

Unaccompanied refugee children

An unaccompanied asylum-seeking child is outside his or her country of origin, under 18 years of age, and has not been accompanied by a close relative when travelling to the UK.

In recent years, the number of unaccompanied children arriving in the United Kingdom has increased. Since 1997 the main groups of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have been from Kosova, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Iraq and Turkey.

Children who arrive in the UK on their own should be supported by Social Services. They are normally granted Discretionary Leave to Remain in the UK until their eighteenth birthday, unless the Home Office is able to ensure that the child will be suitably looked after if returned to their home country.

Many of the pressures on asylum seekers are magnified for young people who arrive in the United Kingdom alone. Indeed they are a very vulnerable group. Many may come from unstable social situations and have high levels of anxiety or emotional distress as a result of the trauma of leaving their home country and their initial experiences of the host country. Being separated from their main carer, many will receive inadequate support in their new environment. This can compound feelings of isolation. They can face many difficulties accessing mainstream services. They may be more vulnerable to emotional or mental health problems, discrimination and racism.

Teachers may find themselves having to play a significant supporting role in the life of unaccompanied refugee children. Indeed school provides them with one of the most important settings for their recovery and progress (see [Supporting emotional needs](#)).

Good practice

Teachers need to be sensitive to the experiences of all pupils when planning their teaching. They need to be especially welcoming to newly arrived unaccompanied refugee children (see [Welcome, admission and induction](#)). They need to avoid using language that excludes them, for example when referring to 'parents' or when setting up curriculum projects that involve or refer to 'family' at home.

Unaccompanied refugee children may have few contacts with others from their culture. Teachers will want to increase the child's opportunities to meet other children who speak the same language and belong to their community. Teachers can also recognise the diverse cultures and languages of the pupils when curriculum planning, promoting self-esteem and interest in pupils' own cultural backgrounds (see [Teaching and learning about refugees](#)). Providing information on the local culture is also important so the child understands their new environment better.

Teachers can provide unaccompanied refugee children with additional opportunities to catch up with studies and access local community networks. For example they can put them in touch with, and if necessary initially accompany them to, local befriending and summer holiday schemes.

To ensure each child has appropriate support, teachers can identify any gaps in provision. Teachers can be the first to know when care arrangements are inadequate. One way of monitoring each child's well-being is by tracking and reviewing their progress and achievement. DfES guidance recommends that looked after children have an individual education plan (IEP) that can ensure their progress is monitored and needs are met.

Teachers need to give practical help to unaccompanied refugee children. They may not have the advice and support that parents usually provide. For example they may have little supervision managing their attendance and organising their time. It is important that schools give them extra support, guidance and encouragement. Unaccompanied refugee children may need help getting appropriate legal advice to ensure their long-term safety.

Student teachers who are supporting unaccompanied refugee children will need to liaise closely with their form tutor, the teacher responsible for child protection and liaison with social services, and, if different, the senior teacher who has overall responsibility for the education of all looked-after children. In the absence of parents or guardians, schools will need to maintain close links with foster carers and service providers, such as the Refugee Council's Children's Panel of Advisers. The Panel of Advisers can provide an advocate who speaks the language of the child. There are other agencies and services that provide help and support to unaccompanied refugee children; these include the Red Cross Tracing and Message Services if the child wants to try and contact relatives. Developing joint working between schools and other professionals can ensure that unaccompanied refugee children receive appropriate support and access their entitlements.

When working with unaccompanied refugee children it is important to ensure they have access to appropriate one-to-one support from an adult, for example from a mentor or a Connexions Personal Adviser.

Strategies that consult and encourage the participation of unaccompanied refugee children can be very helpful. This way, teachers can support the child's ability to manage their situation themselves. By consulting refugee children,

their needs can be better understood. Their participation in decisions that affect them helps them to be resilient, and supports their coping and adaptation to their new environment.

Frequently asked questions

Several unaccompanied refugee children arrive late in the curriculum, at key stage 4. How can I support their needs at such a late stage?

A significant proportion of unaccompanied refugee children arrive in school in the 14-16 age group. Teachers can find it especially challenging to include pupils from overseas who arrive late in the curriculum because they may be beginners of English, they are unlikely to have studied the same examination syllabus as their peers in the UK and they may have gaps in their learning resulting from interrupted schooling. Some children may have had little or no previous school experience. However, new arrivals aged 14-16 can experience significant success. Teachers can provide effective support by consulting the pupil and providing comprehensive and accessible information so the young person is aware of the English education system and how to access additional advice and support. A range of curriculum pathways at key stage 4 need to be explored so that assessment information accurately matches courses on offer and where there is a constrained choice of subjects, additional opportunities for extra study or EAL support need to be built in. Some unaccompanied refugee children may benefit from access to vocational routes and work-related programmes. Teachers will want to work closely with Connexions advisers to develop suitable support for each pupil. Some schools may run alternative programmes that respond flexibly to late arrivals' needs, addressing gaps in learning resulting from interrupted schooling.

What can I do if I think an unaccompanied refugee child is being bullied?

If teachers become aware that a refugee child is being bullied or experiencing racial discrimination or abuse, he or she must acknowledge this with the child and seek ways of supporting them. The school should have procedures for dealing with such incidents. Student teachers should make themselves aware of these.

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Key readings

Free, E. (2003) *Young Refugees: providing emotional support to young separated refugees in the UK*. London : Save the Children.

- This guide offers indispensable advice on how to support young separated refugees in the UK.

DfES (2000) *Guidance on the Education of children and young people in care*. London : DfES

Stanley, K. (2001) *Cold Comfort - young separated refugees in England*. London : Save the Children

Online Resources

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

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture runs a befriending scheme for unaccompanied refugee children.

http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/infocentre/entit/entit_children.htm

This is the Refugee Council's Children's Panel of Advisers. The Home Office funds them to guide unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through the asylum process and to help them access care and education.

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

Save the Children supports some local self-advocacy projects for unaccompanied asylum seekers.

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