to Canada.

The following are examples of services offered by immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations:

- out of school transition programs for youth
- programs for youth at risk
- pilot projects and initiatives to promote welcoming communities
- early childhood development programs for young siblings of school-aged immigrants
- youth buddy programs

Appendix A – Profile of a Resilient Child

Resilience is fostered by protective factors: the personal attributes and social supports that shape and affect a person's ability to trust, grow, and learn. Young people develop a world view and positive habits and attitudes in response to family support, school attachment, and a sense of personal relevance and significance in the community.

Problem-Solving Skills

- ability to develop alternative solutions
- survival, staying alive, etc.
- learning from challenges (not avoidance) and developing self-discipline

Social Competence

- empathy
- care
- humour
- good communication skills
- attachment to school such that the child interacts well socially, cultivates a sense of belonging and worth, expresses him/herself, and develops academic skills



The Resilient Child

Autonomy Purpose/Future

- independence/internal locus of control
- can act independently to self-regulate

Sense of Purpose/Future

- hopefulness
- goal directed
- anticipation of future

Appendix B – Learning Environment Checklist

Social and School Adjustment

- program assignment/placement
- introduction to classroom teacher
- introduction to layout of the school and classroom
- assignment of mentor or buddy
- language assistance if needed
- consistent routine or schedule

Physical Needs

- school supplies
- textbooks/resource materials
- lunch/snack
- orientation to bell schedule
- access to a quiet area or place of refuge
- assessment of any medical needs, such as hearing and vision

Tips for Teachers

- become familiar with refugee background
- be aware of adjustments of children and youth
- speak slowly
- pay attention to non-verbal cues
- become aware of the cultural background
- be aware of cultural differences in mannerisms and responses, e.g., eye contact
- consider different cultural norms associated with gender
- contact settlement worker for support

Instruction

- assess educational background – essential for placement
- assess need for pre-literacy and pre-numeracy instruction
- assess need for language assistance
- determine any learning disabilities
- use age-appropriate resources
- use direct, explicit instruction
- offer a variety of activities to start
- use visual aids
- use repetition, or find opportunities for multiple exposures to information, if needed

Appendix C – Preliterate Learners

At any grade level (Primary, Intermediate, or Secondary), there may be new students who can be characterized as preliterate learners. The age and level of developmental maturity of these students make them part of a particular school population (whether Primary, Intermediate, or Secondary), but they will have received limited formal schooling or pre-schooling. These students are generally recent arrivals to Canada, whose backgrounds differ significantly from the school environment they are entering. Some may have received schooling that was interrupted for various reasons, including war, poverty, or migration. Some may come from a remote rural setting with little prior opportunity for sequential schooling.

Preliterate students may have:

- little or no experience with print
- semi-literacy in native language
- minimal understanding of the function of literacy
- limited awareness of school organization or culture
- performance significantly below grade level
- insufficient English to attempt tasks.

In terms of language skills, the preliterate student may:

- use pictures to express ideas (meaning)
- be able to copy letters, words, and phrases (style)
- begin to write strings of words (style)
- show little awareness of spelling, capitalization, or punctuation (convention)
- use single words (convention).

Appendix D – Resources

- **BC211:** <https://bc211.ca>
BC211 is a non-profit society that connects people to community, health and government resources for help, where and when they need it.
- **BC Refugee Hub:** <http://bcrefugeehub.ca/>
Immigrant Services Society (ISS) of BC, in partnership with the Provincial Government of British Columbia, have created this online resource hub to assist and empower both individuals and organizations in the refugee resettlement process. It serves as a resource centre, providing access to the latest publications and relevant statistics on all refugee categories throughout the entirety of BC.
- **Legal Aid BC British Columbia: Need Help with Your Refugee Claim?** | Legal Aid BC (lss.bc.ca)
Legal Aid BC is a Crown corporation providing legal information, advice, and representation services. Its priority is to serve the interests of people with low incomes, but many services are available to all British Columbians.
- **Refugee Claim Process:** [Refugee Claim Process](#) | [Resources](#) | Immigrant Services Society of BC, ISSofBC (issbc.org)
- **Vancouver Refugee Services Alliance:** www.vrsa.ca
An alliance of immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies formed to provide a continuum of services for refugee claimants.

Schools

- **Settlement Workers in Schools:**
In some school districts in British Columbia federally funded settlement workers in schools address the settlement and integration needs of newcomer students and their families. These specialists can be of great assistance to families and school staff, helping to ease the transition of newcomers to school.
- **Student Support Services:** [BC K-12 School and District Contact Information](#) (gov.bc.ca)
Find out from the school district counselling or student services department who the team members are and be prepared to work with them. These may include critical incidence response teams or trauma support teams.

Settlement

- **Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC** (AMSSA: www.amssa.org)
An affiliation of immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies throughout British Columbia, their website provides a complete listing of all associated refugee-serving agencies in British Columbia communities.
Telephone: **(604) 718-2780** for Vancouver area
Telephone: **1-888-355-5560** outside Vancouver area
- **Newcomers' Guide to Resources and Services:** [WelcomeBC/Newcomers' Guides](#)
Along with a wealth of useful information for newcomers to BC, the *British Columbia Newcomers' Guide to Resources and Services* includes a listing of all the immigrant and refugee-serving agencies in British Columbia.

- **Settlement Workers in Communities:** AMSSA: www.amssa.org
Throughout BC, immigrant- and refugee-serving agencies employ settlement workers to address the settlement and integration needs of immigrant families and those with refugee experience. Many of these community agencies have relationships with schools and can provide information to families in schools where settlement workers are not on staff. They can also be of assistance to families outside of school. Links to the community agencies can be found at: [AMSSA Members](#).
- **New Hope Community Services:** <https://newhopecs.org>
New Hope owns and operates a 13-unit apartment building in Surrey. It is designed to provide housing for families as they transition life in Canada. New Hope support asylum/claimant seeking families, sponsored families and government assisted refugees.

Community Connection

- **BC Newcomer Camp:** <https://www.bcnewcomercamp.org>
BC Newcomer Camp is a registered Canadian charity that operates free programming for recently arrived refugee children and youth. By teaching English language skills and a variety of sports and playground games, our immersive and engaging learning environment equips newly arrived refugee children with the tools and confidence needed to succeed in their new home.

Trauma Support

- **DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society:** www.dcrs.ca/index.php
Located in Surrey, this agency offers a wide range of services and programs to immigrant and refugee communities, including grief and trauma counselling
- **Immigrant Services Society (ISS) of BC:** www.issbc.org/refugeeservices
With offices in Burnaby, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Richmond, Surrey, and Vancouver, this multicultural immigrant-serving agency provides a variety of services to Lower Mainland immigrant and refugee communities. These services include trauma support services for government-assisted refugees and refugee claimants residing in Vancouver and Burnaby. ISS of BC is also the contracted service provider for all immediate support services, including first language services and housing, for all Government-Assisted Refugees destined to British Columbia:
- **Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture:** www.vast-vancouver.ca
This organization provides support services for and promotes the well-being of people who have survived torture and violence.
- **Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture:** www.vcst.ca
A coalition of agencies and individuals responding to the needs of survivors of torture.
- **Vancouver Island Counselling Centre for Immigrants and Refugees:** (VICCIR) <https://www.viccir.org/>
VICCIR provides mental health counselling to immigrants and refugees living in Canada.
- **Health Regional Offices:** www.health.gov.bc.ca/socsec/contacts.html
This website provides contact information for all of British Columbia's health authorities.
- **Rainbow Refugee:** <https://www.rainbowrefugee.com>
is a Vancouver community group that supports and advocates for individuals seeking refugee protection because of persecution based on sexual orientation, **gender identity** or HIV status. Rainbow Refugee engages in outreach, advocacy and public education on LGBT2Q+ and HIV+ refugee issues.

General Information

International

- **International Organization for Migration:** www.iom.int
An inter-governmental organization in the field of migration and working with governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental partners:
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees:** www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home
Since 1950, this office has been mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide, and to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. The website provides detailed information about refugees throughout the world.

National

- **Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada:** Canada.ca
This federal government department provides detailed information about refugee settlement in Canada.
- **Canadian Council for Refugees:** www.ccrweb.ca
Umbrella organization for refugees and immigrants focused on the rights and protection of refugees and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada.
- **Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada:** [Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada \(irb-cisr.gc.ca\)](http://Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (irb-cisr.gc.ca))
The independent administrative tribunal that makes decisions on immigration and refugee matters.

Research

- **Children and Youth Refugee Research Coalition:** <https://cyrrc.org>
(CYRRC) is a nationwide alliance of academics, community partners and government agencies working to promote the successful integration of refugee children, youth and their families. Provides training opportunities for students and youth with refugee experience.

Students with Refugee Experience

A Guide for
Teachers and Schools



Ministry of
Education