

# Assisting unaccompanied youth to integrate

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**With the right assistance and support, unaccompanied refugee youth can adapt and thrive in a new country while maintaining their cultural identity.**

For over 30 years, the United States has accepted unaccompanied children and youth referred by UNHCR for resettlement. However, unaccompanied refugee children can wait years in camps or urban settings before they are identified for resettlement, an average of three years in the case of children resettled to the US. With an average age of 15 at the time of arrival, refugee youth often struggle to integrate into their new cultural context while maintaining their cultural identity. Assisting their integration requires a comprehensive, often long-term, approach that involves families, communities and programme support services.

## A sense of community

Since most of the unaccompanied youth arrive in the resettlement country during their adolescence, they are typically at a stage in their development where peer friendships and support are particularly significant. After experiencing the loss of their community of origin, opportunities to connect with people of their own culture are important. One way in which this connection can be achieved is through a carefully coordinated and screened mentor relationship with a supportive adult in their new community. A positive connection with at least one adult can be a key indicator of successful transition to adulthood. 'Cultural specialists' – people who immigrated years before and have successfully integrated – can also serve as bridges to the new culture while affirming the culture of origin. In addition, small-scale programmes with low staff-to-client ratios allow the young people to form strong professional and therapeutic relationships with adults.

Young people interact in their new communities and form new peer and adult relationships through assisted connections with their ethnic community of origin living in the US, such as through religious connections and cultural celebrations. At the same time, resettled youth become active participants in the new dominant culture and broader community through interactions at school, extracurricular activities and activities such as volunteering. Staff help schools prepare to receive youth coming from other countries whose education has been disrupted by conducting cultural awareness orientation for teachers and administrators in order to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and a more welcoming school environment. Orienting youth to what is often a different teaching style from the one used in their country of origin, where the educational system and educator relationships may have been more formal, can also help youth feel welcome. Through increased involvement in their communities through school activities in particular, refugee youth then become confident enough to share and teach others about their culture of origin.

## A sense of family

The long-term foster family model (as opposed to temporary care arrangements) provides stability and

promotes a sense of belonging, safety and permanency. Targeted outreach to existing ethnic communities in the US, to former international aid workers or to bi-cultural families for foster-parenting of refugee youth is crucial. Foster families are the first responders to assist with the healing process for refugee youth suffering from their loss of family and home.

Adjusting to formal foster care can be a challenge for those refugee youth who are accustomed to a high level of independence prior to being resettled. They may struggle to adapt to having new surrogate parents and to expectations such as having to let their foster parents know their whereabouts or obeying curfews. The refugee youth and foster parents navigate these adjustments together with the support of resettlement programme staff, especially if the foster parents are not of the same cultural background. Resettlement staff must have expertise themselves not only in youth development in general but also in cultural adjustment and refugee trauma.

## Psychosocial support

Unaccompanied refugee youth tend to have higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms than other refugee youth. Research completed with young Sudanese indicates that resettled youth may seek medical care for physical symptoms which are often signs of psychological distress, indicating the importance of proactively addressing underlying psychological factors through culturally sensitive, trauma-focused mental health services. Increasing social interactions by developing community and a sense of home for unaccompanied refugee youth helps counteract the sense of isolation which can exacerbate PTSD symptoms. Group peer sessions with professional mental health staff which focus broadly on individual cognitive-based therapy approaches but adapted to the context of refugee youth's learning about living in a new society can sometimes be more successful than following a Western model of individual therapy.

## Achieving independence

Unaccompanied refugee youth arrive with survival skills and are in many ways already able to function independently, having had to develop independent living skills by default due to being alone. It is, in fact, worth considering whether it is just those unaccompanied refugee youth who have the ability to somehow protect themselves in what can be hostile camp or urban refugee settings who have managed to navigate most successfully the systems of identification and referral for resettlement.

Nevertheless, they require specific knowledge and skills for independent living in a resettlement country. These include job skills and career/education counselling, budgeting and personal banking, the ability to navigate

public transportation systems, cooking and house-keeping, and personal safety.

Statistics are not kept in the US for outcomes for unaccompanied refugee youth exiting resettlement programmes but anecdotal information indicates the success of many children. Much of the practical experience of long-term integration programmes designed in the refugee resettlement framework can also be adapted to destination countries with unaccompanied youth

seeking asylum. Long-term integration programmes originally designed for unaccompanied refugee children now serve international survivors of human trafficking, children seeking asylum and disaster victims too.

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