

Early years provision and refugee children

Young refugee children need access to early years provision. Having access to the support, facilities and care provided by a high quality early years setting is invaluable. Social contact with other children and adults who speak English will promote their early language learning. Play experiences, in particular, can help children make sense of their experiences and build confidence and social skills.

Research has indicated that refugee children are under-represented in most forms of early years provision. With more under fives than in the general population, refugees may have a greater need for early years provision.

Refugee parents often lack information about early years services or are unfamiliar with what may be provided. Frequent changes of accommodation may also mean that families are unable to become familiar with local services, or have their links with them disrupted when they are re-housed.

Many refugee women, who usually have responsibility for young children, may have lost family and community support networks. Welcoming refugee parents and involving them in the life of nurseries, pre-school groups and other settings can help reduce isolation and assist integration into the local community.

All early years settings in England that receive nursery education grant funding are required to plan learning opportunities in line with the new Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. A key principle of this is ensuring that all children feel included, secure and valued. Student teachers in early years settings will need to plan for the needs of children with English as an additional language and can find extensive further advice on how to do this in [Supporting bilingual children in the early years](#)

Good practice

Promote early years provision

In many of the countries that refugees and asylum-seekers come from, there is little or no formal early years provision. Families may arrive in the UK with little knowledge of the range of services on offer. It may also be difficult for those with little or no English to find out about services. Parents may not be aware of, or culturally familiar with, provision such as parent and toddler groups, one o'clock clubs, play buses and toy libraries. Some children newly arrived in the UK miss the whole or part of the reception year in primary school because parents misunderstand the age at which children start school.

Nursery places may also be beyond the financial means of asylum-seekers and other families without work. Even parent and toddler groups that make a small charge might be unaffordable for an asylum-seeker family living on National Asylum Support Service (NASS) support.

Early years providers can help refugee families and communities become better informed about what provision exists locally. Some schools and LEAs have produced translated information which is distributed locally through places of worship, communities, local Pre-School Learning Alliances and Sure Start projects.

Ensure equal access

Race relations legislation obliges early years settings to ensure that children from all ethnic groups have equal access to early years provision.

Strategic planning by the new Early Years Partnerships, monitoring use, provision and outreach and consultation with refugee groups is vital for addressing the under-representation of refugee children in early years settings.

Nurseries and other early years settings will be able to obtain accurate demographic data about their local area from an early years partnership or from the research and statistics section of a local authority. This information can then be compared with data about the uptake of a service, to see if any local community is under-represented.

Link with school admission and induction practice

At admission interviews in primary schools for children in key stages 1 and 2 it might be appropriate to ask parents or carers if they have younger children. Those who have children pre-5 can be informed about foundation stage provision in the school or locality (See [Welcome, admission and induction](#)).

Liaise with health visitors and other local services

Early years providers will find it helpful to make links with health visitors and other professionals working with refugee and asylum-seeker families. They may know of newly arrived families with young children who might benefit from access to early years provision.

Listen to and consult with parents

Schools and early years providers may not understand some of the particular barriers that refugee and asylum-seeker families face, and the concerns they have about childcare. For example, research by the Refugee Council and Save the Children showed that some mothers felt uncomfortable about leaving young children in the care of adults from outside their community where no one spoke their language.

Early years staff can consider how they can make refugee parents feel welcome and provide opportunities for them to articulate their particular needs. A key principle of the foundation stage curriculum is to develop strong partnerships between parents and the early years setting.

Value children's home languages

To acquire skills in English, young children benefit from the strong foundation in the language they speak at home. This provides them with knowledge of how a language works and will help them acquire the new language (see [bilingual language acquisition](#)). Early years settings should encourage parents and carers to use their mother tongue while talking and playing with their children.

Multilingual displays, signs and books in the early years setting will also provide positive messages that home languages are valued.

Ensure staff understand and support the language and learning needs of young bilingual pupils

The [Early years](#) section of this site provides further guidance on how bilingual and monolingual staff can work effectively in early years settings.

Promote positive coping and well-being through play

Some refugee children have missed out on play opportunities. Normal educational and play opportunities may have been unavailable in countries where there has been armed conflict and political violence. In the UK, children living in temporary accommodation, such as hostels and bed and breakfast, may not have space to play.

Play can be used to help children settle into their new environment. For asylum-seeking and refugee children it provides therapeutic opportunities to make sense of the world and gain confidence through positive interaction with peers and exploring their environment.

Some refugee parents may not understand the importance of play in a child's development. Families newly arrived in the UK may also have missed inputs about play and child development that other parents may have received from health visitors. Some early years settings organise meetings about promoting children's learning through play for particular groups of parents, providing interpreters if they are needed.

Frequently asked questions

I am concerned about the development of a refugee child. He seems very unsettled and distressed. What can I do to support him?

The foundation stage curriculum has an important part to play in ensuring that the social and emotional needs of young children are met. It should support young children to form constructive relationships with their peers and with adults, as well as developing a respect for diversity. The foundation stage curriculum also provides a structured approach to achieving the successful social and emotional development of vulnerable children and those with particular behavioural difficulties.

Activities to support the emotional development of young refugee children should be developed in the context of other good practice such as effective induction procedures, supporting parents and recognising when children are distressed and in need of extra support.

Play can be used to help children settle and make sense of their experiences and feelings. Children can also be encouraged to express their feelings talking about themselves, or using art materials such as crayons, oil pastels, paints, plasticine, clay and collage materials, making self-portraits. Role-play and puppetry activities can also be used to express feelings and reflect on events. Children can use puppets to communicate ideas and feelings that would be difficult to say directly.

Many traditional stories explore themes such as conflict, changes in life circumstances and bereavement. These stories can be shared in story-telling sessions. In doing this children learn about how others have responded to conflict and change. Sharing stories about loss and bereavement help children who have experienced such life events to see that they are not alone or different.

How can I get our refugee parents to be more involved in our nursery?

Some refugee families might find it difficult to develop a relationship with early years practitioners. This may be due to being unable to communicate in English, having come from a culture where there is no tradition or expectation of parental involvement or having to deal with the stress of change and coping with life in a new country. Some parents may also not trust those in authority and might be worried about disclosing information about the family background.

Effective welcome procedures should provide a genuine welcome to all parents. They can establish good communication and provide opportunities for parental expectations to be discussed. Parents will also be able to identify the best arrangements for ongoing contact between the early years setting and the home.

Most early years settings have a 'key worker' system. This approach means that parents can access a 'link' member of staff who they know and trust. Early years practitioners with particular linguistic skills can be paired with the key worker.

Many early years settings organise social events such as coffee mornings for parents who are new to the locality. This is also a time to develop links with children's homes.

Many refugee parents support each other. These links and friendships are often made in early years settings. Early years workers can introduce parents to each other, whilst respecting that some families may not wish to pursue social contacts.

Refugee parents can be invited to help in early years settings. They may have many skills that can be used. Parents can be asked to make labels and signs in relevant languages. Parents might also read stories or teach songs in children's home languages.

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Key readings

Rutter, J & Hyder, T. (1998) *Refugee Children in the Early Years: Issues for policy-makers and providers*. London : Save the Children and the Refugee Council

- This report revealed that refugee families in Britain do not enjoy equal access to the range of early years services. It provides guidance for local authorities and the voluntary sector, and highlights good practice.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2000) *A Curriculum Development Handbook for Early Years Educators*. Stoke-on-Trent : Trentham Books

Websites

<http://www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/foundation/223.html>

DfES/ QCA: Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage. Guidance for is all practitioners who work with children in the foundation stage, those with management responsibilities in schools and settings and those who support and train practitioners.

<http://www.earlyyearequality.org>

Early Years Equality (Eye) provide equality training, produce publications to support antiracist training and practice, organise forums, seminars and conferences to share and disseminate ideas and collaborate with partner organisations to promote antiracism in the early years field.

<http://www.ealinhounslow.org.uk/>

Hounslow Language Service. This site has a wide range of foundation stage teaching resources including bilingual stories and word lists.

<http://www.persona-doll-training.org>

Persona Doll Training. Persona Dolls provide a non-threatening and enjoyable way to raise equality issues and counter stereotypical and discriminatory thinking with young children. The Dolls and their stories are powerful tools for exploring, uncovering and confronting bias. They help children to express their feelings and ideas, think critically, challenge unfair treatment and develop empathy with people who are different to themselves. Persona Doll Training also publish *Celebrating Diversity: Inclusion in practice* a video and support book.

<http://www.surestart.gov.uk>

Sure Start is part of the Government's drive to eradicate child poverty. By involving parents and a range of agencies in initiatives to boost young children's development, it aims to give children in disadvantaged areas a much better start in life. Sure Start has produced much useful guidance material for early years practitioners, as well as a foundation stage information pack for parents, available in a number of languages.

References and Further Reading

Commission for Racial Equality (1996) *From Cradle to School: a practical guide to racial equality in the early years*. London : CRE

Rutter, J. (2003) *Working with refugee children*. London : The Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Retrieved on 24th September, 2005 from:
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/1859351395.pdf>

- This study focuses on asylum-seeking and refugee children under the age of eight. In particular, it examines their welfare and educational needs, and responses to these. It also highlights gaps in knowledge about young refugee children.

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