

Embracing New Beginnings: Helping Forcibly Displaced Youth Thrive this School Year

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The back-to-school season is in full swing, and school hallways are once again filled with the anxious excitement and anticipation of their students. For some, school brings the prospect of reuniting with old friends, opening colorful new school supplies, and delving into new subjects. For others, feelings of nervousness about new teachers, concern over homework, and uncertainty about making new friends. New beginnings are a challenging time for any student, but for forcibly displaced youth, additional layers of complexity exist.

For forcibly displaced students, stepping into a classroom may be a first. Conflict and crisis situations, such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, and forced migration, cause significant disruptions in a student's ability to receive an education. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugee students miss out on an average of three to four years of school. As a result, these young learners not only grapple with the tasks of catching up, learning a new language, and acclimating to a different educational system, but also with the burden of overcoming traumatic experiences.

When working with forcibly displaced youth, it's important to remember:

- Some teaching and learning practices common in the U.S. may be unfamiliar to forcibly displaced youth: small group work and center-based instruction, activities that require critical thinking, concept application, student-led learning, completing assignments using online platforms, and other online learning activities requiring advanced digital literacy. Ask the students you work with about how teachers taught in their home country (or previous educational context), and what things their new teachers are doing that they find strange or hard to understand. This can help gain insight into their experience and find ways to support.
- No two students are likely to feel the same way about starting school in a new country. Like their peers, newcomers may feel excited, anxious, hesitant, and eager all at the same time. They're likely also going to feel stressed. Create opportunities for your students to share how they are feeling and how they cope in ways that feel comfortable to them – through talking, writing, visual art, music, or movement – and in whatever language they feel most comfortable expressing themselves in.
- Sense of belonging at school is linked to academic success and healthy, trusting relationships are key. Forcibly displaced students are often far away from the social networks they've relied on and face the daunting task of building relationships anew in a totally new environment. Find out who your student knows and trusts at school – both adults and peers. If they need support developing those relationships, think about how you might help. Maybe that means coaching them on some friend-making techniques or language, how to ask teachers for help, or helping them find an extracurricular they are interested in.

Recommend Resources:

- [Toolkit: SUPPORTING AFGHAN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES](#); Additional Resource: [\(Switchboard\)](#)
- [The Social Emotional Asset Development Guidebook](#)

Operation Allies Welcome (OAW): Two Year Commemoration

As we reflect on the transition from summer to fall, we also reflect on the two years that have passed since the U.S. military's extraction from Afghanistan and the start of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW), which supported the evacuation and U.S. reception of over [88,000 Afghan individuals](#). Afghans who arrived in the U.S. through OAW were part of an unprecedented response that resulted in unique facilitators, barriers and challenges to long-term safety and stability for many. The arduous and, at times, chaotic reception and service provision for the Afghan community in the initial months and year of OAW included significant delays in securing permanent housing, employment, and reliable access to basic needs resources.

While many of these initial barriers and challenges have been overcome, the lasting impact of the prolonged uncertainty coupled with uncertain immigration statuses can provide additional challenges in integration for children and families such as isolation, increased stress reactions, and difficulties in establishing supportive routines. Additionally, many children and families still have loved ones in Afghanistan or among the [8.2 million displaced Afghans](#) in neighboring countries who may be in danger, adding to the daily stressors and fears those in the U.S. face. **As we continue to recognize this time, it's important to remember:**

- To acknowledge that this time may be difficult for many children and families as they may be recalling this time two years ago as they were fleeing and attempting to find safety. There may also be feelings of happiness and pride at how much progress has been made – we, as providers, need to acknowledge and welcome all emotional responses that may be present, especially when they might be conflicting.
- That the term 'mental health' carries a lot of stigma in many communities. Ensure that you are explaining mental health in clear and concise terms while discussing symptoms, not diagnoses, and using less-stigmatizing terms such as 'emotional wellness' or 'wellbeing'.
- To reflect on and honor the strength, resilience, and hope that has facilitated families and children reaching this milestone. Explore and support community and individual-based commemorations of experiences, losses, and hopes related to this time and journey.

Recommended Resources:

- [USCIS webpage for Afghan Nationals](#)
- Brown University Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies Report, ["*Then, We Lost Everything:* Afghan Evacuee Experiences of Operation Allies Refuge and Operation Allies Welcome"](#)

Refugee Arrivals in Fiscal Year 24

Every year, U.S. immigration law requires that the Executive Branch review the global refugee situation and consult with members of their cabinet and Congress and project the possible extent of U.S. participation in refugee resettlement. Part of this process includes extensive conversations with stakeholders, including resettlement agencies, and examining local and state trends in housing costs, unemployment rates, and more. After all these factors are considered, a Presidential Determination on Refugee Admission is released, usually in late September. The Determination sets the ceiling for how

many refugees may be admitted into the U.S. in a given fiscal year and identifies the geographic regions where refugees will come from.

Fiscal Year 2023's [Presidential Determination](#) set the ceiling at 125,000 refugee admissions, which was the highest ceiling in over 30 years. As of August 31, 2023, [51,231](#) refugees had been admitted to the U.S. By the end of the fiscal year, estimates are that around 74,000 refugees and Special Immigrant Visa holders will arrive (Special Immigrant Visa holders are Afghan nationals who served the US government overseas and are not included in refugee arrivals). It is also important to note that refugees increasingly join people coming to the U.S. with humanitarian parole, including large numbers of Ukrainians coming via the [Uniting for Ukraine](#) program.

The number of forcibly displaced people in the world continues to grow to unprecedented levels due to conflict, crisis and displacement by climate change. The number of people who have crossed a country border to seek safety now tops more than 35 million, and numbers continue to grow as existing conflicts and crisis become entrenched and new ones emerge^[1]. While Fiscal Year's 2024 Presidential Determination has not been released, we expect the following considering extraordinary worldwide displacement:

- The ceiling of refugee admissions to stay at 125,000
- Refugee arrivals to come from similar groups as in fiscal year 2023, including people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, El Salvador and Burma with expected increases in Rohingya arrivals from Bangladesh, Guatemala, Venezuela and Columbia
- Steady arrival of Special Immigrant Visa holders from Afghanistan
- An increased number of humanitarian pathways like the Uniting for Ukraine humanitarian parole program
- A steady flow of asylum seekers given that less than 1% of the world's refugees will have access to admission through the refugee admissions or humanitarian parole program

In our next newsletter we will provide a snapshot of the released Presidential Determination and where people can go to information about the historical, political, and cultural information intended to cultivate a general understanding of new arrival refugee populations.

It is important to keep in mind as providers that mental health considerations for working with newly arrived refugees are complex and depend on many factors including but not limited to symptoms, safety concerns, support systems, worldview, and client preferences. However, **below are some practices that can be used as general guidance:**

- Consider timing – When people first arrive, they have significant pressure to find a job, navigate a new community and complex systems, and learn a language. Many of these things are connected to basic needs and thus a sense of safety and security. These things may need to be attended to before addressing mental health concerns, or in a parallel process.
- Work to normalize and destigmatize – Many countries that people are arriving from have little if any mental health infrastructure. Few institutions may exist that offer humane or effective treatment. Roles like “counselor”, “social worker” or “therapist” may be unknown. All these

factors can create stigma and misunderstanding around mental health care in the U.S. Providers will need to spend time explaining who they are and what they do in easily understandable ways, while seeking to normalize and destigmatize seeking support.

- Seek to understand – Cultures often have varying beliefs around the cause of mental health symptoms and conditions, and healing and wellness. Providers should seek to understand the views of their clients by asking questions such as, “Tell me what you think is causing that?” and “How would you take care of this in your country?” Wherever possible, providers should support and integrate client’s beliefs and healing traditions into their service plan.
- Connect clients to broader supports – People who are arriving as refugees have had their broader social network severed. This loss of support and connection can erode symptoms and conditions. Spend some time mapping out ethnic community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, and mutual assistance associations that support the communities you serve, so that you can offer these as resources to your clients.
- Do some homework – While every child and family are unique, it helps to understand some background information about the displaced community, their culture, and why they were forced to leave their country. The [Cultural Orientation and Resource Exchange](#) provides cultural backgrounders that can be helpful.

^[1] <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>