

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

# Refugee and Asylum-Seeker Children

Settling and supporting

## What they may have lived through

Children arriving as refugees or asylum-seekers may have experienced any combination of:

- Pre-flight: war, persecution, witnessing or experiencing violence, loss of family members, disrupted schooling, food insecurity, family separation
- Flight: dangerous journeys (often by sea or on foot), illegal border crossings, time in detention, exploitation, separation from caregivers
- Post-arrival: housing insecurity, social isolation, language barriers, asylum process stress, fear of deportation, racism, family stress

The combination is often called 'sequential trauma' — repeated, layered, ongoing. Many of these children carry significant psychological load even before they arrive at your classroom door.

## Common patterns at school

<p><b>Silence in the first weeks</b></p> <p>Even children with previous English may be silent for weeks. Shock, exhaustion, vigilance. Don't push. Welcome warmth.</p>	<p><b>Hypervigilance</b></p> <p>Watching constantly. Sudden noises particularly distressing. Fire drills can be deeply traumatic — warn in advance.</p>
<p><b>Sleep difficulties</b></p> <p>Many refugee children have disrupted sleep. May appear in school exhausted. Don't push hard cognitive work in the morning if possible.</p>	<p><b>Catastrophic responses to small upsets</b></p> <p>A pencil broken, a small disagreement — disproportionate distress. Their 'small upset' threshold is calibrated by far worse experiences.</p>
<p><b>Survivor responsibility</b></p> <p>Sometimes children carry guilt about family members left behind. Surfaces in unexpected ways.</p>	<p><b>Educational gaps</b></p> <p>Schooling may have been disrupted for years. Don't equate gaps with ability — they're often about access, not capacity.</p>



<p><b>Identity strength</b></p> <p>Many refugee children are also fiercely strong, mature beyond their years, and brilliant survivors. The strength is real, alongside the trauma.</p>	
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## What tends to help

Strategy	Why
Predictability	Their lives have been unpredictable; school routines regulate
Strong EAL support	Can't access curriculum without language; can't make friends without it
A trusted adult / safe person	May be the first stable adult relationship in months
Patient pace	Healing happens slowly; pushing forward forces masking
Cultural respect (food, clothing, names)	These are anchors of identity in a destabilising new world
Connection to other speakers if possible	Even one other child speaking their language matters
Avoiding the 'tell us your story' trap	They don't owe their story; let it come if and when it does

## What NOT to do

- **DON'T ASK 'what happened to you?'** — even with kind intent. Children don't owe you their story. Many things they've experienced are too big for school. Wait for THEM to share, in their pace.
- **DON'T MAKE THEM A 'CASE STUDY'** for the class. Tempting to use their experience as a learning opportunity (war, refugees, geography). Almost always wrong. They become the topic; they need to just be a kid for a while.
- **DON'T USE 'WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?'** or similar. Most refugee children are grappling with where they belong. Such questions land harder than intended.
- **DON'T ASSUME ABOUT FAMILY.** Some have parents. Some are with relatives. Some are unaccompanied. Family situations are complicated, often confidential.
- **DON'T DISCUSS POLITICS.** The political situation around their country of origin or asylum status is not your conversation. Stay in the role of teacher.
- **DON'T UNDERESTIMATE.** Many refugee children are highly capable, multilingual, mature, perceptive. The trauma is one part. Don't reduce them to it.



## Handling disclosures

If a refugee child discloses something concerning — past experience or ongoing — follow your safeguarding process: • LISTEN. Don't interrupt. Don't probe. • DON'T PROMISE confidentiality you can't keep. • THANK them for telling you. • REPORT to the DSL. • LOG accurately. If they disclose something about their journey or pre-flight experiences, you may also need to flag to the safeguarding team. Trafficking, exploitation, modern slavery — these can affect children and may need formal action.

## Working with the family

Refugee families are often: • In housing instability • Stressed about asylum process • Working multiple jobs / unable to work due to status • Isolated • Recently arrived themselves • Not confident in English WHAT HELPS: • Use translators for important conversations (most schools have access) • Communicate in writing as well as verbally (gives time to translate) • Build relationship slowly — trust comes from sustained kindness • Be respectful of timing — they may not have phones, may not check email • Don't penalise late uniform, late forms, late payments. Their plate is full. The family may be the strongest source of insight about the child. Patience pays off.

