

# **TEACHER SUPPORT for REFUGEE CHILDREN in CANADA**

AN ORIENTATION and USEFUL FIRST STEPS  
FOR RECEIVING REFUGEE CHILDREN  
INTO REGULAR CLASSROOMS

by  
Chris Carrier  
Victoria, BC

Dear Educator,

We sincerely thank you  
for choosing to teach others,  
for the years of training you have achieved, and  
for all you have learned through classroom teaching.

We bring a child  
Who needs love before curriculum,  
compassion before rules,  
and possibly English before assignments.

We believe the refugee child  
brings a level of love and strength  
seldom seen in one's teaching career.

Consider the possibility that this child  
may change you,  
may grant you courage.  
The child has seen a lot.

We assume the child has changed due to war.  
We assume there is another personality and capability  
beneath the veneer of those changes.

We do not assume, WE KNOW that no one person  
can be all that the child or family needs.

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

If you feel alone and overwhelmed  
by all you wish to do for this child,

**CALL** the family's sponsor \_\_\_\_\_  
as well as school district supports.

## PART 1: THE TEACHER AS HELPER

Each refugee family is sponsored by a team of people whose responsibility it is to support the family in as many aspects of community living as can be foreseen. The classroom teacher is a vital extension of the team. Things change, and the team must adapt. The classroom teacher may be the first to learn of adaptations needed in the school programs as well as in the family home supports.

**The importance the classroom teacher cannot be overstated.**

The health and welfare of each helper in the team is critical.  
Questions for the teacher to ask herself/himself:

1. Is my life too unsettled for me to help this child?
2. What do I think I have to offer this child?
3. Can I accept that I am a guest in this child's life?  
Can I resist dominating the child?
4. Do I have a support system for myself when I'm upset?

### **Perception check:**

Which two needs most commonly occupy new refugees' thoughts?

- |                   |                   |                    |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| - self-respect    | - health          | - basic life needs |
| - world peace     | - material wealth | - friendship       |
| - family security | - education       | - minimal stress   |

(hint: Most refugees select family security and basic life needs.)

## **Getting Acquainted with Your New Student**

**The refugee child is more alike than different from any child.**

**Trust your compassion and experience with children.**

First a word about Culture Shock

The child starts off highly positive but then may take a turn to the dark side. Through the highs and lows, there is only one rule that works.

**Be a companion  
to the child.  
Just listen.  
Don't try to fix everything.**

The classic model for culture shock refers to an initial honeymoon phase. Shyness quickly dissolves and the children become excited, eager learners. For some children, the engaging stage slowly changes to one of disillusionment perhaps with school, the community, friendships or even with themselves. Following disillusionment, the third phase can get darker with anger, frustration, and judgment being expressed.

Remember the rule: Be a Companion.

Thankfully the child's spirits pick up after this phase. You can see a new comfort in the child's interactions and engagement with learning.

Truthfully, no one knows how accurate this model is for children.

Equally puzzling is how might the journey of a refugee change everything we think about culture shock? But the shock is real.

\*\*\*\*\*  
**When with a special needs child,  
the wise teacher will have one hand  
filled with patience  
and the other hand  
filled with kindness.  
And will use both all up.**  
\*\*\*\*\*

**If the child does not speak English ...**

- **an interpreter should be available for the first visit,**
- **hopefully one or both parents will attend,**
- **ask the ESL resource teacher to attend,**
- **ask the administration to please not surprise you with a parent meeting during your prep. Set an appointment for when you can relax and the room is empty.**
- **This booklet offers a few suggestions for communicating with a non-English speaker. Nevertheless, with the interpreter and the ESL teacher present, get them to describe a communication method you see as workable.**

## **First Visits and the Beginning Days**

### *Helpful Self-talk:*

*"Whenever kindness becomes part of something, it beautifies it."  
(Muslim Book of Manners)*

Following is a slow motion account of a normal conversation pattern you might have with any child. Reference is made to cultural practices, but these are generalizations. Expect individual differences.

### **The Visit**

- **Adult Muslim women must be interviewed by women.**
- **Men must never pat or touch a Muslim girl from about age 12 and older regardless of the intent to offer comfort or support.**
- The single most important thing you can accomplish in the first visits is to restore the child's dignity. The child must believe you see that he/she matters and is capable.

### **Build Trust**

- During the first visits do not expect the child to trust you fully and so do not expect complete responses.
- The child may offer a best guess at what you want or may lead you away from information that is painful. Be sensitive when asking for further information.
- Your nonverbal cues will determine the amount of trust the child extends to you. Let the child draw or look at a book so he can watch you with other children.
- Basically, you have to wait for the child to lean into you.

## **Listening and Asking**

- Be aware of what the student is doing, says he is thinking, and appears to be feeling. Feelings of a refugee child tell you the most.
- Listen carefully for evidence that the student is taking the initiative and/or solving problems on his own. Self-sufficiency will be a featured goal for all refugee children.
- When appropriate in a student's story, probe for problem solving skills used to deal with interpersonal issues. Interpersonal skills will be priority goals.
- Photos of a happy child sent home work wonders.

## **Make a Mental Plan for Teaching the Child**

- Is an interpersonal goal appropriate and manageable?
- Do the child and teacher feel the goal can be handled within the school? Don't reach into the family until you know them better.
- Celebrate victories with gusto. Meeting classroom interpersonal skills could call for a class party.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Teachers, Take a Break!**

**Go get a muffin and coffee.  
Assure yourself that you are awesome  
and that the refugee kid knows  
you care about him.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## **What If They Don't Speak English?**

**The following suggestions may facilitate conversation.**

### **Provide clues to meaning:**

- The classroom should be supplied with a computer or notebook with the translation app for Google translate.
- Use drawings, gestures, mime, and photos
- Don't insist on eye contact. That's often a cultural thing.
- Use names of people and things rather than pronouns.

### **Modify your speech:**

- Speak quietly. Greater volume doesn't help understanding.
- Nonverbal communication is believed first. Smile easily.
- Don't jump in to supply words for the student.
- If the student has a heavy accent, repeat what the child says but do not ask the child to repeat what you said.

### **Check comprehension:**

- Don't ask "Do you understand." You will get a "Yes."
- Teach the phrase "I don't understand."
- Write down messages so students have a visual.

## Examples of Quick Draws

The drawings are quick and intended to be thrown away.  
**Absolutely no suggestion is made to build a nonverbal communication system.**

boy

girl

dad

mom

friend

home

home

bus

recess

PE

cafeteria

bathroom

sad

afraid

angry

miss someone

\*\*\*\*\*

**English as a Second Language Programs in Canada  
are highly respected internationally  
and ideally positioned in our schools  
to support you.**

**The ESL resource teacher is your lifeline  
for materials and strategies.**

\*\*\*\*\*

Few if any of the personnel in school carry as many portfolios as the regular classroom teacher. You may serve in faculty leadership, function as the class counsellor and social worker in addition to mastering content, curriculum sequencing and "best practices" for up to four subjects.

If this project is done right, it isn't an additional thing to do.

\*\*\*\*\*

***The Invincible Argument:***

***I can't do more!***

***I can do different,***

***but I can't do more.***

\*\*\*\*\*

Page ahead to "The Well Dressed Classroom..."

This isn't something revolutionary or clever just for second language students. Most items are simply describing a good classroom, a good language learning environment. There may be little new here for you. Teachers who have welcomed diversity in previous classes usually don't want it any other way.

## **The Well Dressed Regular Classroom for ELL Students**

- \* English Language Learners (ELL) are best served among age peers. ELLs will not learn faster if placed among younger children.
- \* The ideal teacher for refugee children thinks life is fun and has shown the ability to adapt curriculum to the children. Best guess, risk taking and a willingness to laugh at oneself are class norms.
- \* The strategy of the "buddy system" is creatively used:
  - a desk mate can assist with materials, books and pages.
  - a playground mate makes certain the ELL student is included in games and generally cares like a brother/sister.
  - a cafeteria mate shows procedures and eats with the student.
  - a bus mate or walking partner gets the student home safely.

An agenda item for the classroom meeting may be to identify useful instructions, routines, the language of friendship.

- \* The student has a laptop with a language app and a picture bank.
- \* The rule is full inclusion of all children in all class activities. Set expectations for the ELL student.
- \* If the other language doesn't use "a, b, c" letters, ask the parents to write the names of all children in the class. Arabic script is beautiful.
- \* Thematic lesson planning is predominant and includes diagrams in which pictures can replace some writing. The use of activity-oriented projects offers the ELL student meaningful language practice.
- \* Students read to the ELL student often and work up ways to help the new student understand. Use picture books for younger and content books for older children.

- \* Cultural diversity is welcomed in the classroom. Show the cultural heritage for all who want to participate. Children can create space to display photos, maps, artifacts, student writing and perhaps news articles referring to their family's country and culture.
- \* The well dressed classroom purposefully addresses stress in any child. For the refugee child, stress is a given for the family. The teacher can ask all families if there are emotional soothers which might be used in the class, e.g. a stuffed toy, a photo, a letter, a religious item, certain actions or words.
- \* For elementary students, language experience story charts and picture maps for stories enable the ELL child to follow and retell the stories.
- \* In content-heavy subjects, picture explanations and the association of vocabulary and larger concepts greatly assist the ELL student. The picture/gesture/mime approach helps along with the student's being encouraged to articulate understanding.
- \* The student may go through a "silent period" lasting a week or longer, but the teacher and the classmates must keep talking to the child. Quiet students may offer answers to a buddy before the teacher.
- \* The teacher must be allowed to create a grading system which shows progress but does not unfairly compare the ELL student to his/her English-only peer's performance. Look at many areas when assessing learning, e.g. class participation, art work, social interaction. Keep anecdotal records of social and verbal interactions as well as writing samples. Be sure to communicate this adaptation to the parents.
- \* Even within well developed ESL programs, students may need up to three years to acquire street English and seven or more years to participate as equals with academic English. Older students may not have that much time so pick the curriculum priorities and programs with the parents.

**PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS  
ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING  
CAN START THE CLASS  
DOWN THE WRONG ROAD.**

Problematic Assumptions	Change to Principles for Success
1. Learning proceeds from part to whole.	1. Learning proceeds from whole to part so teachers organize curriculum around big questions.
2. Lessons should be teacher centred because learning is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student.	2. Lessons should be learner centred because learning is the active construction of knowledge by the learner.
3. Lessons should prepare students to function in society after schooling.	3. Lessons should have meaning and purpose now so teachers draw on students' background knowledge and interests.
4. Learning takes place as individuals practice skills and form habits.	4. Learning takes place as students engage in meaningful social interaction. So teachers give students opportunities to work collaboratively.
5. In a second or foreign language, oral language acquisition precedes the development of literacy.	5. In a second or foreign language oral and written language are acquired simultaneously.
6. Lessons should take place in English to facilitate the acquisition of English.	6. Lessons should support students first languages and cultures so teachers can draw on and develop student strengths.

## IDENTIFYING KEY FIRST PHRASES

Following are phrases that may be helpful to learn early. A more appropriate list will emerge from asking the students in class what lines they think would be most useful in their classroom.

May I go to the bathroom? (office, drinking fountain, cloakroom, etc.)

Hello, how are you?

Thank you.

What is the word for that?

Can you help me?

I can't find my eraser. (paper, book, homework, lunch ticket, etc.)

May I jump rope with you? (walk, eat, sit, sing, etc.)

May I have the jump rope? (ball, hockey cards, etc.)

Please leave me alone.

I forgot my coat. (book, pencil, band instrument, etc.)

I need paper please. (a pencil, a ruler, an eraser, etc.)

I'll help you.

This is very nice of you.

May I borrow that?

## PART 2: FEAR AND STRESS IN THE REFUGEE CHILD

The refugee family will almost surely be under stress from the move if nothing else. There may be a lot else.

Stress is not all bad. Well adjusted people still experience stress before taking a test or before public speaking, but after the event, the well adjusted person lets go of the stress.

Refugees may not know how to let stress go, or the situation causing stress can't change.

Consider long term stress as a life style, albeit one that the child hasn't chosen. In an absence of known stressors, your student may continue to be anxious, have headaches, concentrate poorly, or present other symptoms of stress.



Dear Stress,  
Let's break up.

## Here are a few symptoms of stress:

Mental symptoms: quick to anger  
sadness, crying, feeling helpless  
quick mood shifts  
needing to be told things again and again  
(and it isn't a language problem).

Physical symptoms: tiredness  
headaches  
tense muscles  
palpitations or irregular heartbeat  
struggling to get air  
nausea  
poor appetite  
vague pains e.g. in arms, legs, or chest

Behavioural symptoms: reduced activity, no energy  
overactivity and inability to rest  
Difficulty concentrating  
Sleep problems (too much or too little)

**The good news** is that teachers and parents alike recognize and address these symptoms all the time in children. And with fair success. The first line of treatment is the teacher's good sense gained perhaps from her/his own children. This highly effective and common sense approach is sometimes called "loving kindness" and means we care for others as a mother would care for her child.

Refugee children are almost certainly  
well loved by their families,  
but if they were well loved in the broader contexts  
from which they came  
they wouldn't be refugees.

**What if the child exhibits stress in school but the source of the stress is outside the school? That's when we do what we can for the child and ask for help with the source.**

1. Social Isolation of the child  
For the isolated child, recess, PE and the cafeteria may be the preferred learning classrooms. Work to keep the child active in these environments.
2. No useful activities  
Older refugee students may want to quit school to start working for money. Educators may believe the student's choice starts him down a road to poverty, but the student can't see it. Working part-time may be a compromise.
3. The child who falls asleep in class  
Possibly there is a medical problem. Perhaps the child has never been in school. Learn what you can. If allowed, a short nap in the nurse's room may solve the problem.
4. Negligence and/or abuse  
The law is the law. Report negligence and/or abuse for refugee children as you would for any child.

\*\*\*\*\*

***Teacher Break!***

***Go for a walk or sit by some water  
and remember your best friend in school.***

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Activities for Reducing Stress**

1. As teachers, we hurt for children who withdraw out of habit. We hope against hope that a quiet child means a child who has figured out a way to cope with the stress. Find ways to ask this child how he/she is doing. Think up jobs for the child to do so he/she is comfortable coming to you and talking.
2. A child may have a problem which is overwhelming him. Find one feeling within the tangle of feelings that the student can see himself fixing. Set a goal with the child for that feeling to shrink up and blow away. Later take on another small part.
3. Being kind to oneself is never out of fashion. Well-being and happiness are counterbalances for stress. Help the child identify what he likes to do, what are the positives in his life, what are the positives about the child, what clubs or activities in and out of school might be fun for the child to try out.
4. The child's culture may have a tradition of meditation practice. If a family member practices meditation, emphasize the importance of involving the child in daily meditation.

If the teacher has an interest in such practices, he/she might read up on "Mindfulness in the Classroom" and incorporate into the class dynamics what parts of mindfulness make sense at the time.

## 5. Sample text for relaxation exercise

- Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the floor.
- Close your eyes.
- Breathe easily through your nose.
- Feel how your muscles become more relaxed when you breathe out. Do this for two to three minutes.
- When you breathe in, you take in energy and health. When you breathe out, you get rid of tension and stress.
- Imagine a pleasant and beautiful place you have visited. Pretend you are there. Let your mind rest in this place.
- When other thoughts come into your mind just watch them come in and go out again. They come and go by themselves. Even worrying or unpleasant thoughts will go if you do not pursue them.
- You are resting deeply in a pleasant place. Remember what it looks like, sounds like, feels like. Let other thoughts come and go on the surface of your mind.
- After about 10 minutes say goodbye to this pleasant place, but remember that you will return there again.
- Take some deep breaths and then open your eyes.



Give your stress wings, and let it fly away.

## References

Coping with Fears and Stress An Activity Guide, Department of Educational Psychology, University of South Carolina, written for the Association of International Schools in Africa, 1988.

Mental Health of Refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1996.

What If They Don't Speak English, Bilingual/English as a Second Language Department, Macomb Intermediate School District, Wisconsin, 2004.