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An Educator's Guide to Welcoming Syrian Refugee Children

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On November 24, 2015, the federal government announced its plan to welcome 25,000 Syrian newcomers to Canada. As of January 20, 2016, 11,613 Syrian newcomers had arrived in Canada on 44 government-organized flights. There were 5,833 refugee applications finalized, but they had not yet travelled to Canada. There were 14,733 refugee resettlement applications in progress.¹

In preparation, the Ontario government has been working with municipalities to identify provincial resources to support the settlement of the newcomers. Of particular importance will be integration of the new permanent residents into Ontario's education system.²

By the end of 2016, it is expected that approximately 10,000 new Canadians will resettle in areas such as the GTA, Hamilton, Mississauga, London and Ottawa. In terms of financial assistance, the government of Ontario is investing \$10.5 million over the next two years to deliver support for refugees and organizations that are privately sponsoring them. In addition, the provincial government has already provided \$330,000 to Lifeline Syria, which assists in the recruitment and training of private refugee sponsors.³

Civil War in Syria

Syria is a country in the Middle East with a population of 22 million. It is very diverse, both ethnically and religiously. Most Syrians are ethnic Arab and will follow the Sunni branch of Islam, however, there are also minorities such as ethnic Kurds, Christian Arabs and some Jewish Arabs.⁴

The UN reports that more than 10 million people have fled Syria since the civil war began in 2011, most of them women and children.⁵ This represents one of the largest refugee movements in recent history. A March 2015 report published by the UN estimated that four out of five Syrians were living in poverty.⁶

The majority of Syrian newcomers are living in Jordan and Lebanon, the region's two smallest countries, which are under enormous stress. An increasing number of refugees are fleeing across the border into Turkey, creating considerable tensions and overwhelming host communities.⁷

School age children from Syria may have had years of lost or interrupted schooling. The Syrian children who have attended school in asylum countries may have been targets of bullying, violence and prejudice.⁸ Children who were born in refugee camps may have health issues, poor nutrition, limited food and inadequate hygiene for prolonged periods of time.

Syrian life centres around family life, with particular value placed on children. The separation of children into the education system, even only during the day, may be extremely difficult for some children and parents.

Culture Shock in Young Refugee Children

A publication by Childminding Monitor Advisory & Support ("CMAS") entitled "Caring for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and Their Families" reviews the impact of the refugee experience on children.

The CMAS Guide indicates that entering a new culture is often very traumatic for young children.⁹ Research indicates that emotional regression is very common.

"Children's emotional expression may be quite volatile or they may experience extreme anxiety when separating from their parent. The child may use physical force or act aggressively when fearful. Alternatively, they may become very apathetic even when strongly provoked. They may easily tune out adults who try to guide their behaviour."¹⁰

The research indicates that in the early stages of culture shock, children are often unable to play and may be disinterested in the play of others. From an intellectual perspective, a child may have weak concentration and become easily frustrated. Secondly, a child may become dependent on one caregiver and seem unable to build a relationship with others.¹¹ The research indicates that the children may be fearful, especially in the early stages of settlement.

The CMAS Guide also confirms that a child's self-esteem is impacted by culture shock. "This may decrease their confidence to try new things. They may look for more assistance and reassurance from adults about how to play with things. Children who feel insecure may also need extra support."¹²

The research indicates that because many Syrian children have witnessed violence or were victims of violence, they may have some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹³ The CMAS Guide states that traumatized children may be unresponsive and almost catatonic and may not have words to express their trauma. "Children who are 'wooden' and despondent are more at-risk than those who cling to their parent and cry for attention. Traumatized children may refuse touch or other comfort, even from family members."¹⁴

The CMAS Guide indicates that education was highly valued in Syria, and many families may become anxious for their children to succeed in school. In light of interruptions to the schooling of most Syrian children caused by the war, it is anticipated that many Syrian school age children may be at an increased risk for failure.¹⁵ The CMAS Guide states:

"They may have difficulty focussing, listening and absorbing information, even in their home language. They may show outward signs of understanding (e.g., smiling, head nodding) but they may not be absorbing anything."¹⁶

Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment

Educators will play a significant role in the newcomers transition from refugees to permanent residents. Under the *Education Act*, a principal has a duty to maintain proper order and discipline in the school.¹⁷ The principal also has a duty to provide for the supervision of pupils during the school day.¹⁸

School board policies on equity and inclusive education are designed to foster a positive school climate that is free from discriminatory or harassing behaviour.

A positive and inclusive school climate is one where all members of the school community, including the new Syrian children, feel safe, included, welcomed and accepted.

Refugee children coming into Ontario schools face a range of significant challenges, such as a language barrier, anxiety issues and dramatic cultural and social differences. Their new school will be completely foreign to them and, as they must adapt, so must the other students. School administration and school staff should monitor the attitudes and behaviours of other students to ensure that the new students are not the subject of bullying, harassment or xenophobia. Some students may make inappropriate comments that while not typically bullying, can be extremely detrimental to the new student's development (i.e. asking the child if any member of their family has died or what the child has seen in their home country). In this regard, it is important for school leaders and teachers to ensure that the new students feel welcome, included and accepted and encourage empathy and compassion for these new Canadians.

Immunization and Health Concerns

Each student is required to be immunized against certain designated diseases in accordance with the *Immunization of School Pupils Act*. Parents are expected to ensure that their children are immunized before being admitted to school, unless an exemption for medical, religious, or conscientious reasons applies.¹⁹ The principal has a duty to give assiduous attention to the health and comfort of students under his/her care.²⁰

The immunization of newcomers can be challenging due to the lack of medical records, language barriers in explaining medical history, and a home country's different vaccination schedule.²¹ Getting a newcomer's immunizations up-to-date is critically important as a Canadian study showed that one third of new immigrants/refugees, particularly women, are susceptible to vaccine preventable diseases, such as measles, mumps, or rubella. All refugees will receive medical check-ups and be screened for infectious diseases before they arrive, but vaccinations will have to be completed after they relocate.²² The Canadian Collaboration for Immigrant and Refugee Health has emphasized that vaccination will be a key health initiative and they are expected to vaccinate widely as soon as the refugees begin arriving.

The World Health Organization says that children who have been living in refugee camps outside Syria are considered to be a risk for chronic disease and "psychosocial and violence-related illness" due to the lack of medicine and poor conditions in some camps.²³ It is expected that children will require health services as they have likely missed basic check-ups and vaccinations during the war in Syria and while living in refugee camps.

Educators should follow their normal process regarding immunizations. Public health agencies across Ontario are working closely with other health care providers to ensure they can support the Syrian newcomers the way they support all their patients. The Ministry of Health is developing a registry of health care providers who are able to provide health care to the Syrian newcomers. In this regard, there is a multi-lingual, 24/7 Refugee HealthLine (1-866-286-4770) to connect refugees to health care providers for transitional health care and services.

Special Education Issues

Some students have special needs that require support beyond those ordinarily received in a school setting. In Ontario, students who have behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities, may have educational needs that cannot be met through regular instructional and assessment practices. These needs may be met through accommodations and/or an educational program that is modified above or below the age-appropriate grade level expectations for a particular subject or course.

The *Education Act* requires school boards to provide special education programs and services for its exceptional students. Specific procedures for the identification and placement of exceptional pupils are set out in Regulation 181/98. Under the legislation, school boards are required to develop an Individual Education Plan ("IEP") for every identified student. School boards also have the discretion to develop an IEP for students who have not been formally identified as exceptional but who are receiving special education programs and services.

School-age children coming from Syria have usually had many years of lost or interrupted schooling. The high level of stress and trauma suffered by these children could have long-term consequences and could have an impact on their learning skills.²⁴

In light of the cultural shock these children have gone through, they may have weak concentration, and difficulty focussing, listening and absorbing information. Researchers indicate that another sign of cultural shock is extreme anxiety. In certain cases, separating from a parent may be an intense and traumatic experience.²⁵

Many of the Syrian students may have special needs that require supports beyond those ordinarily received in the school setting. In this regard, educators will need to undertake a thorough assessment of the student's strengths and needs that affect their ability to learn. Where appropriate, an IEP will be prepared describing a special education program and/or services required by a particular student. In some cases, a student's program will include, in part or in whole, expectations derived from an alternative program, such as social skills, communication or behaviour management.

The school leader will work in concert with school board personnel, such as speech and language pathologists, educational assistants, child and youth workers and/or social workers to provide supports required for relevant children. The principal will also meet with parents or guardians to inform them about the services, accommodations and programs that are available based on the individual needs of their children.

In communicating with parents about school services, principals may suggest that a family member or friend attend the meeting to assist as an interpreter. It is recommended that the school leader try not to overwhelm the parents with too much paperwork and enrollment information.

Welcoming Refugee Families

After the trauma of fleeing their home country, it is important that Syrian families feel that the school is a safe and welcoming environment. Practical steps that school leaders can take to reduce stress and help ease the difficult transition for families are as follows:

- Ensure all staff have the information they need on what to expect regarding these new Canadians. Provide information to the staff on culture shock, its stages and strategies to address it.
- Assign one staff member to take the lead with the family.
- Identify strategies for communicating with parents. Take the time to learn some words in Arabic or other languages spoken by the Syrian refugees in the program, to support early communication with parents and children.
- Have translated materials available to parents, written in simple English or with visuals.
- Find out basic information about the child but avoid asking too many questions or being intrusive about their past.
- Share simple information on the child's activities, mood and achievements. Match your language to that of the family. Keep your speech simple and speak slower for parents with less English.²⁶

On December 10, 2015, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greeted the first group of Syrians who arrived in Canada, he spoke eloquently about the values of Canadians. The Prime Minister said, "This is something that we are able to do in this country because we define a Canadian not by a skin colour or a language or a religion or a background, but by a shared set of values, aspirations, hopes and dreams that not just Canadians but people around the world share."²⁷

Consistent with these values and aspirations, our schools are committed to working diligently to welcome Syrian refugee families to Canada and help them settle successfully. Children coming from Syria as refugees at this time will have experienced traumatic events that will affect them in many different ways. School boards should provide their administrators, teachers and school staff with the knowledge and facts they will need to better understand and respond to the unique experiences and needs of these new Canadians.

¹ Government of Canada, "#Welcome Refugees".

² Ontario Government, "[Ontario Preparing to Welcome Syrian Refugees](#)", November 24, 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ CMAS, "[Caring for Syrian Refugee Children \(2015\)](#)" at page 5 ["Caring"], p. 5.

⁵ Caring, at p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Caring, at p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Caring, at p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Caring, at p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Caring, at p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ R.S.O. 1990, c. E2, section 265(1)(a).

¹⁸ R.R.O. 1990, Regulation 298, section 11(3)(e).

¹⁹ R.S.O. 1990, c. I.1. ²⁰ R.S.O. 1990, c. E2, section 265(1)(j). ²¹ Public Health Agency of Canada, "[Canadian Immunization Guide](#)" (September 4, 2013).

²² CTV News, "[What kinds of health-care needs will Syrian refugees have?](#)" (November 24, 2015).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Caring, at p. 9.

²⁵ Caring, at p. 17.

²⁶ Caring, at p. 19-20.

²⁷ New York Times, The Editorial Board, "[Canada's Warm Embrace of Refugees](#)" (December 11, 2015).

By: [Sarah Sweet](#)


Services: [Education](#)

Related Contacts & Expertise

Sarah Sweet
Partner

 Toronto

 SSweet@blg.com

 416.367.6590

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Education