



## Resource Guide for Supporting Children with Refugee Experience

Surrey Welcoming Communities Project  
Refugee Myth Busting Campaign  
March 2014

*Two Worlds: Africa and Canada*  
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## Table of Contents

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<b>The Surrey Welcoming Communities Project and the Refugee Myth Busting Campaign.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. What Refugee Children Have Experienced.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1. Displacement .....	6
1.2. Relocation .....	6
1.3. Resettlement.....	7
<b>2. What Refugee Children Often Bring with Them .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1. Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.....	10
2.2. Possible Effects of Refugee Experience on Children:.....	10
<b>3. Assessing and Supporting Refugee Children in Schools .....</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1. Assessing Risk for Trauma.....	12
3.2. What Schools, Teachers and Support Staff can do to Support Refugee Students .....	12
<b>4. Opportunities for Expression .....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1. Art Making, Play and Stories .....	14
4.2. Benefits of Using Play, Art and Stories with Refugee Children.....	14
4.3. Ideas for Using Art-based Activities with Children .....	15
<b>Conclusion: Recommendations.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Resources .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Resources on Art and Expression.....	18
<b>References.....</b>	<b>19</b>

# The Surrey Welcoming Communities Project and the Refugee Myth Busting Campaign

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As the largest recipient of immigrants and refugees in Metro Vancouver, Surrey has an impressive array of new comer services. With support from WelcomeBC, the Surrey Welcoming Communities Project was inaugurated in 2012 to help administer and coordinate these efforts, under the guidance of an advisory committee drawn from 25 diverse community, business and government stakeholders.

In developing a far-reaching Welcoming Communities Action Plan, the committee identified a need for greater awareness about the refugee experience. The resulting Refugee Myth-Busting Campaign is being directed toward service providers, the education system, businesses and the community at large, and is composed of several distinct elements, including the following:

- An education-sector training series and production of material
- The Surrey Museum exhibit “Surrey a Place of Refuge”
- Refugee focus groups and subsequent research into promising practices for the main issues identified during the focus groups
- Media coverage
- A quarterly newsletter focusing on refugees in Surrey

This resource guide on how to support children with refugee experience in school was compiled and written by Peta Schur, Co-founder of the Expressive Arts Therapy Certificate Program at Langara College, for ISSofBC. This guide is part of a toolkit also comprised of “The Heart of the Children” video presenting Expressive Art Therapists’ work with children participating in this project and a “We Are Here Now”, a story book compiling art work and stories of these children. The complete toolkit is available on ISSofBC and Surrey School District websites.

## Introduction

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Schools play a vital role in supporting the integration, healing and aspirations of refugee background students and they play a vital role in resettlement. Schools can provide a safe and supportive environment that can nurture the positive mental health and wellbeing of refugee students, enhance their educational outcomes, and promote social connectedness between refugee families and the school community. Providing a safe, inclusive environment that builds connections and skills and contributes to dignity, meaning, and a sense of future are essential for recovery for children who have experienced trauma as it helps them nurture their resilience and encourages their aspirations for inclusion and success.

“Schools, beyond their role in providing education, are naturally placed to provide opportunities to increase social inclusion, support freedom from discrimination and provide important life and work skills. These factors create better mental health outcomes, contribute to more successful resettlement, and ultimately offer the best chance for successful participation in the new society.” *(Fortune House, In Schools for Refugees 2011)*

The purpose of the resource guide is to provide school staff and other professionals who engage with refugee children with a framework for understanding children with a refugee experience background. The aim is to look at what the children may have experienced or may be experiencing, what they bring with them from their journeys away from home and to Canada, and to explore some ideas on how best to support the integration of their worlds and support their resettlement in Canada. For an extensive guide please refer to *Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools*, Ministry of Education, October 2009.

The art work and the quotes in green are taken from a collection of stories told by refugee children in response to their drawings, as part of the ISSofBC led Refugee Myth Busting Campaign, a project of the Surrey Welcoming Communities Committee. As part of this campaign, a training series as well as video and print material were produced by ISSofBC for the Surrey School District. ISSofBC contracted three graduates of Langara Expressive Arts Therapy Training, (Greta Hedley, Heba Khalid and Matias Hacker) who worked with elementary school

refugee students from Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Burundi, Honduras, Sudan and Burma. The children used drawing, clay, painting and storytelling to share their experiences and stories. They explored the idea of home, displacement, belonging and their feelings around integrating into Canadian society.

# 1. What Refugee Children Have Experienced

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Families arriving in Canada as refugees have overcome great obstacles and adversity. They bring with them their varied experiences that may include displacement, relocation, living in refugee camps and their journey to Canada. They share with us their strength and resilience, their understanding of injustice and their ability to hold onto a belief in our human capacity for connectedness and compassion, even in the face of having experienced immediate and vicarious violence and violation. Refugee background students need time and support to negotiate a range of challenges on resettlement in Canada. These challenges may include trauma, a disrupted education, adapting to a new culture and learning a new language. These children have often lived through years of conflict and their education has been limited, disrupted or non-existent. Many children have spent long periods in refugee camps or a first country of asylum where only basic or even no education is available to them. In Canada refugee background students must confront the challenge of mastering a new language, negotiating unfamiliar customs and different expectations, and understanding new and complex systems.

## 1.1. Displacement

Within their country of origin kids have experienced being removed from their homes and community. For some, this is a sudden and dangerous move. Most refugee children will have experienced violence, war and violation in addition to a lack of food, water and shelter. They may have also lost loved ones. Displacement generally includes the leaving behind of friends and family.

*"I came here I was five years old. I used to live with my family and we were six kids. My father stayed there. We left in the night when he didn't know. We walked. We had to walk for a long long time... sometimes my dad calls and we are all very excited. I want to go back but it's so dangerous. The most dangerous country in the world. Many of my family have been killed. If I go back I will bring my dad with me and I will never leave him there again."*

## 1.2. Relocation

The children may experience the same as they did during displacement as well as a dangerous

and unknown journey away from home, living in camps, separation from family, loss of community, uncertainty about future, harassment by local authorities and detention. Some of

the refugee children in the schools were born into refugee camps.

*"Things in Syria were so good for a while. But then everything changed and we were in trouble and everyone was scared. We had to keep moving to be safe and we had to find new homes to stay. We had no money and we had not enough food or water. I used to steal some bread from the shop for me and my brother. My father was killed in a war. Now I dream of my father. Now I am only with my mother and my sister."*



### 1.3. Resettlement

Families can wait for years to hear about relocation. They often have a short period of time to pack up and say goodbye once they receive confirmation of placement. Often families are separated as a result of resettlement. When leaving the children generally understand or have a sense that they likely will not see their loved ones or homelands again. Children often leave at night and without getting an opportunity to say goodbye. Families experience many challenging transitions during resettlement. They are required to learn a new language, live in a new culture, manage housing and financial demands, and negotiate a new education system while continuing to manage the effects of trauma, separation

and loss. Transitions are ongoing once in Canada. The families continue to deal with financial stressors, difficulty finding adequate housing and employment, loss of community support and a lack of access to resources. They are also faced with acculturation difficulties including conflicts between children and

*"I didn't know I was going to come to Canada. When I came to Canada everything was different, more different than Syria. I had to learn a new language. I know English now but my parents they don't know English they are going to school they must learn or they cannot have a job. Here we have not a big garden and here we have different clothes and different food."*

parents over new and old cultural values, conflict with peers related to cultural misunderstandings, the necessity to translate for family members not fluent in English,

problems trying to fit in at school and the struggle to form an integrated identity.

Dislocation, deprivation, disruption and loss can continue to impact refugee families and they continue to manage layers of trauma and difficulties that do not end with resettlement in Canada. The experiences of refugee children will differ depending on country of origin and experiences of the family so it is important to have some knowledge of their country of origin such as what may be the context for dislocation and what are general patterns of movement for refugee families from a particular region.



## 2. What Refugee Children Often Bring with Them

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- A strong sense of identity and home
- A deep connection to their land and people
- A deep longing for community, land and the sense of home they had
- A strong sense of and affiliation to family and community
- Experience with ideas of us and them – experiences and a grappling with the ideas of justice, injustice, what is persecution and what are human rights
- A capacity to understand conflict, an ability to coexist and even befriend an identified “enemy” when in the Canadian context
- A belief and experience of needing to be stronger than or show power over in order to stay safe
- A longing or stated plan to go back to country of origin and make a difference
- A strong desire to fit in
- A deep need for connection, friendship and belonging
- A need to integrate and have some freedom from trauma responses that are intrusive
- A tangible resilience
- Traumatic experiences and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



*“Things in Iraq were good; we had a big house with a garden to play soccer in. My mother she loved to do the garden. We had many flowers. My big brother was really nice and really kind to me. We had a party at my house and all my cousins came. My brother went to buy the bread and when he was out he was killed by a bomb. He didn't come home and we didn't know where he was. In the morning we went and we saw it. We found out. He was so nice to me. When we went to Syria it was different and I had to leave my friends and my family.”*

## 2.1. Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

**Trauma** occurs when there is a threat to the physical and/or psychological integrity of self, or others, whereby the person's response involves great fear, horror and/or helplessness (Rothschild, 2000).

**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** is an anxiety disorder caused by exposure to trauma. PTSD can occur if the person who has experienced trauma is not able to integrate the experience and they continue to suffer from the effects. These effects continue to impact functioning after the event(s), experience(s) have passed and the person is safe. Thoughts, feelings and memories from the trauma continue to invade day-to-day experiences and relationships.



*"We all came here in an airplane. When I painted this I was thinking about my older brother who died there. In Burma all the water came and flooded the village. I didn't get to see his face. I think about him."*

## 2.2. Possible Effects of Refugee Experience on Children:

*Expecting a child with trauma to give their full attention in the classroom is like asking someone who just received a very disturbing phone call to go on with their day unaffected. The problem with both situations is the effects of anxiety on our ability to focus on the task at hand. Our emotions are ready to provide us with critical information to inform our decision-making process. However, our emotions can also run wild with fear and anxiety in situations we either do not understand or believe we cannot handle. School can produce debilitating anxiety for the traumatized child resulting in the child's lack of focus and inability to learn. (Ziegler 2003)*

**Children may experience difficulties with:**

**Anxiety and fear** – difficulties with concentration and memory, disturbed sleep, exploration through play and new learning are difficult as a result of constriction, which is a numbing of feelings or behaviour to avoid triggers (sounds, smells, sensations and situations). This avoidance is a protection against feeling and remembering. New situations may be anxiety provoking and children need predictability and a sense of control.

**Re-experiencing of traumatic events** – the child may remember and experience events as if they are real (really threatening) even when not. The child remains in a state of hyper-arousal as a result of their stress response being in overdrive. They may react to triggers and they may have difficulty regulating their responses and returning to a relaxed state.

**Connections with others** – trauma often disconnects a person from themselves and others. This serves to protect a person from overwhelming feelings and possible shame and guilt they feel. For a refugee child, complicated by the fact that at the time they need it most, they lose connection with family, friends, community and home. Refugees are often isolated and separated and this can persist once resettled in Canada.

**Self-concept** – self-concept includes how we see ourselves and our relationship to others and the world. As a result of trauma we may feel betrayed by ourselves especially if we experience extreme helplessness. Our sense of self can shift along with our sense of place in the world. Without the notion of a safe and secure world and a feeling of personal safety in it our self-concepts can be vulnerable.

**Shame and guilt** – This goes along with exposure to violence and a sense of helplessness and inability to act on your own or another's behalf. The shame and guilt can cause a person to be secretive and unable to speak of the events.

For many refugee children they have had few outlets or resources to deal with their unspeakable pain and loss and they need a school environment that encourages them to feel safe, seen and competent.

## 3. Assessing and Supporting Refugee Children in Schools

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### 3.1. *Assessing Risk for Trauma*

**Some useful questions teachers can use to assess the risk for trauma for students in their classroom:**

- How does the student relate with other students?
- Do the student's life experiences prior to living in Canada find expression through play, art, or acting?
- Does the student have difficulty in remembering daily activities, routines, or tasks?
- Does the student appear to experience mood swings?
- Is the student able to concentrate on a set task?
- Does the student appear frightened or fidgety?
- Are there any recurrent themes in the student's drawings?
- What are the student's strengths (e.g., coping mechanisms, abilities, interests, etc.)?
- From Boston's Children's Hospital, Centre for Refugee Trauma and Resilience (CHCRTR)

#### **Resources for Assessing Risk for Trauma**

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.nctsnet.org/](http://www.nctsnet.org/) (recognizing signs of trauma – age specific effects)
- Boston's Children's Hospital, Centre for Refugee Trauma and Resilience (CHCRTR) web-based toolkit to explain refugee experience. It includes an on-line assessment of trauma [www.chcrtr.org/toolkit/](http://www.chcrtr.org/toolkit/)

### 3.2. *What Schools, Teachers and Support Staff can do to Support Refugee Students*

**Know the child** – learn about the child's background, culture and experiences. Provide opportunities for the child to be known – allow the children to express themselves and their experiences to tell their story.

**Understand the child** – understanding trauma and difficulties these children face as a result of refugee experience or resettlement, brings compassion and empathy.

**Structure and Consistency** – refugee kids often need firm boundaries, clear rules, and expectations as well as consequences applied with sensitivity and calm.

**Manage your own reactions** – working with traumatized children can bring strong emotions; staying calm will help the child to calm themselves

**Learn about Triggers** for individual kids and try to minimize where possible, by creating a predictable environment and preparing children for changes.

**Connect** – contact helps with regulation and a sense of belonging, dissociative children who are often quiet and compliant, need gentle and consistent attempts to connect with them.

**Time in, not time out** – time out can be experienced as a rejection increasing feelings of shame and worthlessness.

**Explore ideas** of justice, persecution, war, peace, home in curriculum - discussion, sharing ideas, being heard helps with reconstruction of meaning and discovering deeper lessons in tragedy

**Engender a feeling of belonging** –by creating a culture of inclusion, by seeing, naming and addressing discrimination, exclusion and bullying. By helping them find a friend

**Encourage Competence** –children feel competent when they are supported in expressing their own values, taking responsibility, given opportunities to make decisions, and are contributing their talents, abilities and creativity, when they experience understanding and “getting it right” with school work.

**Help with navigating acculturation process and new systems** – bearing in mind that many of the children have had little or no formal schooling or have been in school systems that used harsh punishments and very different methods of teaching. Help the children understand the expectations and culture of the school.

*“I thought that Canada would be smaller and all snow. My first day of school in Canada I went to the office with my mum. A girl came and took me to class, I didn’t understand anything. Then I met another girl from Syria and she translated for me. We became friends.”*

*“This is our backyard in Iraq. They make with lots of bricks in Iraq. We played with all of our friends. We never had to stop playing. It was hot, I liked it. I don't like cold. I have a big family and I feel like I will go home one day.”*

## 4. Opportunities for Expression

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### 4.1. *Art Making, Play and Stories*

***“Many refugee children have been denied opportunities for play and have had little fun in their lives. Creative activities have a special relevance for all children who are deprived”*** (Richman 1998)

Voices of refugee children have often been subsumed by the largeness of their experiences and the urgency of their situations. They have often not had the opportunity to process and make sense of their experiences. To be witnessed, listened to and given the opportunity to express themselves, is invaluable for these children. It helps them integrate and make sense of their experiences if we take time to listen and to bear witness. It helps them make sense of and expand possibilities, release vulnerability and a sense of physical helplessness. Stories and artwork can capture their experiences, both real and felt. The art created or stories told might be indirect, they can tell of the experience without having to refer to it directly. In this way it can offer a safe container to hold the suffering and loss and provide distance so that the child can look at and talk about their experiences without having to feel the pain or explain with words. For children who do not easily access language, art can express for them what words may not. The art can also externalize what the child is living with and the art and play can open imaginative possibilities thereby resourcing the child. By finding new possibilities in exploring old experiences and creating new outcomes, children access the ability to grow through grief.

Refugee children need opportunities for playing, art making, creating, storytelling and engaging imagination. They find it easier to share their experiences and stories of home through art.

### 4.2. *Benefits of Using Play, Art and Stories with Refugee Children*

- Spontaneity and trust is inherent in the process
- Art and play releases interrupted action, art making can move a child to be less constricted. It involves an impulsive act which encourages some freedom
- Pride and satisfaction from art created, an experience of success that is not language based

- Using art and imaginative play to explore, make sense of, work through and explore alternative outcomes/possibilities
- Fun, an invitation to experience more
- Provides relaxation and enjoyment
- Encourages interaction and helps with integration in a group, everyone has something to offer
- Offers alternative ways of relating
- Transformation may take place through the act of giving form to something
- What is expressed becomes externalized. The story, the experience or feeling is then outside the person. Once out it can be disengaged from, related to and changed
- Art can act as a container, it can hold painful feelings and give voice to experience
- Indescribable now has representation and can be witnessed so children feel a sense of being seen and belonging
- It is a living process through which children move through events and feelings
- Intelligence of intuition guides children to experience and express what is most important for them at the moment
- Engaging through art modalities allows children to “get some of the wound out”
- Children’s play is the means whereby the child manages the transition between the inner and outer reality

*“Children are open to the silent deeper truths of human survival. Interwoven in the matrix of nature, creativity, and magic, children form a total and believable relationship between themselves, their life lessons and the process of making meaning out of art materials.”(St Thomas and Johnson 2007)*

#### **4.3. Ideas for Using Art-based Activities with Children**

**Visual Journal** – documenting day-to-day experiences and feelings with drawings and a few words.

**Journal writing** – children are encouraged to write their feelings or thoughts down when they feel disturbed by them.

**Story writing and diaries** – children can use artwork, photos and stories to express feelings and narrate personal history. Themes such as *I remember or I do not remember* can be given.

**Spontaneous art** – children are given art materials and told to draw, paint or work with clay and they are encouraged to tell a story or tell about their finished work.

**Active Imagination** - Children are encouraged to ask an image or images within the art what they would like to say to them. Writing letters to the image or from the images to the child, even one sentence can encourage sharing.

**Art with a theme** – children can explore ideas of home, family, hopes and dreams through art.

**Storytelling** – children are encouraged to tell a story about themselves or someone they care about. Stories can be put together in a story quilt.

**Letters** – writing to family members (for themselves, not to be sent) or to themselves of a few years ago or themselves in a few years.

**Collage** – using precut images for children to group together with themes like *what matters to me* or with no theme and then get them to title their work.

**Drama** – Children put together a play that tells of their experiences or the places they were born or take existing stories that tell of overcoming or other themes the children are working through. Read a brief version of the story and get the children to choose a character from the story and to be that character. There can more than one of each character so that each child can play the role they chose. Group acts out story and then talks about or explores the reasons they chose these roles.

**Me Boxes** – Children each get a box that they paint, draw on, cut pictures onto or decorate. The outside of the box is what others know and see of them. The inside of the box is what is less known about them.

**Making a Book** – A class activity all the children draw and write about where they grew up or events in their lives that are important to them. This is put together as a book.



## Conclusion: Recommendations

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As a teacher, there are a few things you can do to support your students who came to Canada as refugees and might experience difficulties in class:

- Be informed about the refugee experience.
- Understand the implications of the refugee experience on learning and wellbeing.
- Implement strategies to support integration and acculturation.
- Build trust through strong connection, through listening and developing positive and supportive relationships with your students.
- Find out about the interests and backgrounds of your students.
- Ensure students are engaged in their learning and are included in a meaningful way.
- Provide a safe, predictable, inclusive, non-threatening environment.
- Value and celebrate diversity and address racism.
- Promote relationships and connections to others through sharing of stories, play and structured group activities.
- Identify and utilize students' current skills, strengths and interests.
- Provide opportunities for success and experiences of competence.
- Include opportunities for spontaneous art making and allow children to speak about their art and what it means to them and creative means for the children to communicate and tell their stories.
- Ensure your ongoing professional development and wellbeing (related to working with refugee students) is supported through school policies and protocols.

## Resources

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1. Refer to the extensive list of resources in *Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools*, British Columbia Ministry of Education, October 2009
2. National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.nctsnet.org/](http://www.nctsnet.org/)
3. Boston's Children's Hospital Centre for Refugee Trauma and Resilience toolkit [www.chcrtr.org/toolkit/](http://www.chcrtr.org/toolkit/)
4. Cultural Orientation Resource Centre [www.culturalorientation.net](http://www.culturalorientation.net)
5. Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Schools in for Refugees [www.foundationhouse.org.au/service\\_innovation\\_program/working\\_with\\_schools/schools-refugees-online.htm](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/service_innovation_program/working_with_schools/schools-refugees-online.htm)
6. Immigrant Services Society of BC – [www.issbc.org](http://www.issbc.org)

### *Resources on Art and Expression*

1. Caussau M, *Kids Play: Inspiring Children's Creativity*. New York, N.Y. Penguin/Putnam.2004
2. St Thomas B and Johnson P, *Empowering Children Through Art and Expression, Culturally Sensitive Ways of Healing Trauma and Grief*. London, England. Jessica Kinsley. 2007
3. Marion Liebmann M, *Art Therapy for Groups: A handbook of Themes and Exercises*. New York, N.Y. Routledge. 2004

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7. Victoria Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. (2004). *Schools in for Refugees: Whole-School guide to refugee readiness*. Retrieved January 6, 2014 from <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=25051>
8. Ziegler D, *Optimum Learning Environments for Traumatized Children: How Abused Children Learn Best in School*. Retrieved February 14, 2014 from [http://www.jaspermountain.org/optimum\\_learning\\_environment.pdf](http://www.jaspermountain.org/optimum_learning_environment.pdf)

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This resource guide is part of a toolkit, also comprised of "The Heart of the Children" video, and "We Are Here Now" a story book compiling art work and stories of children with refugee experience, available on ISSoBC website.

If you are interested in learning more about refugees in BC, you can find several reports and publications on ISSoBC website at [www.issbc.org](http://www.issbc.org).



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