



September 2025

Engaging with Refugee Youth and Fostering Resilience in Different Stages of Child & Adolescent Development

Who Are We?



- Refugee Services
- Policy and Advocacy
- Legal Services
- Trafficking Services
- International Programs
- Children's Services

Note: USCRI is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)

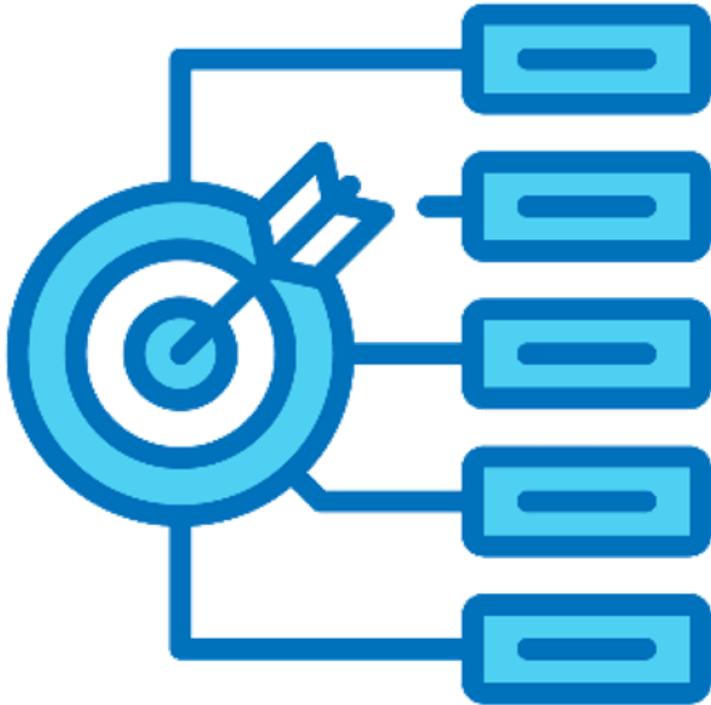
Who Are We?



Refugee Youth Resource Center

- National Training & Technical Assistance (TTA) initiative
- Part of USCRI Children's Services
- ORR grant-funded program
- Focus on building provider capacity to foster refugee youth resilience, integration, and child safety

Learning Objectives



1. Recognize protective factors that strengthen resilience of refugee youth
2. Identify practical strategies to facilitate engagement with refugee children and youth at different stages of development
3. Explore activities from USCRI's Refugee Youth Resource Center toolkit to foster resilience of refugee youth
4. Apply strengths-based, resilience-focused approaches to case examples

A Strengths-Based Approach

What Is a Strengths Perspective?

- An approach that focuses on the youth's qualities, resources, and capabilities, rather than on deficits or pathology.

What is Resilience?

- The ability to effectively cope with and recover from stressful or traumatic events.

What are Protective Factors?

- Factors in a young person's life, surroundings, personality, environment, social relationships, culture, or setting that can help foster resilience.





Let's Talk About It...

What are some examples of **strengths** and **protective factors** you have identified when working with refugee youth and children?



Protective Factors



Family and social support



Personal characteristics



Education and supportive school environments



Legal relief



Goal setting



Spirituality



Cultural resilience and identity



Cultural Resilience and Identity

- Sense of belonging and community
- Multilingualism and cross-cultural perspectives
- Importance of family
- Collectivism
- Religion/spirituality



Engaging Children & Youth at Different Stages of Development



Tell Us About Your Experience...

What are some of the **challenges** you've experienced when **building rapport** and **engaging** with refugee children and youth?

How do age and developmental stage come into play?



Considerations for Engagement with Refugee Youth



Language & Communication

- Working with interpreters
- Using clear, simple language
- Allowing time & space to develop trust



Cultural Norms & Expression

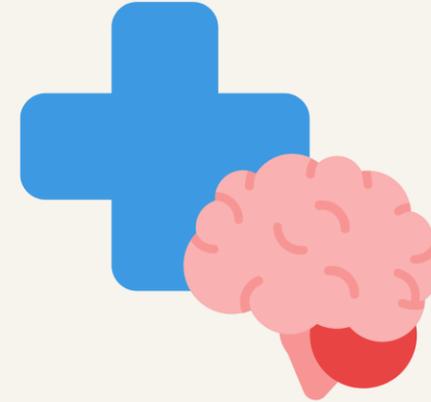
- Checking your own assumptions and biases
- Approaching with cultural humility and curiosity

Considerations for Engagement with Refugee Youth



Family & Social Dynamics

- Shifting family roles
- Conflict related to cultural expectations and acculturation
- Partner with youth and their parents/caregivers!



Trauma & Emotional Health

- Mistrust and fear may be common – part of our job is to create safe spaces and earn youth's trust
- Importance of privacy/confidentiality
- Avoiding re-traumatization

Stages of Development



Infancy and early
childhood
(0-5)



Middle
childhood
(6-11)



Early and late
adolescence
(12-24)



Refugee Children: Early Childhood (0-5)

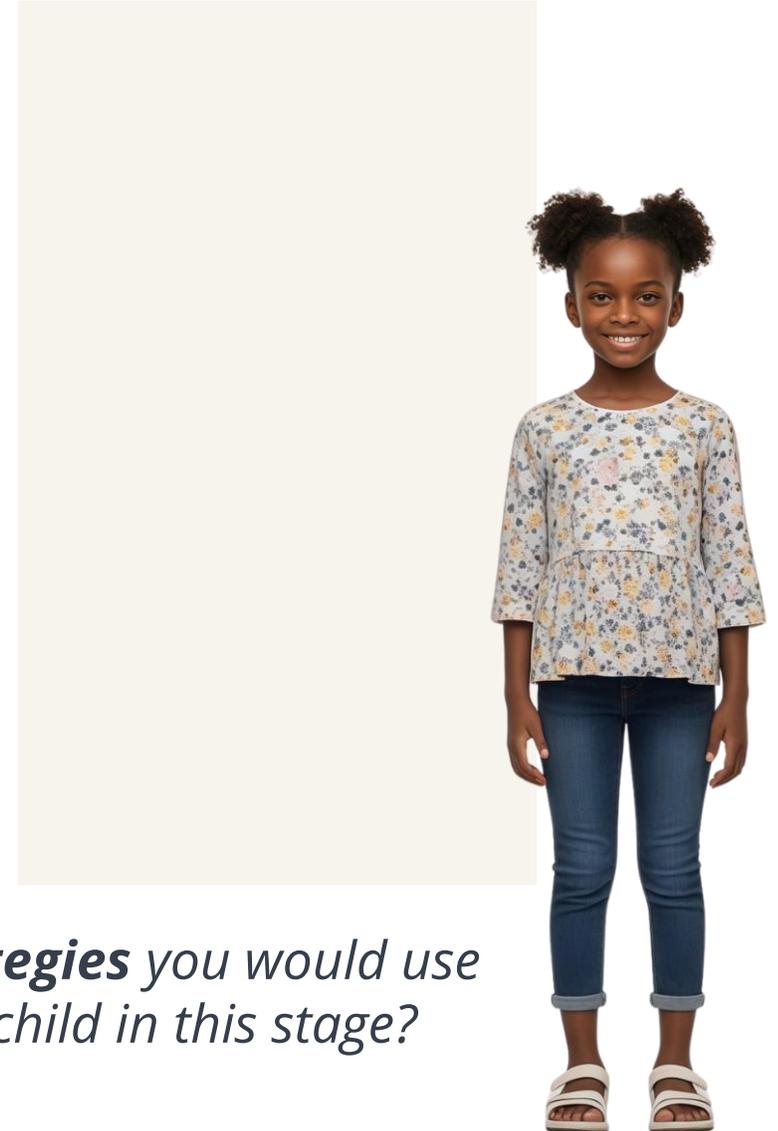


- Developing **language** but **unable to express** their thoughts and fears in words like older children
- Following simple **instructions**
- Increased **socialization**, learning through **play**
- Asserting **independence**
- Importance of bonding to primary caregiver – impact of disrupted early **attachment**

*Considering these characteristics, what are some **strategies** you would use for **engaging** with a refugee child in this stage?*

Refugee Children: Middle Childhood (6-11)

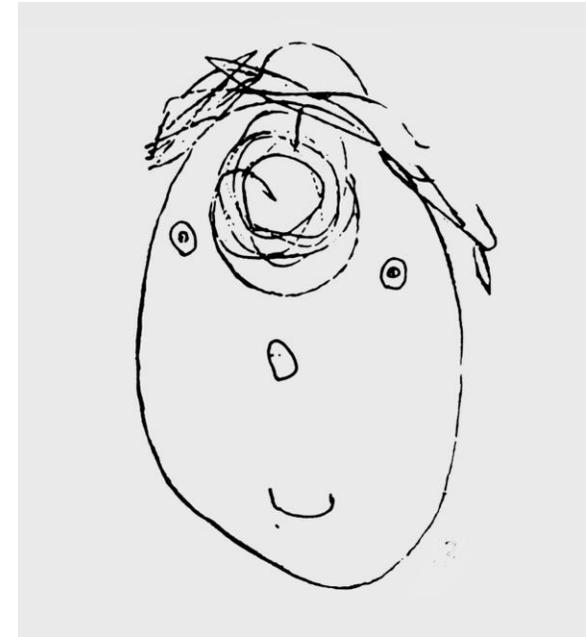
- Displacement **disrupts** the process of learning and socialization:
 - Development of **mental skills** (reading, math)
 - Describing experiences and talking about thoughts and **feelings**
 - Forming more complex **friendships**, understanding the perspectives of others
 - Satisfaction from their **efforts/abilities**
 - **Seeking approval** from adults; sensitive to criticism



*Considering these characteristics, what are some **strategies** you would use for **building rapport** and **engaging** with a refugee child in this stage?*

Engagement Strategies with Younger Children

- Get on the child's **level** – helps them feel **safer**
- Engage young children in **play**
 - Small cars, animal or people figurines
 - Drawing pad and markers/crayons
 - Squiggle game
 - Draw yourself activity
- Use **simple** language
- Consider **attachment** – creating safety, including the parent/caregiver

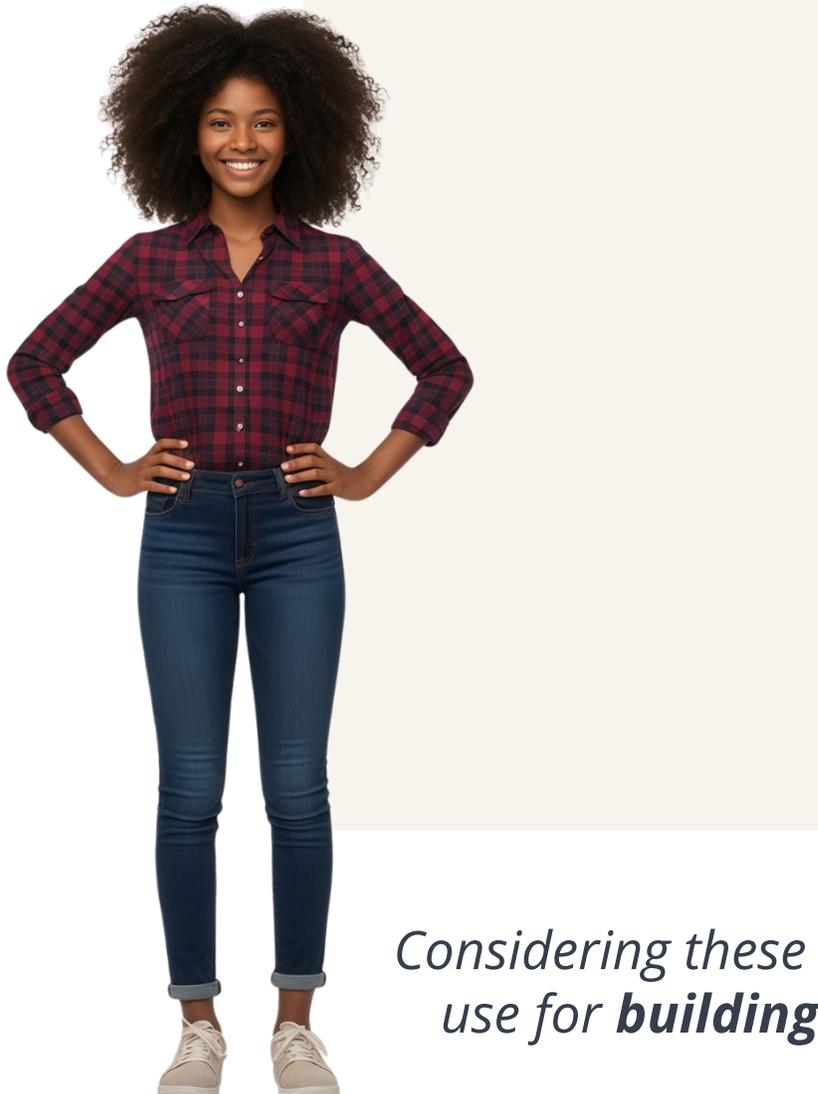


Engagement Strategies with Younger Children

- **Three wishes:**
 - If you had three wishes about your future, what would they be?
- **Magic wand:**
 - If you had a magic wand, what would you change about...
 - ...your family?
 - ...your school?
 - ...where you live?
 - ...yourself?



Refugee Youth: Adolescence (12-24)



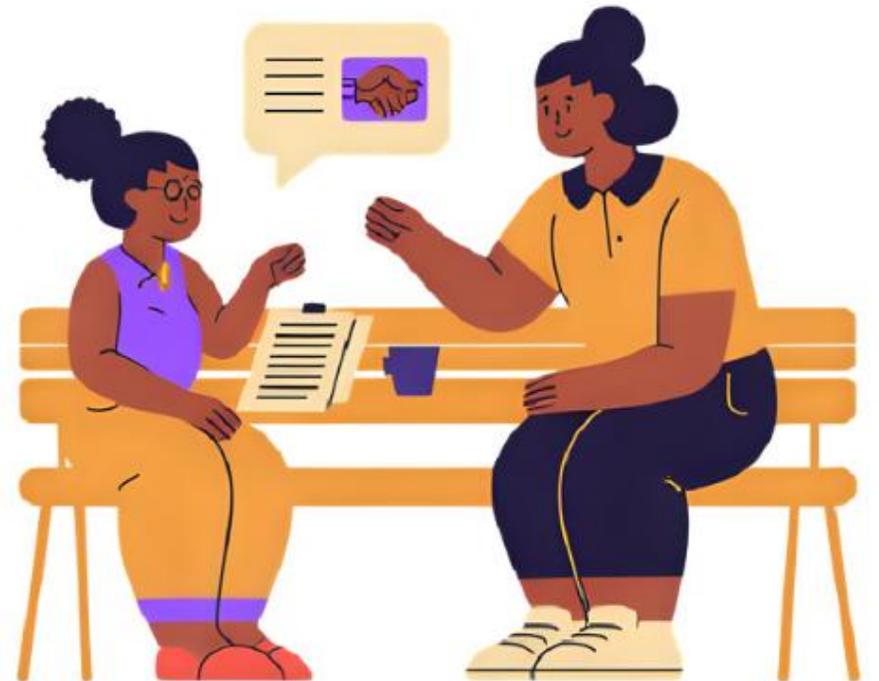
- Prioritizing peer relationships, seeking **social acceptance**
- Seeking **respect** and **independence**
- Developing own set of values/beliefs – **identity formation**

- Resettlement made more complex by **simultaneous changes** of:
 - Puberty
 - Developing sense of self
 - Peer relationships/group identity
 - “Renegotiation” of parent/child relationship

*Considering these characteristics, what are some **strategies** you would use for **building rapport** and **engaging** with a refugee adolescent?*

Engagement Strategies with Older Youth

- Set a tone of **partnership** from the start
- Take a **non-judgmental** approach, seek to understand
- Keep conversations **positive** and future-focused
- **Get to know** the youth's likes and dislikes
- Engage in activities that **foster the relationship** while maintaining healthy **boundaries**: drawing, playing cards, going for a walk, listening to music, talking about pop culture



Engagement Strategies with Older Youth



Treat young people as the experts of their own lives, with the ability to make their own decisions



Support autonomy:

- “I know you’re not asking me for advice and it’s your choice, but would you be open to my thoughts about that?”
- “Now that you are here in the U.S., what are your goals for the future? What matters most to you right now?”



Reflect and affirm:

- “Thanks for sharing that with me. You went through a lot to come to the U.S. and it sounds like life here is not what you expected.”
- “That was a difficult situation that you faced with your friend, but it sounds like you handled it really well.”

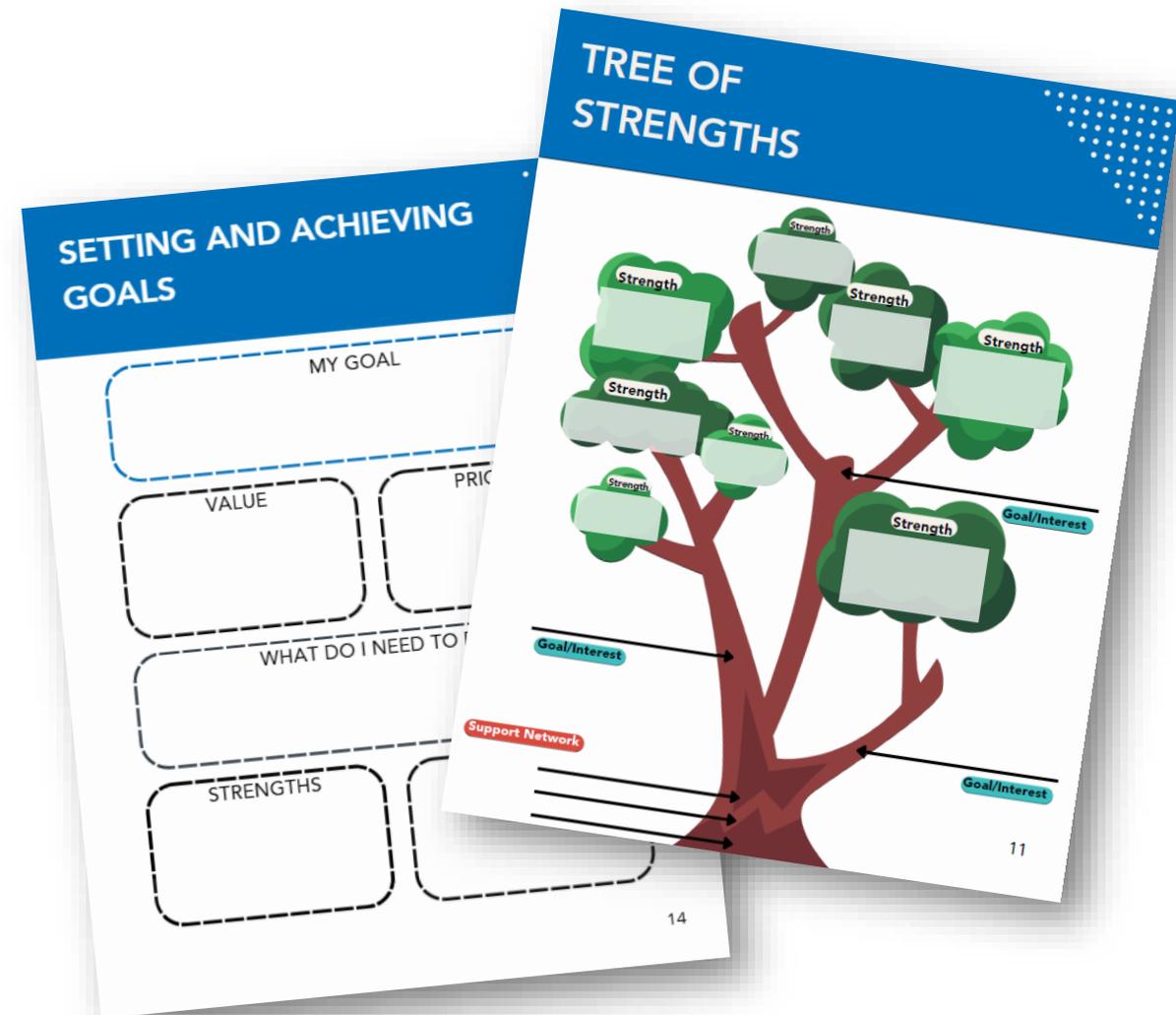
Exploring Goals with Older Youth

- **Include** the youth in the goal-setting process
 - Helps ensure they're invested
 - Makes the youth more likely to follow through
- Be **consistent**: if you work with a youth to set a goal, follow up with them about their progress!
- If a youth struggles with goal setting, help them **warm up** to it and relate the goal to their strengths



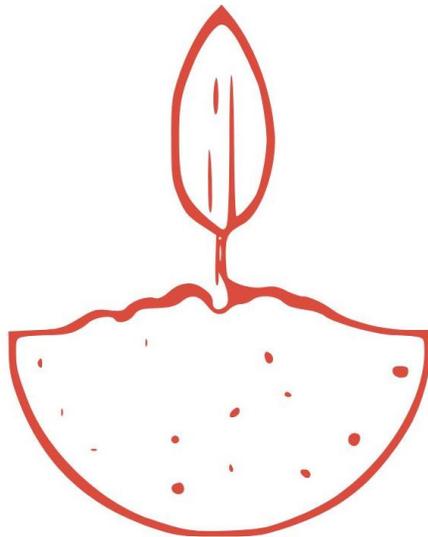
Exploring Goals with Refugee Youth

- Imagine/draw yourself 2 years from now...
5 years from now... 10 years from now...
- Write down a “top 10” list – things you want to do or try
- Write a personal mission statement:
 - My greatest passion is...
 - I’ve always wanted to...
 - My greatest abilities are...
 - What does the world need that could be met by my passion and abilities?

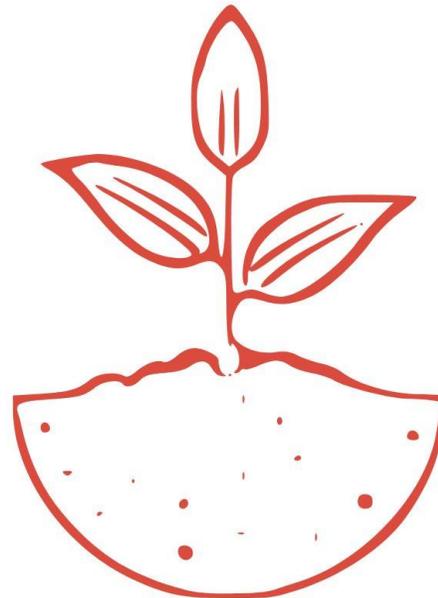


Fostering Resilience in Refugee Youth

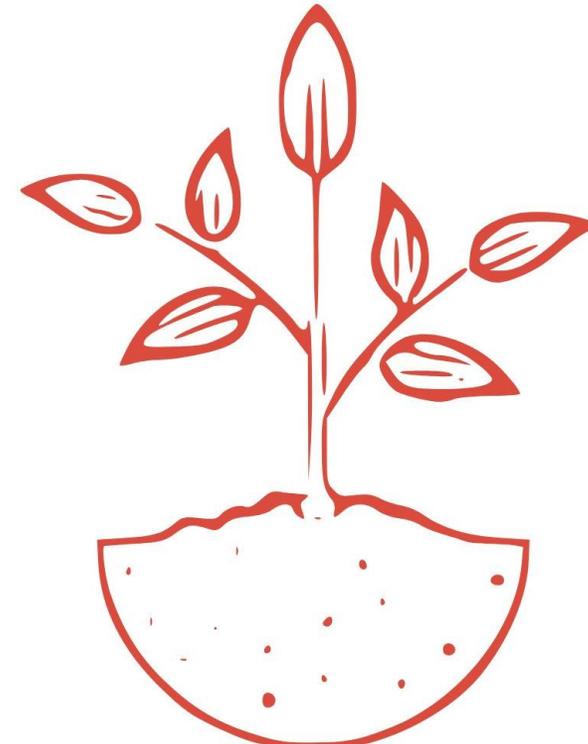
Youth-Centered Approach



**Adjusting our
own perceptions**

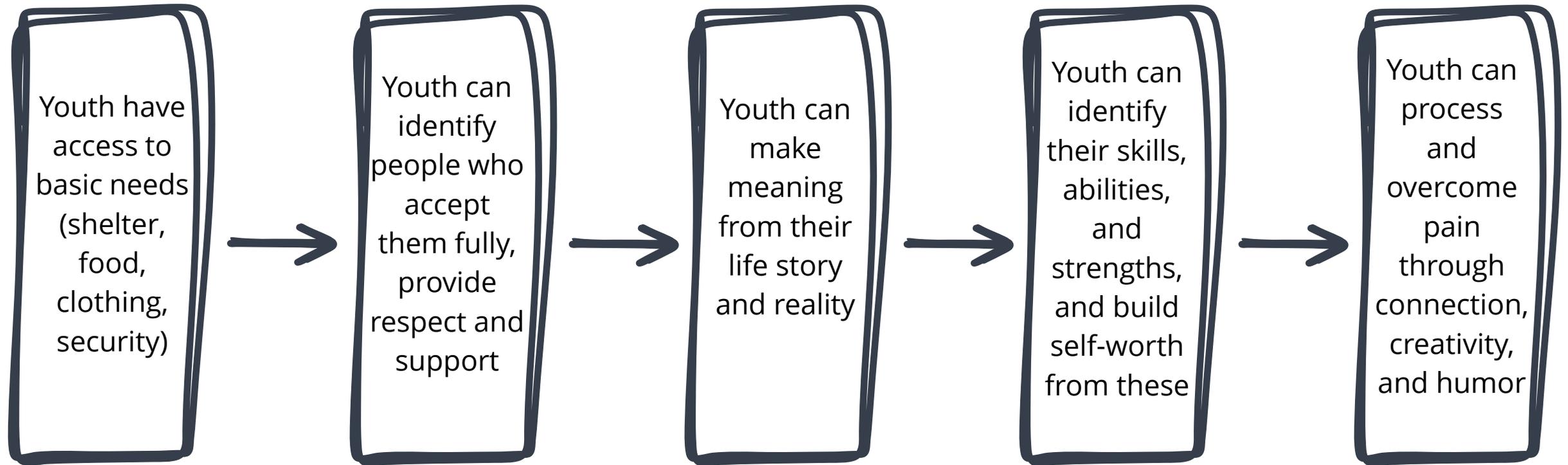


**Supporting the
youth's agency**



**Exploring tools and
resources together**

Building Blocks of Resilience





Share Your Strategies...

What are some **creative** ways you've helped refugee children and youth **explore** their strengths, resources, and abilities?



"I Have, I Am, I Can"



Fostering

Resilience

In everyday interactions, adults can help youth identify...



- Trusting and supportive relationships
- Places to feel safe and protected
- People who encourage them and value their autonomy
- Role models they aspire to be like
- Healthy, predictable routines, rules, and boundaries
- Services they have access to (i.e. education, health, welfare, security)



Resilience Reflection Worksheet:

"I Have, I Am, I Can"



I Have

Who or what helps you feel safe, supported, and valued?

Examples:

- I have my uncle who listens to me when I feel sad.
- I have my soccer team where I feel like I belong.
- I have my church community that fills me with hope.

Your turn:

I have _____

I have _____

I have _____

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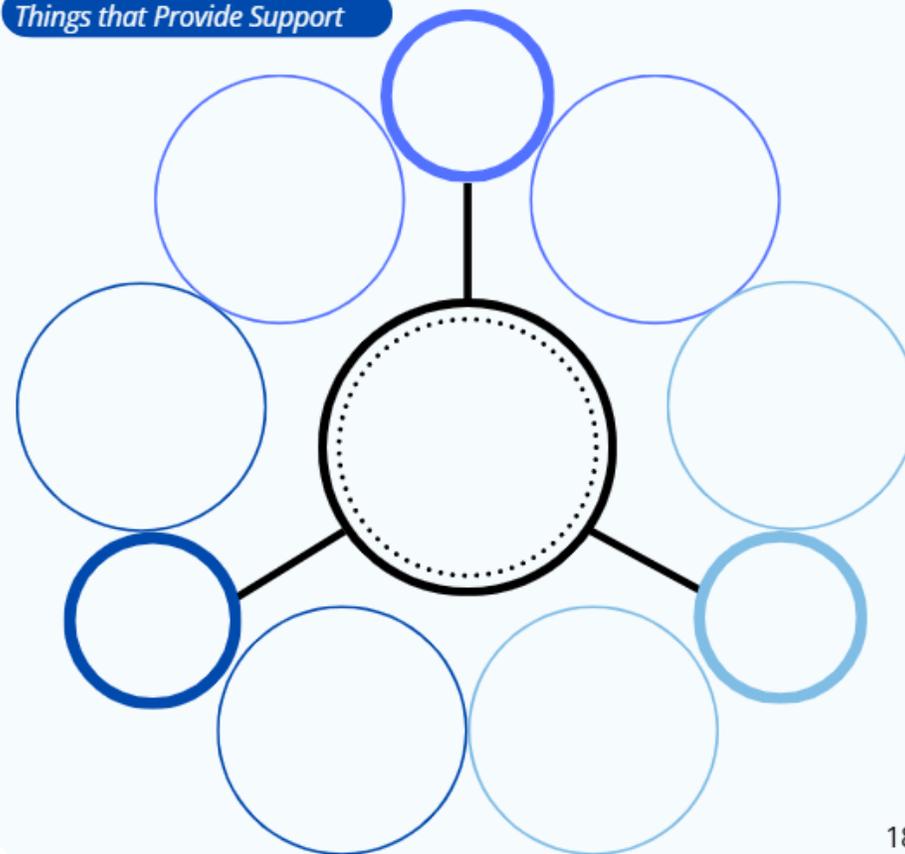
I Have Activity:

Map Your Community of Support— Draw yourself in the middle of a page, then draw or label people, places, and things around you that make you feel safe and supported.

Places of Support

People who provide support

Things that Provide Support



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Fostering Resilience

In everyday interactions, adults can help youth build respect for themselves and perceive themselves as people who are:

- Liked and appreciated by others
- Empathetic and concerned for others
- Respectful of oneself and others
- Proud of oneself and accomplishments
- Responsible for personal decisions and actions
- Filled with hope, faith, and trust



Resilience Reflection Worksheet: "I Have, I Am, I Can"

I Am

What are some good things about you?
What makes you special?

Examples:

- I am brave.
- I am a good friend.
- I am proud of my culture.

Choose some words that describe you:

Kind, Funny, Helpful, Smart, Creative, Strong, Friendly, Responsible

Or write your own:

I am _____

I am _____

I am _____

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I Am Activity:

Positive Affirmation Jar or Cards — Create a list of positive "I am" statements. Write each on a small card or slip of paper to keep in a jar, folder, or backpack. Pick one and read it whenever you're having a tough day.



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Fostering

Resilience

In everyday interactions, adults can help youth perceive themselves as people who can:

- Talk about their fears and concerns
- Solve problems and generate new ideas
- Manage feelings and impulses
- Ask for help when needed
- Find humor in life and use humor to reduce tension
- Accomplish goals and future plans



Resilience Reflection Worksheet: "I Have, I Am, I Can"



I Can

*Think of a difficult situation you've faced.
What are you capable of doing when you're
in that situation?*

Examples:

- When I'm having trouble in school, I can ask my teacher for help.
- When I'm feeling anxious, I can take deep breaths to stay calm.
- When I'm asked if I want to drink at the party, I can say I'm not interested.

Your turn:

When _____

I can _____

When _____

I can _____

I Can Activity:

Coping Skills Brainstorm — Name a difficult emotion you've been experiencing lately (sad, angry, frustrated, overwhelmed, lonely). What can you do to calm down, relieve stress, distract yourself, or make yourself feel better when you're experiencing that emotion?

Option: Pair this with the affirmations cards so you can add "I can" statements too.

Emotion: sadness/loneliness

- I can talk to a friend.
- I can listen to music.
- I can go for a walk.
- I can draw in my journal.
- I can play with my dog.
- I can play soccer.
- I can _____
- I can _____
- I can _____
- I can _____

Case Examples of Refugee Youth Resilience



Case Example #1: Jean-Raynald



17-year-old Jean-Raynald arrived in the United States with his mother after fleeing gang violence and insecurity in Haiti. Since arriving, his mother has fallen ill and Jean-Raynald has started working in a restaurant kitchen to cover their needs and send financial support back home to their family members. Despite being unable to enroll in school full-time due to financial responsibilities, Jean-Raynald started an adult ESL program and joined the band at his local church, where he quickly became a trusted peer and source of encouragement for other recently arrived Haitian youth.



Case Example #2: Farzana



Farzana is a 15-year-old girl who arrived in the U.S. with her family after fleeing Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power. After arriving in the United States, she struggled with feelings of loneliness and disconnection. One night, she had dinner with other newly arrived youth in her neighborhood and felt a sense of peace. Shortly after, Farzana began organizing weekend dinners for other newcomer youth in her community in hopes of providing them with the same sense of peace she felt. These gatherings provided a safe space for young people to share meals, talk about their journeys, and offer emotional support. Farzana is now known in her neighborhood for regularly checking in on others, connecting youth with resources, and being the go-to person for community connection.

A photograph of three young boys sitting at a desk in a classroom, looking at books and papers. One boy in the center is smiling and pointing at a book. The other two boys are looking at their own papers.

Case Example #3: Kweli

Kweli, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is a 12-year-old boy who arrived in the United States after spending four years in a refugee camp in Angola. He is one of seven children, with some siblings remaining abroad and others resettled in the U.S. with him and their mother. Recently arrived in a new country, Kweli focused his energy on learning English by watching YouTube videos and reading. Despite his success at adapting to school, he continues experiencing ongoing grief from the separation from his family and cultural adjustment. Rather than his grief having a paralyzing effect on him, it has ignited a sense of purpose for Kweli.

Building a Network of Support



Social support can include:

- Strong family/caregiver relationships
- Positive peer relationships
- Community supports and services

Role of providers:

- Build parent/caregiver capacity; support family bonding, communication, conflict resolution
- Help youth identify trusted adults and peers
- Connect youth to trusted organizations and collaborate across disciplines (school, resettlement, mental health providers, legal, faith-based organizations, and others) to create a network of care to support the youth



Discussion & Reflection: Key Takeaways

Share **one strategy or new piece of information** that you are taking away from this training that you will implement to support a refugee youth/family you are currently working with.



- [USCRI Refugee Youth Resource Center **Toolkit for Providers: Strategies to Support Refugee Youth Engagement and Resilience**](#)
- [Switchboard](#)
 - [Fostering Resilience for Refugee Students](#)
 - [Demystifying Strengths-Based Services: Fostering Refugees' Resilience in Resettlement](#)
- [Youth Development Resources \(BRYCS\)](#)
- [Resilient Migration: Tools for the Emotional Rescue of Migrant Children and Adolescents \(UNICEF\)](#)
- [Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Toolkit \(Boston Children's Hospital\)](#)
- [A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit \(Edith Grotberg, PhD, The International Resilience Project\)](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Case Management with Foreign National Children and Youth Survivors of Trafficking \(USCRI\)](#)
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

Thank you!

Contact Us:

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