

Supporting the **Mental Health** of **Refugee Students**

A Resource for Educators and
Mental Health Professionals

Refugees face many unique challenges upon arrival to a new country including stress related to immigration, learning a new language, understanding a new culture, and family adjustments. Families with school-aged children face particular challenges including assimilating into a school system that may be significantly different from their previous schooling, disruptions in school attendance due to violence or war, and cultural expectations surrounding parental involvement and behaviors. Additionally,



many refugees will have experienced trauma as a result of fleeing their home country and integrating into a new culture.

It is important for schools and mental health professionals to be aware of these unique challenges for refugee students and how they impact the mental health of the refugee student. Unfortunately, education and mental health professionals often receive little formal training on these topics. This resource aims to outline the challenges faced by student refugees, strategies to improve their mental health, and to provide resources for further reading.

Cultural Views Regarding Mental Health

Mental health challenges and treatment are approached differently throughout the world. When considering the refugee student, it is important to understand the attitudes regarding mental health in their home country. Some cultures have little understanding of mental illness and others may highly stigmatize



individuals with mental health concerns. Instead of seeing mental health symptoms as stemming from adverse events or trauma, some cultures may consider symptoms to reflect character or personal weakness.

Signs and Symptoms

Student refugees may undergo significant stress related to fleeing their home country and relocating to another. This stress may impair their concentration, cognitive functioning, memory, and social interactions. While normalizing non-pathological reactions to stress is important, it is equally vital to monitor for emerging symptoms of mental illness.

For example, trauma may come with symptoms such as:

- hypervigilance
- flashbacks
- and nightmares that do not allow students to be cognitively present in school

Other internalizing symptoms such as **anxiety, depression, fear, anger, loneliness**, and feelings of exclusion can also affect school engagement. Externalized behaviors such as **outbursts, aggression, and conduct disorders** may also emerge. Student refugees are at increased risk of developing

these symptoms given their past aversive experiences. Care should be taken to view behaviors as a **symptom of underlying mental health struggles**, rather than intentional disobedience or aggression. Referrals to mental health professionals should be provided when appropriate.

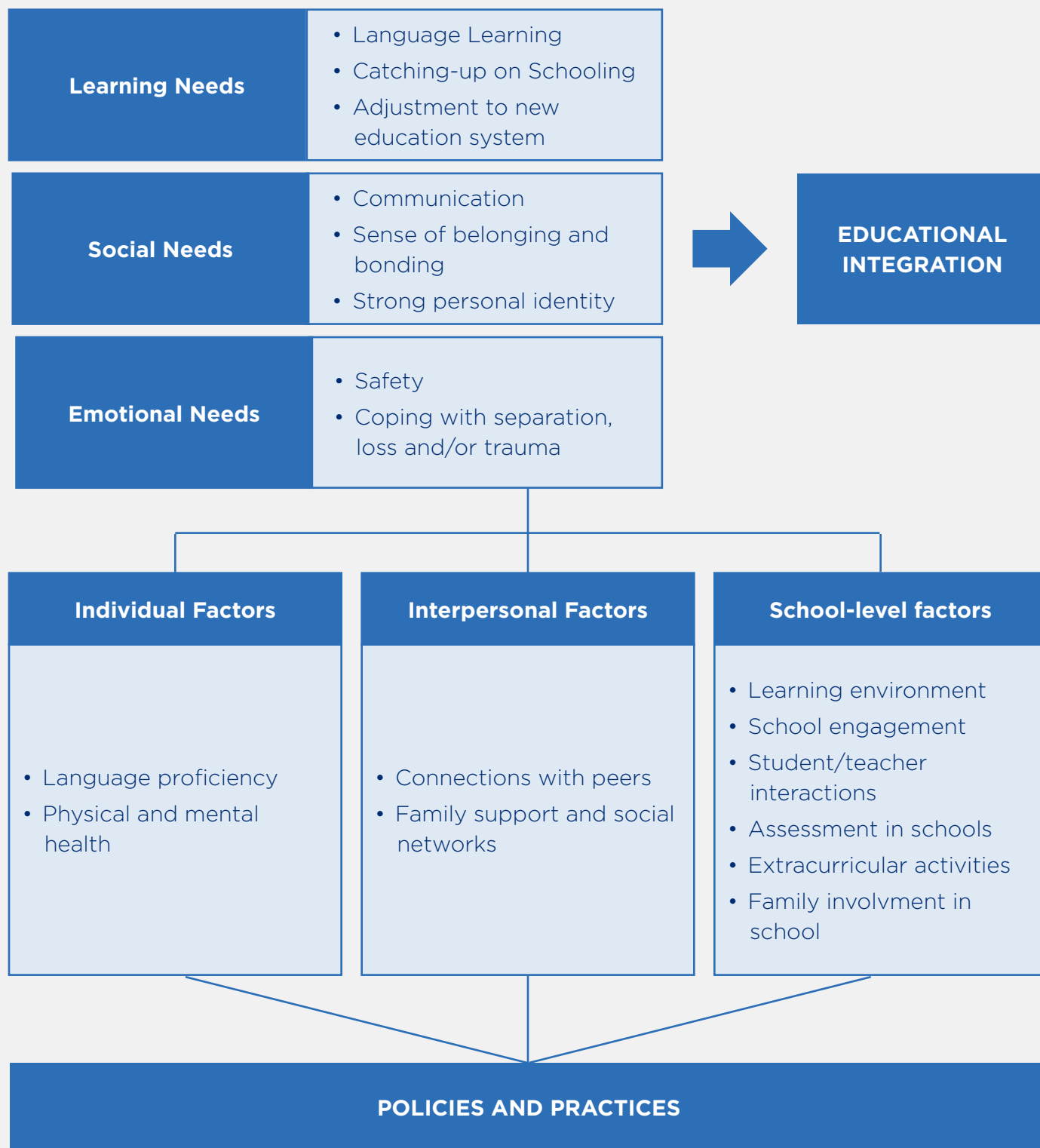


Bullying

Bullying can be a significant challenge for student refugees due to differences in appearance, cultural expectations, religious beliefs, language ability, and family systems. Teachers and parents should get involved early and often at the first signs of bullying, making it clear that bullying behaviors will not be tolerated. This may be complicated by cultural expectations – in some cultures, parents are expected to be minimally involved to show respect for the educational system. In these cases, it will be important to get parents involved and provide an empathetic explanation for their continued participation.



The following flowchart displays the needs of refugee students that can be incorporated into the classroom and factors that can be addressed in school policies and practices.



Adapted from OECD Library



You can **become an ally and advocate** for **refugee students and families** by:

Providing education on the cause of mental health concerns (including that symptoms are NOT due to weakness). **Some causes may include:**

- Stress and trauma associated with the immigration and resettlement process
- Challenges with assimilating to a culture with a different language and education system
- Encounters with both individual and institutional bias, discrimination, and racism



Focusing on resiliency or the student's strengths

- Focus on developing an environment where all students feel safe and supported.
- Celebrate student progress, not just success
- Provide opportunities for goal setting and reflection

Emphasizing student behaviors

- Engage the class in setting behavior expectations
- Model and promote positive behaviors
- Provide time to transition

In addition, mental health terms such as depression or anxiety may not mean the same thing in different countries, so it is important to create a common understandable language. For ideas on how to talk about mental health, check out the Well Beings Language Guide at [wellbeings.org/mental-health-language-guide](https://www.wellbeings.org/mental-health-language-guide)



Accessing Resources

Refugee students and their families may have increased difficulty accessing resources due to language barriers, cultural expectations for parental involvement in school, embarrassment or shame around asking for help, and other factors. Encouraging families to get involved early and often is the first step to creating relationships between school systems and families that can help support children. Keeping a list of resources (translated into different languages, if available) for parents to access can greatly reduce barriers.



Learn More

To learn more about issues affecting refugee populations and what you can do to support, check out the resources below.

1. [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
2. [National Association of School Psychologists](#)
3. [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Organization \(SAMHSA\) Refugee Behavioral Health](#)
4. [Administration for Children and Families](#)
5. [Refugee Mental Health Resource Network](#)
6. [International Rescue Committee](#)



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