



Companion House

Tips for Teachers

Working with school students from refugee backgrounds

1

Focus on empathy, safety, and relationship building with students

The sense of safety for many refugee background children has been shattered, and young people and families undertake a significant cultural transition as they adjust to life in Australia

STRATEGIES

- Model and encourage relationships that build trust
- Identify and utilise students' skills, strengths and interests
- Use positive reinforcement by encouraging and recognising achievement, and highlight success stories
- Provide a safe, predictable and non-threatening environment that is engaging and stimulating with clear goals and boundaries
- Address concerns that students raise, and support students during times of conflict and heightened emotion, while managing your own reactions and emotions
- Challenge and address overt, subtle and institutionalised racism, stereotyping and other forms of prejudice
- Celebrate and demonstrate respect for diversity and be sensitive to cultural practice
- Refrain from requesting or conducting psychometric testing with refugee background students who have been in the country less than four years, as these will not be valid and can often lead to inappropriate labelling of students
- Be an advocate for refugee background students

2

Identify educational gaps and put in place specialised support

Many students from refugee backgrounds have had disrupted educational experiences.

STRATEGIES

- Tailor learning experiences and goals to students' needs
- Ensure students are engaged and can contribute in a meaningful way
- Provide specific and regular feedback to students
- Give students time to consolidate language skills
- Scaffold content and activities
- Put in place appropriate classroom support to enable achievement

3

Take a whole of school approach

Predictability and a consistent approach across the school build safety for students, and staff also benefit from appropriate exchange of information and mutual support

STRATEGIES

- Build safety for a traumatised child with challenging behaviour by implementing predictable relationship based responses across the whole of staff team
- Ensure your professional development and information sharing on working with refugee background students inform school policies and protocols so teachers provide a consistent approach to student well being
- Create structures that enable you to review policies, programs and activities, such as a refugee welfare committee or subcommittee



4

Build links with communities, community leaders and support agencies

Investing in expert advice and cross cultural knowledge better equips staff to understand students' backgrounds and needs, and can facilitate communication with parents

STRATEGIES

- Ensure executive staff members meet key community leaders and consult with them on the hopes and experiences of community members
- Use opportunities to meet community members at times they may feel more comfortable, such as appropriate community celebrations and events
- Invite agencies with expertise in working with refugees to run information sessions or professional development in your school
- Use appropriate referral protocols to partner agencies such as Companion House and be aware of key contact people

5

Use strategies which facilitate communication with parents and carers

Active and meaningful engagement with parents and carers supports improved educational outcomes for refugee background students

STRATEGIES

- Include approaches for welcoming and inclusive enrolment procedures for refugee background parents in your school/parent/carer engagement policy
- Maintain good direct communication and don't communicate through the child or young person
- Use interpreters as a standard practice when phoning refugee background parents with limited English
- Provide interpreting services as a standard practice for parent/teacher interviews or information nights
- Ensure notices sent to refugee background parents and carers have been translated
- Invite parents if they would like to bring support people to school events, though not as interpreters
- Consider organising an event or events welcoming refugee background students and their families and carers to your school

6

Provide professional development for school staff

A commitment to enhancing the skills and expertise of all staff will assist students, create safer classrooms and schools, and help to prevent staff burn out

STRATEGIES

- Undertake regular professional development, and any opportunities for all staff to update and share their knowledge on working with refugee background students
- Be informed about refugee experience as well as the impact of trauma on learning
- Keep learning about background knowledge of students' country of origin or the situation in country of asylum
- Ensure all staff understand how to use the Translating and Interpreting Service

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:

School's In for Refugees: A whole-school approach to supporting students of refugee background 2nd edition (2011) Foundation House the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture www.foundationhouse.org.au

Hints for Healing E-zine Monthly electronic magazine for student welfare personnel STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors) www.startts.org.au

Calmer Classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children (2007) Child Safety Commissioner State Government of Victoria www.kids.vic.gov.au

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