

Play, leisure and out-of-school-hours learning

Refugee children may find it difficult to establish or rebuild friendships in their new school environment.

As well as experiencing interruption to their schooling, a period of threat and frequent moves, refugee and asylum seeker children may also have suffered many losses in their lives. Loss of home, friends, family and all that is familiar (see [Supporting emotional needs](#)). Furthermore, asylum seeker families are frequently housed in poor quality temporary accommodation in the UK that can be overcrowded. Some families may have to share a room in a hotel. Living in temporary accommodation can lead to many moves, and therefore frequent changes of school.

'She gets friends and then has to start again when she goes to a new school ... she says "oh mum, please don't, don't let us move to another school because I'm already used to this one"'.

A parent living in temporary accommodation, from *Where's home? Children and homelessness in Bristol. Shelter (2002)*

These pressures can lead to withdrawal and deliberately not making friends.

"I really missed my friends and dreaded making new ones".

Children's voices from *Where's home? Children and homelessness in Bristol. Shelter (2002)*

Research shows that some of the consequences of temporary accommodation for children's education and well-being, include stress and health problems that affect learning and behaviour, low educational attainment compared to peers and behavioural problems such as mood swings, hyperactivity, disturbed sleep, and bed-wetting. Children may also have little or no space to play or study and are unable to invite friends home.

Whilst refugee children may have to frequently build a new set of relationships, poverty and living on a low income can restrict their access to leisure and recreation opportunities. Interrupted schooling and frequent moves means therefore that many refugee children miss out on things that are essential for children's development: opportunities for study, play and making friends.

Providing good quality play, recreation and supplementary study opportunities for refugee children should therefore be a key element of school and [early years provision](#). Play and leisure opportunities can help children's emotional well-being, releasing tension and anxieties. Having fun and enjoyment can enable children to cope better and enhance their resilience. Children can also make friends and develop their language and social skills. Play is an essential developmental experience for all children.

Good practice

Initial play activities can be planned to assist a child's settling into their new environment. Sensory and exploratory play can be reassuring and calming, for example water play and noise putty for early years, and treasure hunts for older pupils around their new school to help familiarisation.

When planning to develop play and leisure opportunities for refugee children, teachers may become aware of any cultural differences in the way that children play. This awareness can help teachers plan effectively to increase the benefits of play activities and participation. Resources used should reflect the cultural background of children.

Refugee children can use play, writing, drama and drawing to represent events in their lives. Providing a wide range of culturally appropriate play materials and objects can increase the opportunity for children to interpret stressful events that have taken place in their lives. Story-telling, with follow up discussion and drama or role play can also provide refugee children with safe and beneficial ways of sharing their experiences.

Refugee children may display a preoccupation with powerful elements of their experiences in their play. As a result of their experiences of political violence and uncertainty, together with more current stresses such as, for example, experiencing racism, children may re-enact war or show other kinds of aggressiveness, identifying with their oppressor. Teachers need to work closely with parents and refugee agencies and services in order to be aware of refugee children's experiences.

A close and trusting relationship with one adult can benefit children and support recovery through play. Many refugee children have had their confidence shaken by the behaviour of adults in situations of political violence, or have lost parents or other carers.

Many schools provide out-of-school-hours activities for their pupils. These often can include sports and games, homework clubs, help with key skills, study clubs linked to curriculum subjects. Student teachers can help support these, or even set up after-school-hours clubs themselves. They can encourage refugee children to attend.

Refugee parents may not be aware of, or used to, out-of-school-hours provision. Also parents may be concerned about their child attending activities late in the day and need both reassurance and assistance to ensure their child's safe passage home. Other reasons for good communication with parents include the strong possibility of older refugee children being needed at home to help with the day-to-day needs of the family. Indeed, it is important that teachers consult with children and parents, and involve them when planning any play, leisure or out-of-school-hours programmes. Refugee parents may have a different understanding of play and not be aware of schools' approaches to play in supporting children's development. Parents who are newly arrived in the UK may also have missed information that other parents have received. Admissions meetings with new parents provide a good opportunity for sharing important information (see [Welcome, admission and induction](#)).

To increase the opportunities for refugee children, teachers can work with local agencies and services to link refugee pupils to out-of-school-hours activities. There are supplementary and community schools in some areas. Teachers can support community groups' provision to teach their children's first languages by helping make school premises available. Teachers can also help by hosting social gatherings where local communities can meet. It is important that teachers monitor attendance at any existing out-of-school-hours learning activities and childcare provision they are involved in to ensure that refugee children are getting access.

Frequently asked questions

As well as providing out-of-school-hours activities , why is increasing play opportunities in the curriculum particularly important to refugee children?

Refugee children can learn to play again and rebuild skills they may have lost during persecution and flight. They can make new friends, develop language and social skills and learn to cope with loss and change. Play gives real opportunities for praise and affirmation so they can experience success in the curriculum. Play can provide a safe space to assimilate difficult feelings and memories. It also provides real opportunity for children to gain recognition of their experiences and their cultural heritage.

What types of recreational activity can I plan in the curriculum to help the recovery and achievement of refugee children?

Organised playground activities are a useful starting point. Break-times and lunchtimes can be particularly stressful for new arrivals in school. Otherwise activities can include sports and games, oral history or autobiographical projects, activities that involve the use of mother tongue, drama, photography, music, singing and dance, arts and craft. Some refugee children may come from an agricultural background and have skills to share in gardening. Many refugee children may have acute awareness about the political situation in their country and welcome political campaigning, especially if it raises awareness about refugees and is related to human rights and anti-deportation work. Because of their challenging circumstances, many refugee children will not be able to travel to other areas of the UK. Trips and outings can be extremely beneficial. Festival and faith projects and celebrations can also promote their inclusion in school life.

Authors

Bill Bolloten
Tim Spafford

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Key readings

Cattanach, A. (1995) *Play Therapy: Where the Sky Meets the Underworld*. London : Jessica Kingsley

Power, S., Whitty, G., Youdell, D. (1995) *No Place to Learn: Homelessness and Education*. London : Shelter

Rutter, J and Hyder, T. (1998) *Refugee Children in the early years: issues for policy makers and providers*. London : Refugee Council and Save the Children

Shelter (2002) *No Room to Play*. London : Shelter

Shelter (2002) *Where's home? Children and homelessness in Bristol*. London : Shelter

Tolfree, D. (1996) *Restoring Playfulness – Different Approaches to Assisting Children who are Psychologically Affected by War or Displacement*. Stockholm, Sweden : Radda Barnen /, Swedish Save the Children.

Online Resources

<http://www.breakfast-club.co.uk>

The Breakfast Club web site provides information needed to set up and run a successful breakfast club.

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

Continuity plays a significant role in shaping the out-of-school hours learning, or study support, movement in education, where children can learn through activities that are voluntary, extra-curricular, sociable and built around the choices and interests of the individual child. The Continuity website provides guidance, and information and support to schools and teachers who are developing out-of-school hours learning activities.

<http://www.learningdesign.biz>

100 Games & Activities for the School Playground (1997)

Learning Design website for details about this book which details 100 traditional games, from Cat and Mouse to Wink Murder and can be also be used in a wide number of settings and can be used by those working in Nurseries, Play Centres, After School Clubs and Adventure Playgrounds.

www.londonplay.org.uk

London Play is a London-wide voluntary organisation that supports and co-ordinates out-of-school play services for children across London.

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

Skills Active Playwork Unit provides information and support for early years practitioners.

<http://www.positive-identity.com>

Positive Identity supplies multi-cultural toys and dolls.

www.resourceunit.com

The Resource Unit for Supplementary and Mother-Tongue Schools provides advice and support to supplementary and mother-tongue schools. The Resource Unit School Directory provides details of 1,000 supplementary and mother-tongue schools in the United Kingdom.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/studysupport>

The DfES Study Support Website offers schools, teachers and LEAs support and advice about initiating and continuing good practice of out-of-school-hours learning throughout primary and secondary education.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/studysupport/docs/toolkitschls>

The Study Support Toolkit is a package of materials that provides practical self-development and training resources to help headteachers and study support co-ordinators in schools and local authorities develop or expand their study support programmes.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/studysupport/news/?newsID=929945>

The new Study Support Code of Practice (2004) brings together for the first time, guidance for primary, secondary and special schools. Many schools have extended and improved their study support provision and the involvement of pupils, parents and other partners. The changes incorporated in this new and revised edition of the Study Support Code of Practice reflect these developments

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

The Supplementary Schools Support Service works to build links between schools and their local communities.

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