Refugee and asylum seeker support and advice pack for early years practitioners
Early Years Foundation Stage Team

This document is aimed at practitioners and other professionals working in Early Years Foundation Stage settings which have refugee and asylum seeking families and children. It is hoped that the information included will serve to raise awareness of relevant issues and provide practical ideas for strategies, activities and contacts to support the development of good practice and provision.

Introduction

In Islington;

- There are an estimated 4,614 children from a refugee background (around 22% of the total number) in schools (2011)
- The largest refugee groups are Somalis, Kurds, Congolese, Albanians and Latin Americans.

Whilst it is true that there are more under fives in the refugee population than in the rest of the population as a whole, research has shown that there is very poor uptake of early years provision amongst refugee families. Generally, refugee communities state that much early years provision fails to take account of the cultural and linguistic needs of their children.

Quality Early Years Foundation Stage provision can play an extremely important part in helping refugee children and their parents and carers to rebuild their lives. Many of the principles of good early years practice apply when working with such families; this includes a commitment to equality and anti-racist practice, working with parents and the community and a belief in play as a child's right.

Definition of terms

An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been decided.
A refugee is someone whose asylum application has been successful and who is allowed to stay in another country having proved they would face persecution back home
‘Failed’ asylum seeker. A person whose application has failed and who has no other protection claim awaiting a decision. Some refused asylum seeker return home voluntarily, others are forcibly returned and for some, it is not safe or practical for them to return until conditions in their country change.
Economic migrant. Someone who has moved to another country to work.

It may be that in the course of their professional life, practitioners come into contact with colleagues or parents who hold negative views about refugees and asylum seekers, often fuelled by reports in the media. An understanding of correct information can help to dispel common myths, making it easier to stand up for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Information, facts and figures on 'The truth about asylum' can be found from the Refugee Council website as can more about the asylum process itself.
Background and Context

Refugees and asylum-seekers may arrive in Britain traumatised and disorientated, having been forced to leave their own countries for reasons such as war, persecution and torture. They will often have been separated from other family members.

All newly arrived children have the same entitlement to education in Early Years Foundation Stage settings as children born in the UK. The Amended Race Relations Act (2000) makes it unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly against applicants for places on the basis of their race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins. The Every Child Matters policy framework (Dec 2004) aims to improve outcomes for all children and a key principle of the EYFS framework is to ensure that all children feel included, safe and secure.

It is important to consider what young refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families are likely to be experiencing on arrival in the U.K. This is likely to include some or all of the following;

- a drop in living standards
- the effects of poverty as families live on reduced welfare benefits
- living in temporary accommodation, possibly with frequent moves
- being isolated and subject to racism and harassment
- separation from immediate family or usual carers
- the effects of poor health
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In addition to this, young children will have to get used to;

- a new language
- different food and drink
- a new place to live
- different weather
- unfamiliar TV programmes, music, stories and books
- different clothes and toys

They would certainly miss their home, friends and familiar surroundings. Families will often have very complex needs which may impact negatively on a child’s development, well-being and learning.

It is important though, not to make any stereotypical judgements concerning refugee children. It is often assumed that all refugee children are ‘traumatised’ and need specialist intervention. This is in fact not the case. What they are likely to need is access to good quality early years provision to provide them with opportunities to experience stability, safety, warm and friendly adults, friendships with peers and meaningful play experiences.
Young refugee children and their families will need to feel safe and secure if they are to overcome the obstacles they face when rebuilding their lives. Early years settings can play a crucial role in helping refugee children and their families to feel welcome and a part of their local community. Children’s Centres in particular, with their emphasis on multi-agency working will be places where refugee families can obtain important information, advice and support around a number of key issues including health, housing and benefits.

**Signs of distress**

A child recently arrived at an early years setting who has experienced some trauma may demonstrate feelings of distress in a variety of ways. It is important to be aware of these signs so that children are not automatically labelled as 'difficult' and to help practitioners meet their needs more effectively. It is true though that behaviour will vary greatly and all children will need time to adjust and settle in to a new environment.

**What are the signs of distress a child may exhibit?**

- Feelings of panic caused by flashbacks
- Feeling distressed by things that remind them of frightening past events, such as loud noises, helicopters / aeroplanes or men in uniforms
- Poor sleep due to nightmares
- Poor concentration skills
- ‘Acting out ‘real life scenarios in their play
- Withdrawn and overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells of the group
- Disruptive and aggressive, unable to settle or take part in group activities
- Stop speaking or start bed wetting
- At times appear restless and overexcited or provocative
- Show lack of interest in food or demonstrate other eating issues
- Difficulty with settling in to their new setting

Many children will need to just observe what is happening before developing the confidence to engage in play in a more active sense. If, however, after having had plenty of time to settle into the setting, you feel that a child is still expressing extreme signs of distress then you can seek support and advice from the Islington Early Years Inclusion Team.
**Play as a healing process**

Play has an important role in helping children settle into their new environment. It offers children a way of making sense of their experiences in a controlled and safe situation. Play can allow children the chance to explore and come to terms with past hurts and fears.

**Case study**

An early years worker noticed that a group of children from Bosnia were always playing in the home corner. They sat around the table pretending to make and pour drinks looking very subdued. Every now and then one child would make a phone call, become agitated and throw the phone to the ground, prompting the other children to offer comfort. The children played out variations on this theme for many weeks. The practitioner made no attempt to move them on from this drama. She felt that they were playing out a scene they had witnessed and needed to make sense of. She just observed and was present so that eventually the children involved her and gave her a role (this was achieved through gesture and mime). Over time, the adult introduced different props so that the children could develop and extend their play.

Adults can take part in and facilitate play in a number of ways;
- modelling - where the adult participates in play, joins in and acts out a role
- extending play by making comments or suggestions or providing additional props
- participating as play partners in children's drama and storylines
- providing a good range of resources to allow children to express themselves in a variety of ways, i.e. storyboxes, free-flow between inside and out, puppets, role play, art and tactile materials.

It may be that some children, especially boys, who have witnessed violence in some form, may wish to engage in war, weapon and rough and tumble play. It is important that, while boundaries and general rules about kindness and not hurting each other are adhered to, adults do not spend all their time giving negative attention and feedback to these children. This may happen if the setting has a zero tolerance approach to such play. An understanding of why it is happening and willingness by the adult to join in and channel it positively would enable those children's needs to be met more fully.

It may be the case that some refugee or asylum seeker parents may not understand the role of play in the early years setting and that practitioners will need to provide specific information about learning through play for particular groups of parents, providing interpreters or translations where necessary.

(an example of a theme around safety and sanctuary can be found in the Appendix).
Practical strategies and activities to support emotional wellbeing

♦ Having a key person system in place ensures that a child can begin to establish a close and trusting relationship with one person. This is particularly important for refugee children who may have lost many of the significant adults in their lives.

• Being warm and friendly – it is important that both the child and their family feel welcome and valued by adults in the setting.

• Helping children to make positive friendships

♦ My life story book – children make a scrap book or picture book about themselves, and work with an adult to write captions for their drawings.

• My world - this can be done with groups of children. Each draws him or herself at the centre of a piece of paper and then draws pictures of objects and people who are important radiating from ‘me’ at the centre. The drawing can be used to prompt discussion and reflection. The same activity can be adapted to ‘my world back home’, where the child draws objects and people left behind.

• Self portraits – These might be drawings, paintings or masks. The teacher can discuss facial features and feelings with the children.

• The desert island – Children work in groups of four or five around a large sheet of paper painting or sticking on pictures of the items they would wish to take to their desert island. There is space for painting personal items as well as communal space for children to paint together. The activity is a good prompt for talk.

• Opportunities for art, music and drama are particularly important for refugee children as they encourage self-expression.

• Many traditional and modern stories explore themes such as conflict, changes in life circumstances and bereavement. These stories can be shared in story telling sessions to help those who have experienced such life events to see that they are not alone or different. Letterbox library supplies a range of books on issues such as bereavement, refugees and bullying. Storyboxes and props can provide opportunities for children to retell stories, often adding themselves in as characters.

• Circle time activities can help children express themselves and develop skills of empathy and listening to others. Establishing ground rules to create a safe, relaxing environment can increase the confidence of children to share feelings and experiences.

• The use of puppetry can also be used as a way of engaging young children. As well as developing communication skills, puppets can also help children explore their feelings and experiences.
Support for parents

It is important that refugee and asylum seeking families are made to feel welcome and valued from the very beginning. Parents and carers of very young children, especially women, may be suffering from the effects of isolation, lacking family and community support networks. Regularly attending early years settings or other services such as ‘stay and play’ can help to restore an element of normality in life and reduce feelings of isolation. Effective practical strategies include:

- Developing a ‘Welcome Pack’ for newly arrived parents containing items such as local maps, bus routes, information about local drop ins and information about local facilities such as playgrounds and parks

- Having an awareness of the services available to support families in your local area. These may be services held at their local Children’s Centre or school, such as English classes, advice on nutrition, stay and play sessions, toy libraries and Family Learning. Alternatively it may be necessary to signpost parents to local community groups.

- Showing sensitivity towards refugee families that are not able to produce a birth certificate and accept other documentation issued by the Home Office as proof of date of birth.

- Providing support with admissions forms and using photos, videos, translated materials in community languages to aid communication where necessary.

- Inviting parents into the setting to share their skills or just join in

- Having flexible settling in procedures to help those parents who feel anxious leaving their children for the first time

- Having a named ‘key person’ for parents to liaise with

- Aiming to offer outreach services and home visits

- Organising social events where parents have the opportunity to get to know each other

- Providing information about the British education system, preferably in their home language

- Explaining to parents the importance of continuing to speak in their mother tongue with their children.
General ideas for good practice and provision

Policies and procedures

♦ Ensure effective policy and implementation on equal opportunities, Racism and bullying
♦ Have procedures in place for identifying refugees in order to meet their particular needs
♦ Ensure that settings have a specific person with responsibility for refugees
♦ Highlight available training for staff on refugee awareness
♦ Translate communications between home and setting
♦ Set up positive links with community organisations including supplementary schools
♦ Extend services to refugees including drop-ins, toy libraries
♦ Work with other agencies e.g. colleges, health, social services, to create multi-agency support
♦ Develop welcome and settling in policies and procedures
♦ Develop a policy on supporting bilingual children and parents
♦ Support and encourage the use and development of community languages
♦ Obtain all relevant information about a child before they start, such as their name (including correct pronunciation) languages spoken and understood, special needs, etc

♦ Practical organisation

♦ Develop a welcoming and calm environment
♦ Consider the importance of routines to help develop children’s sense of security and to provide meaningful opportunities for talking and listening
♦ Prepare resources for the child in advance e.g. coat peg with photo
♦ Ensure that children have long uninterrupted periods of time in which to play, both inside and out.
♦ Children living in asylum hostels or flats may have limited opportunities for outdoor physical play. Where appropriate, give newly arrived children more time and space to use the equipment
♦ Keep spare clothes such as warm coats suitable for outdoor play
♦ Make a ‘Welcome Pack’ for newly arrived children with e.g. crayons and pencils
♦ Allow time to observe the children playing in a variety of contexts and use observations to plan for individuals
♦ Use a variety of visual support such as props and puppets to ensure full access to the curriculum
♦ Ensure that resources support and reflect the language and culture of the child e.g. books, home corner equipment, signs and labels. Mantra Lingua produces welcome posters and playgroup signs in different languages, as well as a Nursery Welcome Booklet CD Rom.
♦ Have a stock of dual language books, CDs, story sacks and toys which parents can borrow
♦ Activities which are non-verbal, such as music, painting and sport are particularly beneficial for those children who do not have English as their first language and help in raising their self esteem.
Guidelines for practitioners working in 'drop-ins' and 'stay and plays'.

All of the general principles and ideas so far are relevant for practitioners working in early years settings across all sectors. There are some crucial differences in provision however between part or full-time early years settings and 'drop-ins' or 'stay and plays', which need to be taken into account when planning specifically for refugee and asylum seeker parents and children. The nature of drop-in provision can mean practitioners working even harder to make parents feel welcome enough to ensure they come back.

• There is not usually a key person system in place this type of provision.

• Some parents will need to be re-integrated each time they come, particularly if this is not very regularly. Practitioners will have to take time to sit and forge bonds between regulars and newcomers. This will be an on-going process and may make the difference between a parent staying away or coming back.

• A parent will often come back just because you make the effort to enter into conversation. Practice the art of phrasing questions so they can lead into conversation of any sort.

• Parents often state that they don't return to a drop in because of other parents' unfriendly attitudes to them and their children. It is up to the practitioner to model good behaviour and a positive attitude - smile and be friendly. Other parents will be watching and will look to you and take your lead.

• Accept that you may have to find a way to approach children who display inappropriate behaviour. The way that you deal with a child or a parent during these difficult times will make a difference between them staying away or returning.

Stay and plays can be a lifeline for parents who have little or no links in the community. They can also make a huge difference to how a child goes on to settle in more permanent early years provision.
Useful Contacts / resources / documents

www.refugeecouncil.co.uk

http://nrif.homeoffice.gov.uk/education/earlyyears/index.
(national refugee integration forum)
Provides a wealth of materials on good early years practice including ideas for activities, resources and case studies

www.qca.org.uk/newarrivals

www.mantralingua.com: 0208445 5123 for dual language books and other resources

www.letterboxlibrary.com 0207 503 4801 for dual language books and others with relevant themes

www.parentscentre.gov.uk - the DfES parents website provides information on eligibility for free school meals and uniforms and provides information in different languages

www.islington.gov.uk/childrens-and-families/cs-about-childrens-services/early_years to order a number of resources developed by the Islington EYFS Team including; Bilingualism and multilingualism' leaflets for parents in 8 languages, posters promoting the use of mother tongue in 16 languages and a transition pack and to contact the Early Years Inclusion Team.

Islington Council also provides the following websites and contact details on refugees and asylum seekers:

IRIS: Islington Refugee Integration Service
www.islington.gov.uk/Community/equalitydiversity
Tel. 020 7527 7140
Email: iris@islington.gov.uk

www.islington.gov.uk/refugeedirectory

NRPF: (No Recourse to Public Funds) www.islington.gov.uk/nrpf
Tel. 020 7527 7107
Email: nrpf@islington.gov.uk

http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/sea for the SEAL materials (social and emotional aspects of learning)

http://www.iels.org
For Islington Education Library Service, a subscription service with a fantastic range of books and artefacts

Translation and interpreting services

Islington translation service: 0207 527 4024
Pearl linguistics: www.pearllinguistics.com: 0207 253 7700
TLS - the language service: 0207 272 1465

Further reading
Exploring notions of sanctuary, security and safety - some ideas

What makes a place safe?
Where do you feel safe?

Discuss with children where they go and to whom they go when they feel unsafe?
What does safety feel like?
Allow the children to make cosy dens, and draw and paint pictures of special places.

Explore this issue with soft toys or persona dolls to encourage children to empathise and problem solve.

For example, make some soft toys wet and cold (by leaving them in the freezer) and leave them in a central place with a letter for the children to discover when they arrive at the early years setting. The letter can explain to the children that the animals are feeling lonely, scared, wet, cold and need care. Could they think of ways to help them feel happy and safe?

Use picture books as starting points for discussions about comforting and secure places, and special people-

Ten in the bed - Penny Dale
Can't you sleep little bear? - Martin Waddell
Owl babies - Martin Waddell
Dogger - Shirley Hughes
Who are your friends - Jillian Powell
Where's my teddy - Jez Alborough

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