

Refugee Youth & Language

Effective language programs aim to validate and support the multiple identities and life experiences of refugee youth.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Effective language programming for refugee youth not only teaches vocabulary and grammatical competence, but also addresses complex linguistic needs. It goes hand-in-hand with coping and resilience support and mental health treatment.
- ❑ Encouraging the maintenance of a first language is culturally empowering for refugee youth. It positively impacts their mental wellbeing, while also fostering acceptance and openness.
- ❑ Support workers who understand the contexts and backgrounds will relate better to refugee youth. They will be able to provide a more comprehensive assessment of their linguistic, academic, and personal needs, especially in areas where refugee youth may not have the necessary vocabulary for discussing their issues and problems, or where they may fear reprisal.



WHY THIS MATTERS

Language impacts all aspect of life, including satisfying basic needs, mental and physical health, healing from trauma, social needs, career training, cultural maintenance, and identity negotiation.

KEY POINTS

- ❑ It is important to recognize the diverse experiences of refugee youth. There is no universal refugee experience.
- ❑ The cognitive, social, and linguistic needs of this age group are significantly different from those of both younger children and older adults.
- ❑ Becoming proficient in a new language occurs in tandem with many other processes and developments in a refugee youth's life, such as coping with trauma, dealing with official paperwork (visas, citizenship, etc.), navigating complex and changing cultural and social identities in unfamiliar social structures, and learning new ways of life.

Effective language learning goes hand-in-hand with developing coping skills and resilience, mental health, and empowerment.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Religious institutions are instrumental in welcoming and supporting refugees, and providing services that are essential to their wellbeing. They provide an excellent practical context for informal language learning, and foster connections to refugees' home culture and heritage while also bridging the gap with the new community and culture.
- ❑ Arts-based programs hold potential for:
 - 1) providing a safe space for youth to explore their identities;
 - 2) introducing coping strategies for trauma recovery;
 - 3) teaching valuable real-world skills such as digital literacy;
 - 4) fostering language learning in diverse and creative ways that are relevant to the lives of refugee youth; and
 - 5) encouraging relationship-building with fellow refugees and non-refugee peers.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ❑ Digital literacy serves four main functions for refugee youth:
 - 1) building and maintaining co-ethnic relationships;
 - 2) connecting to other members of the diaspora community;
 - 3) promoting solidarity; and
 - 4) creating and disseminating expressive digital works.
- ❑ The Internet also provides access to information on medical care, public services, driver's licenses, citizenship, school requirements, etc., as well as maintaining ties to family and homeland.
- ❑ Through computer-assisted programming, language acquisition can be more learner-centred and individualized, taking into account each learner's abilities and educational background. Students are more motivated to engage with activities that are immediately relevant to their lives, and that make use of authentic and relatable materials.
- ❑ Television and information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide refugee youth with a means to stay connected to their culture and heritage, while providing information about their new cultural surroundings, assisting with language learning, and creating a potentially world-wide community for support.

Frequent use of ICTs such as social media and YouTube, along with television, provide refugee youth with information on the cultural context of their new community, including pop culture, history, current events, norms, attitudes, expectations, and values.