



WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

A Global Mental Health Education Program of the
WORLD FEDERATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH



EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS OF CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

The Mental Health of Refugee Children and Adolescents

Refugee children and adolescents face a myriad of challenges in their home countries, such as the following:

- War trauma
- Loss of home, schools, family and friends
- Physical injury, assault, illness, malnutrition
- Witnessing death, dead bodies, injury to others
- Awareness of the fears of parents and their inability to protect and provide for them
- Forced prematurely into adult roles
- Deprived of school, health care, social services
- A lack of understanding of events

Refugees often spend long periods of time in camps; the “Lost Boys of Sudan,” for example, have grown up in the Kakuma camp in Kenya and, if among the lucky ones, are able to migrate to other countries as adults. Currently, Kakuma is home to more than 83,000 refugees from nine African states, namely Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Eritrea, and Angola.

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable in the camps where there is less structure and supervision, and rarely opportunities for education. Many of the above-mentioned stressors apply in the camps, as well as in home countries.

While expectations of coming to Western countries for resettlement are great, often these expectations are not met, thereby causing additional problems. Refugee children and adolescents may be faced with the following challenges in their new country of resettlement:

- Racial or ethnic discrimination
- High crime residential areas
- Inadequate educational preparation
- Role reversal/ambiguity when children learn the new language before their parents
- Family reunification and reconfiguration
- Loss of culture and having to find their way in a new culture

- Community support systems which often figured positively in a child's life
- Exposure to gangs and drugs

There are common trauma reactions found in this age group:

- Fears and worries
- Physical complaints
- Attention and memory problems
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Post-traumatic play
- Regression and separation anxiety
- Anger, hostility, aggression
- Apathy, withdrawal, avoidance
- Sadness, depression
- Survivor guilt
- Risky, dangerous behavior

Interventions that have proven to be successful in helping the social adjustment of refugees, including children and adolescents, when coming to new countries for resettlement are as follows:

- Vocational rehabilitation services
- Individual and group therapy and medication
- Family and individual counseling before and after reunification
- Support group for youths going through reunification process
- Providing structured activities in safe, supportive environments, such as classes in life skills, nutrition, parenting, language, exercise in order to build a sense of competency and control in their new living environment and to strengthen their social support system
- For children, art/play therapy is very useful, as well as support groups, consultation with teachers, tutors, and after school programs
- For physical stressors, one needs a thorough physical exam and medical treatment as well as education about medical resources, use of medications, nutrition, and the purchase, preparation, and storage of food products
- Screen for hearing and vision problems and offer corrective measures
- Support groups and activities to provide a sense of control over destiny
- Life skills training
- Parents should be educated about the actual risks and safety issues and use of police as a resource
- Experiences can be offered to provide interaction with police
- Sponsor community social activities to connect with other residents in any given housing complex
- On site after school programs are always helpful
- Parenting skills program
- Cluster similar refugees together and connect with familiar religion systems, such as linking Muslims with a local mosque
- Link with ethnic markets where traditional food can be purchased
- Facilitate involvement in traditional celebrations

- Involvement in activities that recognize value of native culture
- Train employees and school staff to respect ethnic traditions of refugees
- Teach refugees how to deal with discrimination/ethnic insults in the school and/or work environment
- Provide language classes and cultural orientation and life skills groups to instill sense of competency in dealing with life in their new country
- Help acquire TV and radio, dictionaries, books
- Match with volunteer tutors
- Provide incentives for increased language competency
- Provide literacy classes
- Link with organizations that help track displaced populations, such as the Red Cross, UNHCR, Amnesty International, etc.
- Offer opportunities to become involved with well functioning mainstream peers and supportive community activities, e.g. scouts, sports, after-school tutorial programs, etc.

Source: The National Alliance for Multicultural Mental Health

For more information:

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