



### REFUGEE ADJUSTMENT AND ADAPTATION

Refugees experience many stressors before they leave their home countries or camps, during their flights to “safety,” and after arrival in their new country; in this case, the United States.

These stressors include:

#### Pre-flight

- Imprisonment
- Death or disappearance of family member(s)
- Malnutrition
- Loss of home and other personal property
- Loss of livelihood
- Repeated relocation
- Physical assault (beatings, rape, torture)
- Fear of unexpected arrest
- Living in “underground” with false identity

#### During Flight and Processing

- Illness
- Robbery
- Physical Assault/Rape
- Witnessing others being beaten or killed
- Malnutrition
- Long waits in refugee camps
- Anxiety over the future
- Interviews and other pressure from resettlement countries to justify refugee status

#### After Arrival in the United States

- Unmet expectations
- Low social and economic status
- Language barriers
- Identity
- Role loss/ambiguity/reversal
- Bad news from home
- Transportation limitations
- Discrimination/racial insults
- Values conflict
- Joblessness/underemployment
- Social isolation
- Family reunification
- Sex ratio
- Inadequate housing
- Legal status
- Secondary migration
- Intergenerational conflicts
- Neighborhood violence
- Poor physical and mental health and lack of adequate treatment

#### Stressors Experienced by Refugee Children After Arrival in the U.S.

Children also experience unique stressors that are only exacerbated by the adjustment difficulties of their parents and older family members. These stressors include:



## Attachment 29: Refugee Adjustment and Adaptation (con't)

- Intergenerational value conflict
- Role reversal/ambiguity
- Inadequate educational preparation
- Language barriers
- Bad news from home
- Peer pressure
- Residency in low income/high crime area
- Pressure to excel in school
- Exploitation/abuse
- Family conflict
- Inadequate parental figures
- Racial discrimination
- Family reunification
- Surrogate family issues
- Unpredictability of life events
- Rejection by family or sponsor
- Feelings of physical inadequacy
- Cognitive limitations

### Phases of Refugee Adjustment

Normally, refugees go through specific adjustment phases upon their arrival in the U.S. and, as time goes by, each person, for a variety of reasons, often takes either of two tracks (see Phase III A and B). These phases are:

#### **Phase I – Arrival**

- Excitement
- Relief
- Bewilderment
- Confusion
- Enthusiasm
- Sense of safety
- Fascination

#### **Phase II – Reality**

- Awareness of challenges
- Disappointment
- Anger
- Fear/sense of abandonment
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Preoccupation with losses
- Plagued with memories of traumatic events
- Confusion/frustration

At this stage in the adjustment process, a refugee may take either of two directions, depending on individual personality/family stability/physical and psychological health/degree of support. These two directions result in the following:

#### **Phase IIIA – Negotiation**

- Takes Initiative
- Action to move ahead (ESL classes, training, job)
- Development of support network
- Beginning to accept losses



## Attachment 29: Refugee Adjustment and Adaptation (con't)

- Beginning to heal from trauma
- Determination to succeed
- Defining new roles and identity

This path leads to:

### **Phase IIIB - Integration**

- Good psychological and social adjustment
- Self-sufficiency/self-confidence
- Well-defined roles and identity
- Sense of power and control
- Language competence
- Good social support system
- Well-functioning family/kids

At the other end of the adjustment spectrum, refugees may take the following path:

### **Phase IIIB – Alienation**

- Withdrawal
- Isolation
- Despair/sadness
- Apathy
- Poor physical health
- Mental health problems
- Lamenting loss of old roles

### **Phase IVB – Marginalization**

- Dependence
- Unemployment
- Legal involvement
- Rolelessness/negative roles
- Minimal social support system
- Family dysfunction/break-up
- Acting out in children

### **Possible Interventions**

Each stressor causes certain physical and psychological consequences and outcomes...and calls for certain interventions. Without going into details as to specific stressors and their accompanying consequences, we list possible interventions that can be explored:

Depending on the particular stressor and the psychological and physical reaction, one should consider the following:

- 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, ESL, 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.



## Attachment 29: Refugee Adjustment and Adaptation (con't)

- 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 American 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 ESL classes and cultural orientation and life skills groups to instill sense of competency in dealing with life in the U.S.
- Help acquire TV and radio, dictionaries, walkman for English tapes
- Match with volunteer tutors
- Provide incentives for increased English 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. boy scouts, sports, after-school tutorial programs, etc.

For further information see the September 2001 issue of *Connections* in the Resource section, or contact Ellen Mercer ([emercer@irsa-uscr.org](mailto:emercer@irsa-uscr.org)) at IRSA at 202-797-2105 or visit the website at: [http://www.refugeesusa.org/who/prog\\_info\\_sp.cfm](http://www.refugeesusa.org/who/prog_info_sp.cfm).

The authors express appreciation for resource materials provided by Dennis Hunt, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Center for Multicultural Human Services, in Falls Church, Virginia – an IRSA affiliate agency.