Making refugee and asylum-seeking families welcome

Early Years Alliance mini-guide

early years alliance

How you can ensure that all families are made to feel welcome in your early years provision and refugee and asylum-seeking children are able to thrive

Some early years providers may already be providing places for children from refugee or asylum-seeking families. These people may have fled their homes due to war, conflict or fear of persecution. The current situation in Ukraine and the government's Homes for Ukraine scheme mean that it is likely that more providers will be considering how they can make these families feel safe and welcome in their settings.

The first thing to remember is that all refugee and asylum-seeking children are entitled to the same access to early years education as any child born in the UK. However, uptake of the entitlements is often low, despite the obvious potential benefits for children who may be suffering trauma or struggling to settle in a new country.

Reports in the media about unauthorised migrants and asylum seekers can sometimes provoke negativity. Make sure that everyone in your provision understand the differences between asylum seekers, refugees and unauthorised immigrants:

Asylum seekers and refugees

These are people who have come to the UK and asked for asylum. Until they are granted refugee status they do not have the same rights as a refugee or British citizen. Asylum seekers are not authorised to work in the UK.

All newly arrived children have the same entitlement to early education as children born in the UK. The Race Relations Act 2000 makes it unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly against applicants for places based on their race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins.

Unauthorised immigrants

These immigrants do not have the right to remain in the UK. They may have entered the country legally but failed to leave when they were required to do so. Alternatively, they may have entered the UK illegally.

Make sure your provision is accessible to families

- Find out about the services available to support families in your area. Many local authorities will have details on their website about organisations who are working with refugees.
- Contact local support services to find out how your details can be made available in an accessible format.
- Let local support services know if you have available places.
- Contact your local authority's Family Information Service to find out how they are providing information about childcare options to refugee and asylum seeking families.

Uphold the themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage

"Quality and consistency in all early years setting so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind"
The EYFS provides a strong framework that acknowledges that "children learn best when they are healthy, safe and secure, when their individual needs are met and when they have positive relationships with the adults caring for them."

A strong focus on the 'unique child' will ensure that educators recognise and prioritise the needs of every child, whatever their background or family circumstances.

"A secure foundation through planning for the learning and development of each individual child, assessing and reviewing what they have learned regularly."
It may be more challenging, but it is essential to establish starting points for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Educational programmes should have a strong focus on the prime areas of learning and development with plenty of opportunities for play.

Children may have had different educational experience in their country of origin or any places they have spent time on their way to the UK. Some children may benefit from structured sessions with a focus on adult-led activities while others may need more free play as they settle in.

"Partnerships between practitioners and parents/carers"
Overcoming any barriers to communication with parents should be a priority. Providing information in the family's home language where possible and taking as much time as needed to build positive relationships with parents during settling in visits will make a significant difference. Offering reassurance that their child is settling well and will have every opportunity to thrive will reassure parents who are facing their own challenges as they come to terms with their situation.

Educators should seek out training on supporting children with English as an additional language so that they can support the home learning environment as well as supporting them while at the setting.

"Equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported."

An emotionally safe environment is essential. Familiar words, symbols, pictures, resources and responsive adults will help to give children a sense of belonging where the early years setting quickly becomes a safe and familiar haven. This can make a big difference to the child and their family when they may be separated from extended family or feel socially isolated within the community they are living.

Early years providers have an important role to play in integrating the family by making them feel welcome. Facilitating connections with other parents and promoting a mutual understanding of each other's culture will help to overcome negative stereotypes.

Review your policies and procedures

Ensuring that parents, particularly those with English as an additional language, understand your provision's procedures and can ask questions will prevent misunderstandings about what is expected of them and what they can expect from you.

Settling in

The settling in period is even more crucial for children who have already experienced significant and possibly traumatic transitions early on in their lives. Be prepared for settling in to take longer and don't be tempted to rush the process. If necessary, revisit the stages of settling in where a parent stays for visits until they are ready to be left.

Remember that settling in allows a child to make a secure attachment with their key person so that they feel safe in their new environment. This is very important for children and families who may be distressed or disorientated by their past experiences. Make information available in the family's home language where possible and make sure that your settling in process allows for plenty of visits at key times such as during meals.

Signpost families to other services in your local area such as community groups, Children's Centres, English classes, toy libraries and Family Learning or stay and play sessions. Try not to overwhelm parents with too much information at one time. As you settle the child and get to know the family better, it will become clear which services they are likely to benefit from.

Equality and inclusion

Your approach to equality and inclusion should demonstrate a commitment to valuing and respecting diversity. Make sure that your procedures reflect how you will work in partnership with parents to understand their cultural identity and values. Build on information gathered during settling in as you get to know the child and their family.

Give examples of the steps you will take to promote children's physical, social and emotional capacity to thrive. You may wish to have a named person with specific responsibility for refugees who works closely with each child's key person to identify and remove any barriers to inclusion.

Safeguarding

Your safeguarding procedures will already outline the actions you should take if you have concerns about a child's safety. This is no different for children from refugee or asylum-seeking families.

Some children may be particularly vulnerable due to the trauma they have already suffered or because of their parents' capacity to cope with their circumstances. Work with parents to identify services that can support them.

Behaviour

A clear and consistent approach to supporting a child's behaviour requires positive relationships with parents to identify any underlying causes and to agree a way forward. Refugee and asylum seeking children may be confused, angry or frightened. Their past experiences may cause them to have challenging behaviour as they seek to make sense of what has happened to them.

The vital importance of giving children time to settle in fully and to make a secure attachment to their key person will go a long way towards promoting positive behaviour and preventing further stress and anxiety caused by being in an unfamiliar environment.

Where there are concerns that a child's behaviour may be linked to an emerging special educational need, then a referral for early intervention should be made.

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