Understanding Refugee and Newcomer Families:

A Self-Reflection and Practice Guide for Frontline Child Welfare Professionals

While child welfare professionals bring essential expertise in child safety and family well-being, effectively working with refugee and newcomer families also requires an understanding of the unique experiences, systems, and barriers these families may encounter. The goal of this self-reflection and practice guide is to encourage thoughtful, intentional practice when working with refugee and newcomer families by creating space to pause, ask questions, and reflect on assumptions before drawing conclusions.

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Part 1: Understanding Refugee and Newcomer Families

Before engaging with a case involving a refugee or newcomer family, it is important to understand the family's background and immigration pathway to the U.S. This information can help provide context for the systems and experiences the family may be navigating, identify appropriate supports, and coordinate with relevant partners. While all families should receive high quality, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive care, different immigration pathways may affect their individual eligibility for services and available resources.

U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

Below you'll find key definitions for refugee and newcomer populations. To learn more about the resources and services that children and families may be eligible for, visit the Refugee Youth Resource Center's Legal & Immigration page here.

Key Definitions

Refugee	A person who has fled or is unable to return to their home country because of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are formally admitted to the U.S. under federal refugee law and undergo an extensive screening and vetting process prior to their arrival.
Asylee	A person who has been granted asylum in the U.S. after demonstrating a well-founded fear of persecution if they were to return to their home country. Although refugees and asylees receive similar legal protections, their process for obtaining humanitarian protection is different.
Unaccompanied Child (UC)	A child under age 18 who entered the U.S. without a parent or legal guardian and without lawful immigration status. Unaccompanied children are transferred to the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and are released to vetted sponsors, often family members or trusted family friends, while their immigration proceedings continue.
Humanitarian Parolee	A person temporarily permitted to enter the U.S. for urgent humanitarian reasons (such as urgent medical treatment, family reunification, or evacuation from a crisis situation) or significant public benefit. Humanitarian parole is temporary and does not provide permanent immigration status.
Survivor of Trafficking	A person who has experienced human trafficking, including sex or labor trafficking. Foreign-born survivors under 18 may be eligible for an Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) eligibility letter that can help them access certain services and benefits. Being a survivor of trafficking does not itself confer legal immigration status.
Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)	A form of immigration relief available to certain children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by one or both parents. Eligibility requires findings from a state juvenile court, making child welfare professionals and dependency courts key participants in the process. SIJS holders may qualify for work authorization and other protections.

VAWA Self-Petition	A form of immigration relief that allows certain abused spouses, children, or parents of U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents to apply for lawful status without relying on the abusive family member.
U Visa	A form of immigration relief for victims of certain qualifying crimes who have suffered substantial harm and are helpful to law enforcement during the investigation or prosecution of the crime.
T Visa	A form of immigration relief available to certain survivors of severe forms of human trafficking who meet eligibility requirements and cooperate with law enforcement when appropriate. T Visa holders may qualify for work authorization and other protections.
Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	A temporary immigration status granted to eligible individuals from designated countries experiencing armed conflict, natural disasters, or other extraordinary conditions. TPS provides temporary protection from deportation and authorization to work but is not a pathway to permanent residency.

Note: Regardless of a family's immigration status, child welfare professionals should focus on the safety and well-being of every child they serve. Understanding a family's immigration status can help identify appropriate supports and services; it should not determine whether a child's safety and well-being are taken seriously or whether the family receives appropriate child welfare support.

Considerations for Refugee and Newcomer Children, Youth, and Caregivers

Every refugee or newcomer child welfare case involves a family whose experiences may shape how they function, respond to authority, parent their children, and understand safety. For child welfare professionals, understanding this context can help provide more effective, culturally responsive support throughout the child welfare process.

Child welfare professionals should be aware of the following:

- Children who have experienced trauma, displacement, or violence prior to arriving in the U.S. may be more guarded or may have already learned to minimize what has happened to them as a survival strategy.

- Language barriers can significantly affect a child or caregiver's ability to communicate what they have experienced. Always ensure that a professional interpreter who speaks the child and caregiver's preferred language is present; never rely on a family member, child, or peer to interpret during a disclosure conversation.

- In some cultural contexts, children may be taught not to speak with adults in positions of authority about family matters.

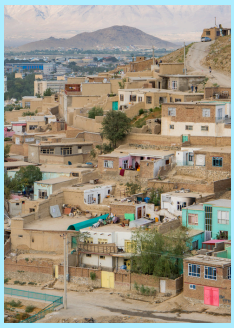
- Children may fear that disclosing abuse or neglect will result in consequences for their family, including involvement with government agencies, immigration enforcement, or family separation. Provide clear, age-appropriate information about what may happen and what will remain confidential, consistent with your agency's policies and requirements.

- Some children may have had prior negative experiences with government systems, law enforcement, or authority figures in their countries of origin. Building trust through consistent, calm, and transparent engagement is essential before a child feels safe enough to disclose abuse, neglect, or safety concerns.

- A caregiver's own trauma or prior negative experiences with government systems, law enforcement, or authority figures in their country of origin can shape how they respond to child welfare professionals. Hesitation, resistance, or fear rooted in these experiences can be misread as being uncooperative, unmotivated, or combative.

Triple Trauma Paradigm

Refugee and newcomer families often experience trauma across three stages of transition: pre-flight, flight, and post-flight, also referred to as pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration. The following is a simplified overview of what many families have experienced at each stage:



Pre-migration/Pre-flight (in one's country of origin)

Many families have feared for their lives amid persecution and violence, including witnessing death, injury, or sickness, and enduring prolonged hunger or conditions of extreme poverty before fleeing.

During migration/Flight (en route to safety)

The journey itself is often dangerous. Many families may have experienced the loss of home and family, displacement in refugee camps, regular exposure to danger, including assault, abuse, or exploitation along the way. Some children may have arrived in the U.S. without their parents or caregivers.

Post-migration/Post-flight (resettlement)

Arrival can bring the challenges of a new environment, isolation, language and cultural barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. laws and rights, and discrimination or xenophobia. Families may also need to secure housing and in many cases enter the work force within weeks of their arrival. Refugee services and case management can help connect families to support during this transition.

Reflect

Think about the last refugee or newcomer case you encountered or supported.

1. Were you aware of the family's culture, ethnicity, background, or primary language?

    a. If so, was professional interpretation used to ensure the children and caregivers could communicate effectively in their primary language?

    b. What assumptions, if any, did you make about the family based on their country of origin, language, religion, immigration status, or other circumstances?

2. Did you ask the family directly about their needs, priorities, and concerns, or did you rely primarily on information from other professionals?

3. What strengths, protective factors, and sources of support did the family bring with them?

4. Looking back, what additional information or support would have helped you serve the family more effectively?

Part 2: Assessing Child Safety Within a Family's Cultural Context

Practicing cultural responsiveness means reflecting on how a child welfare professional's own perspectives, experiences, and assumptions may shape their understanding of a refugee or newcomer family and ensuring that child welfare assessments are grounded in evidence, rather than assumptions.

The following are examples of family and caregiving practices that are sometimes identified as abuse or neglect in child welfare investigations involving refugee and newcomer families. It's important to note that none of these practices are inherently safe or unsafe without additional information and assessment.

Ask yourself: **Is this child at real risk of harm**, or **am I misinterpreting an unfamiliar practice?**

Co-sleeping

Bed-sharing between a parent and infant is practiced safely in many cultures around the world. It may not be, in itself, a child welfare concern. The focus should be on the specific sleep environment and any specific identified safety risks.

Ask yourself:

- Does the sleep environment pose a genuine safety risk, or am I making a judgment based on a practice that differs from the sleep practices I am most familiar with in the U.S.?

(Note: some agencies have specific safety guidelines, such as around co-sleeping between siblings of different gender. Apply your agency's policies alongside the family's cultural context.)

Sibling caregiving

In many cultures, older children routinely care for younger siblings as a normal, expected family responsibility. This may not be inherently neglectful. A child welfare assessment should consider whether the arrangement is developmentally appropriate and safe for the children involved.

Ask yourself:

- Does this caregiving arrangement pose an actual risk to either child, given their age, frequency and duration of the caregiving arrangement, environment, and other circumstances?

Traditional healing practices

Practices such as coining (cao gio), cupping (hijama), and herbal remedies have been used safely across generations in many communities. These practices may leave marks on the body that are unfamiliar to CPS caseworkers who have not encountered them before.

Ask yourself:

- Does this mark reflect a known injury, or could it be the result of a traditional healing practice I should learn more about before drawing a conclusion about child abuse or safety concerns ?

Child independence

In some cultures, young children are expected to self-soothe, explore independently, or take on responsibilities earlier than what is typical in the U.S. This may not be automatically evidence of neglect.

Ask yourself:

- Are the child's developmental and safety needs being met, or am I comparing their independence to a U.S. cultural norm?

Communication and behavior during home visits

A parent who does not make eye contact, does not speak during a home visit, or appears to defer all communication to another family member may be following cultural norms around gender roles, respect for authority, or appropriate conduct in formal interactions.

Ask yourself:

- Is this behavior a genuine sign of concealment or risk, or could it reflect cultural norms around authority, gender, or communication? Have I separately screened for indicators of domestic violence, which may also present in a similar way?

Discipline

Parenting norms from a family's country of origin may conflict with U.S. parenting expectations. This gap may not imply ignorance or malice; it may be the result of different cultural systems with different assumptions about childhood, discipline, and family structure.

Ask yourself:

- Is this disciplinary practice causing actual harm to the child, or is it simply different from the disciplinary norms I'm used to?

Caregiver emotional presentation

Parents or caregivers may appear emotionally unavailable or withdrawn. This may not automatically be a sign of disengagement or poor bonding; it may reflect grief, trauma, disorientation, or the absence of familiar social support following the caregiver's own displacement. A caregiver's emotional presentation may also be influenced by language barriers, loss of community, or the stress of adapting to a new environment.

Ask yourself:

- Is this caregiver's emotional presentation a sign of risk to the child, or could it reflect grief, trauma, disorientation, or acculturation stress that I should understand more before drawing conclusions?

Understanding Acculturation Stress and Its Impact on Family Functioning

Acculturation is the process of adapting to a new cultural environment. During resettlement, many refugee and newcomer families experience stress from navigating new systems, a new language, financial pressure, and social norms and expectations. Understanding this context can help child welfare professionals interpret what they observe more accurately and distinguish between family stress and child safety concerns.

The below are some examples of common stress that may come from adapting to a new cultural environment:

- Children often learn English faster than their parents, often due to greater exposure through school and daily interactions with English speaking peers. This can shift family power dynamics and result in children helping to translate or process information for their parents.
- Family conflict may increase during the adjustment period as financial pressure, housing instability, and cultural adjustment stress compound one another. This context matters when assessing child safety risk. Before concluding that family conflict reflects a parenting or safety concern, consider whether it may instead stem from these or other external pressures, and whether connecting the family to concrete supports (such as housing, financial, or other community resources) would address the root cause more effectively than a child welfare intervention.

Impacts of Immigration Fears on Family Engagement

Fear of immigration enforcement is a daily reality for many refugee and newcomer communities. This fear can impact how newcomer children, youth, and their caregivers interact with and engage in services, including child welfare services. It's important for child welfare professionals to be aware that newcomer families may not be able to clearly distinguish child welfare professionals from other immigration-related authorities and may associate child welfare involvement with immigration enforcement. In practice, this fear can show up in a variety of ways, such as a family closing the door on child welfare, avoiding eye contact when a child welfare professional arrives, or refusing to answer questions or provide information. It's important to consider that this behavior does not always mean the family is hiding something or intentionally being uncooperative. Fear or uncertainty about immigration-related consequences may influence how a family responds to child welfare involvement.

Before interpreting a caregiver's lack of cooperation as a safety concern, CPS caseworkers should consider whether they have clearly explained who they are (including showing their identification or credentials), what child welfare's role is, and that child welfare is separate

from immigration enforcement. This explanation should be provided through a qualified interpreter in the family's primary language. Families that have an understanding of what is happening will feel safer and be more likely to engage, which are important for an accurate child welfare assessment.

Reflect

Think about a time when a family seemed uncooperative or difficult to engage.

Ask yourself:

- Could their behavior have been related to fear, cultural norms around authority, or a past negative experience with government systems?
- What would you do differently now?

Part 3: Self-Reflection Checklist for Child Welfare Professionals when Supporting Refugee and Newcomer Families

Effective child welfare practice, with any population, requires self-awareness on the part of the professional/provider. The following questions are designed to help child welfare professionals examine their own assumptions and strengthen their judgment when working with refugee and newcomer children, youth, and caregivers. Use these questions as prompts for reflection in supervision, before or after a home visit, or after a case closes.

Before Meeting with the Family

Reflect

- What do I know about where this family is from and what they have experienced?
- How much do I know about this family's cultural norms?
- What am I assuming that I should take the time to verify or learn more about from the family themselves?

Reflect

- Have I arranged for a qualified professional interpreter in this family's primary language?
- What is my plan for ensuring that this family fully understands who I am, why I am here, and what their rights are?

During the Assessment

Reflect

- What might be impacting this child or caregiver's hesitation to share information? Have I clearly explained that the child welfare system is separate from immigration enforcement?
- Is what I am observing evidence of actual harm to this child, or is it a practice that is unfamiliar to me?
- Am I interpreting this family's silence, withdrawal, or limited engagement as a safety concern? What steps can I take to help reduce this family's fear and discomfort?
- Am I documenting the strengths and protective factors I am observing alongside the risks, or is my documentation one-sided?

Before making a safety or risk determination in a case involving a refugee or newcomer family, consider pausing and asking yourself the following three questions:

What do I know?

- What information do I have about this family's history and experience, directly from the family themselves?
- What cultural context is important to know and consider in this case?
- What specific, observed facts point to an actual safety concern for this child?

What am I assuming?

- Am I assuming "good parenting" can only look a certain way, rooted in U.S. parenting norms?
- Is my own cultural perspective creating bias in how I am assessing this case?

What do I need to find out?

- Before I make a determination, do I need more information about this family's history, cultural context, or specific circumstances?
- How can I gather the information I still need? Can I ask the family directly, consult a cultural liaison, talk with my supervisor, or gather more direct observations ?

Part 4: Best Practice Reminders for Child Welfare Professionals

Use the following reminders alongside your agency's policies, your supervisor's guidance, and other cultural resources available in your jurisdiction or community. This section consolidates and reinforces the key practices covered throughout this guide as a quick reference recap.

Before Making a Risk Determination

- Consult with a cultural liaison, refugee-serving organization, or community partner if/when you have questions or uncertainties pertaining to a family's cultural background or status-related eligibility for resources and services.
- Consider whether the level of intervention you are planning is proportionate to the actual level of child safety risk, and whether a prevention focused referral to family support services in the community would be more appropriate response than opening a CPS investigation or continuing formal child welfare involvement.

Recognizing Trauma and Cultural Context

- Consider how prior trauma, displacement, or negative experiences with authority figures in a family's country of origin may shape how a child or caregiver responds to child welfare involvement, including hesitation, resistance, or fear that can be misread as being uncooperative.
- Before treating an unfamiliar practice, such as co-sleeping, sibling caregiving, or traditional healing practices, as a safety concern, ask whether there is a specific, observed risk to the child rather than simply a difference from U.S. norms.
- Distinguish acculturation stress, such as shifting family power dynamics or financial pressure, from an actual child safety risk, and consider whether connecting the family to community or family support services would address the root cause more effectively than a child welfare investigation.

Addressing Immigration-Related Fear

- Clearly explain, through a qualified interpreter, who you are and that child welfare is separate from immigration enforcement. Families who understand the process are more likely to feel safe and engage.
- Recognize that a family closing the door, avoiding eye contact, or declining to answer questions may reflect fear of immigration-related consequences rather than an unwillingness to cooperate or an underlying safety concern.

Working with Interpreters

- Always use a qualified professional interpreter. Children, neighbors, or untrained community members should never serve as interpreters in child welfare cases.

- Brief the interpreter before entering the home. Let them know the purpose of the visit and the sensitivity of the conversation so they can prepare appropriately. For additional guidance, review this brief training from Switchboard, on best practices for working with interpreters.
- Speak directly to the family member, not to the interpreter. Maintaining direct eye contact and communication with the family, rather than the interpreter, helps build trust and rapport with the family.
- Monitor for signs that interpretation may be incomplete or inaccurate. For example, take note if an interpreter's response is noticeably shorter or longer than what the family member actually said. A family member's emotional response should generally match the content of what is being communicated.
- If a family member attempts to use a child to translate, redirect respectfully. Explain that it is important for a professional interpreter to handle the conversation to ensure accuracy and to protect the child from being placed in an adult role.

Understanding a family's cultural background and immigration experience is essential to making thoughtful, high quality, and accurate assessments of child safety. By approaching each refugee and newcomer family with curiosity and grounding child welfare assessments and investigations in evidence, child welfare professionals can better distinguish safety concerns from differences in culture, communication, or experience and respond in ways that support both child safety and family well-being.

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