

Interview with Refugee Parents and Children

The BCTF is composed of compassionate educators who are committed to building an inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

Many members and students have expressed a desire to learn more about how to best support refugee students. As a response to these concerns, the Committee for Action on Social Justice (CASJ) has created a [list of resources and lesson plans](#). We hope these resources will help you and your class prepare to welcome refugee students into your classroom community. We will also be developing a workshop for refugee parents shortly.

People have heard countless stories about refugees. There is no single story or experience that can capture what it is like to have to leave your home or arrive in a new country. In order to better understand the diverse experiences of parents and children navigating the public school system with very little English, I interviewed some family friends about their experience arriving as refugees from Syria this December.

Home

By Warsan Shire

(excerpt)

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilets
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitied

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land

Interview Questions for Hassan (9.5) and Jawad (7.5)*

Q: Can you tell me about how you felt on your first day of school?

A: We felt like strangers. We felt scared and anxious because, for us, it felt like a new place.

Q: What did your teacher say or do to help welcome you?

A: She was very pleasant and treated us with kindness, but we couldn't understand anything in English. She tried to help us by using translation on the computer.

Q: What did your classmates say or do to help welcome you?

A: They were very kind to us. Our first day was amazing, but now it's getting harder. When many people are trying to tell me what to say at once, it's too much to understand. It's better if one or two people talk to me at a time.

Q: Can you tell me about how you feel at school? What is the biggest difference between your school in Syria and your school in Canada?

A: We feel happy and content. It is totally different—the way they teach, the way the school hours are. School here is longer, but you don't feel like it is as long because here it is more interesting.

Q: Do you have any advice for your teachers and classmates about how to welcome new students? What would you do to welcome a new classmate from Syria?

A: We want to learn English first so that we can understand the other subjects. We need more time to learn English. We could help them out by teaching them the routines and being beside them so that they don't feel lonely. Can you put the word "window" on the

window, “door,” etc., so that I learn the words for the different parts of the class? The more I see a word, the easier it is to memorize.

*Hasan and Jawad requested to have their responses combined into one answer from the both of them.

Interview Questions for Najwa and Jihad (parents)

Q: Can you tell me about how you felt on Hassan and Jawad’s first day of school?

A: It’s a good feeling, mixed in with anxiousness. I was anxious because everything was new to us. The school was new. The kids didn’t know how to speak English. I knew that the teachers and students would help welcome them, but I didn’t know what would happen.

Q: As a parent, what do you wish for your children as they enter the public school system?

A: We wish they would put more hours toward helping our children learn English. I want them to learn how to have meaningful conversations in English (i.e., “do you want to play with me?”)

Q: Can you tell me about your experience with the public school system?

A: The school is really good and teachers are very helpful and welcoming. My kids are very happy in it.

Once Jawad was playing soccer at school and he took the ball. All his friends ran to take the ball. He felt like they were all ganging up on them. He didn’t know what to say and so he hit them. I was very mad at him. He told me that he felt like they were going to attack him, and he didn’t know what to say. He hit them because he didn’t know how to ask for them to leave him alone. I was upset because there’s never an excuse to hit, but I was also very sad because he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t hit kids before because he used his words instead, but now it is difficult for him to express himself.

Q: What can educators do to help you and your children feel welcome and safe?

A: Continue to help, smile, and be patient until they learn English. It’s nice to see them smile. I want my children to learn how to sing in English; I think that would help them learn. In my adult English class, we speak about meaningful subjects together. The teachers give us questions to discuss and games to play.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to say to educators?

A: Afterschool programs really help our children learn because they can speak English with their new friends. We thank you for your help and your support.



Top from left: Masa (17 months), Najwa, Jihad
Bottom from left: Hassan (9) and Jawad (7)

We encourage you to use the hashtag **#BCTFwelcomesrefugees** to share stories about welcoming refugees into your class, and to promote any materials or resources that you have found useful. In addition, please upload any lesson plans to TeachBC.