

USCRI Refugee Youth Resource Center

Toolkit for Providers: Strategies and Activities to Support Refugee Youth Engagement and Resilience



About USCRI

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization dedicated to addressing the needs and rights of refugees and immigrants. Our vision is for a world where immigrants, refugees, and uprooted people will live dignified lives with their rights respected and protected in communities of opportunity. Visit www.refugees.org for more information.

Toolkit Overview

This toolkit is intended for refugee-serving agencies working with children and youth, including ORR-funded refugee resettlement agencies, state refugee programs, and other ethnic- and community-based organizations, as well as state and community agencies not funded by ORR that provide services to refugee children, youth, and their families, such as state and local child welfare agencies, schools, and other providers.

Refugee youth bring with them a wealth of strengths and cultural richness that can positively contribute to their new communities. The activities in this toolkit are designed to build from youth's existing strengths to help foster continued confidence, self-esteem, and personal growth. By engaging in these activities, providers can help refugee children and youth feel seen, supported, and empowered as they navigate new environments and build meaningful connections with others.

Many of the activities and handouts in this toolkit can be adapted for use with refugee youth of varying ages, from young children to adolescents. Others (such as the "Setting and Achieving Goals" worksheet) are more appropriate for older children and teens. The activities in this toolkit may be used in any order, but we encourage providers to start with activities to get to know the youth first (identifying strengths, needs, and existing resources first), followed by the goal-setting and resilience-building activities.

The production of this material was supported by Grant #90RB0054 from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) and do not necessarily represent the official views of ACF.

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Refugee youth bring strength, resilience, and unique challenges during the resettlement experience. Providers working with refugee children and youth play a critical role in supporting their adjustment and well-being. Keep these key considerations in mind:

Language & Communication

- Youth may have limited English proficiency or interrupted schooling.
- Be sure to use qualified interpreters and understand that using an interpreter can make it more challenging to establish rapport and trust.
- Use clear, simple language, and avoid idioms or slang. Ask questions to ensure the youth's understanding.
- Allow time and space for youth to develop trust and confidence when communicating with you.

Cultural Norms & Expression

- Refugee youth may have different cultural norms around communication, social behavior, and emotional expression, as well as different values related to individualism vs. collectivism, education, family roles, and respect for authority.
- Be aware of how your own cultural assumptions or biases may shape your interpretation of a youth's responses and behaviors. Take steps to learn about the youth's culture from those familiar with it, including the youth themselves.

Family & Social Dynamics

- Family roles may shift during the resettlement process, with youth often taking on adult responsibilities and serving as interpreters or systems navigators.
- Youth tend to acculturate faster than their parents, often resulting in conflicts and tension at home related to the new culture.
- Partner with youth and their caregivers to set expectations together regarding school, household responsibilities, behavior at home and outside of the home, etc. – youth who have a say will be more willing to follow through.



Trauma & Emotional Health

- Refugee youth have experienced forced displacement, violence, loss, and other types of trauma which can impact their adjustment, mental health, and sense of safety.
- Mistrust, fear, and uncertainty may be common, even after resettlement. It is part of our job as providers to create safe spaces and earn the youth's trust.
- Use trauma-informed approaches that prioritize safety, choice, and empowerment.
- Privacy and confidentiality are critical – be open and transparent with youth about your role and any sharing of information.
- Approach conversations and education on the topic of mental health with sensitivity, understanding that some cultures discourage open discussion of mental health.
- Provide support without forcing the youth to share past experiences which could be re-traumatizing for them.

Strengths & Protective Factors

- A strengths-based approach focuses on youth's strengths, resources, capabilities, and future goals, not just on needs or deficits.
- Protective factors are things in a youth's personal life, environment, social relationships, culture, or personality that can help foster resilience, such as:
 - Supportive families and communities
 - Cultural identity and pride
 - Spirituality or faith-based practices
 - Education and supportive school environments
 - Social connections and peer support
 - Personal characteristics such as perseverance and empathy

Best Practices

- Approach all interactions with cultural humility and curiosity.
- Build trust through consistency, transparency, and actions – not just words.
- Create safe, welcoming spaces that honor youth's backgrounds and experiences.
- Collaborate with families, schools, and community partners to ensure holistic support.

By recognizing the unique experiences of refugee youth and building on their strengths, providers can help create safe, empowering relationships and environments where youth can grow and thrive.

Get on the child's level:

Physically positioning yourself at the child's height (by kneeling or sitting) can improve connection and communication, making young children feel safer and more engaged.

Engage young children in play to help them feel more comfortable:

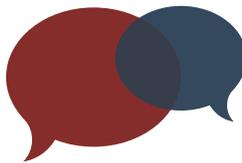
- Use small cars, animal or people figurines.
- Provide a drawing pad and markers or crayons.



Communication tips:

- Use short, simple sentences that include the child's own words (for example, how they refer to family members).
- Rephrase questions the child doesn't understand.
- Avoid rapid-fire questions – allow time to comment, ask the child to elaborate, or simply acknowledge their response.
- Some young children may not feel comfortable meeting without their parent or caregiver present – and that's okay!

Conversation starters:



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?



Building Trust and Empowering Conversations

- Set a tone of partnership from the start.
- Ask open-ended questions.
 - For example: “What is your favorite part about school?” instead of: “Do you like school?”
- Take a non-judgmental approach and seek to understand.
- Keep conversations positive and future-focused.
- Engage in activities that foster the relationship while maintaining healthy boundaries, such as: drawing, playing cards, going for a walk, listening to music, or even talking about popular culture to find commonality and connection.
- Get to know the youth’s likes and dislikes, the culture they are coming from, and the aspects of their culture that they are missing or grieving the most.
- Treat young people as the experts of their own lives, with the ability to make their own decisions. Support the youth’s 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?”

Reflections and Affirmations

- “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.”



Relationships Flower Activity*

Activity

*This worksheet is available in Arabic, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Pashto, Spanish, and Ukrainian at refugees.org.

Healthy relationships are built on boundaries, trust, respect, and open communication. Talk with youth to define each of these concepts, keeping cultural differences in mind.

- **Boundaries** help us understand what feels safe vs. uncomfortable.
- **Trust** means feeling safe with someone who won't hurt you – it's built over time but can be easily broken.
- **Respect** is recognizing and valuing others for who they are.
- Open, honest **communication** helps us express our needs and build connection.

Activity Guide

Help guide the youth to complete the worksheet by doing the following:

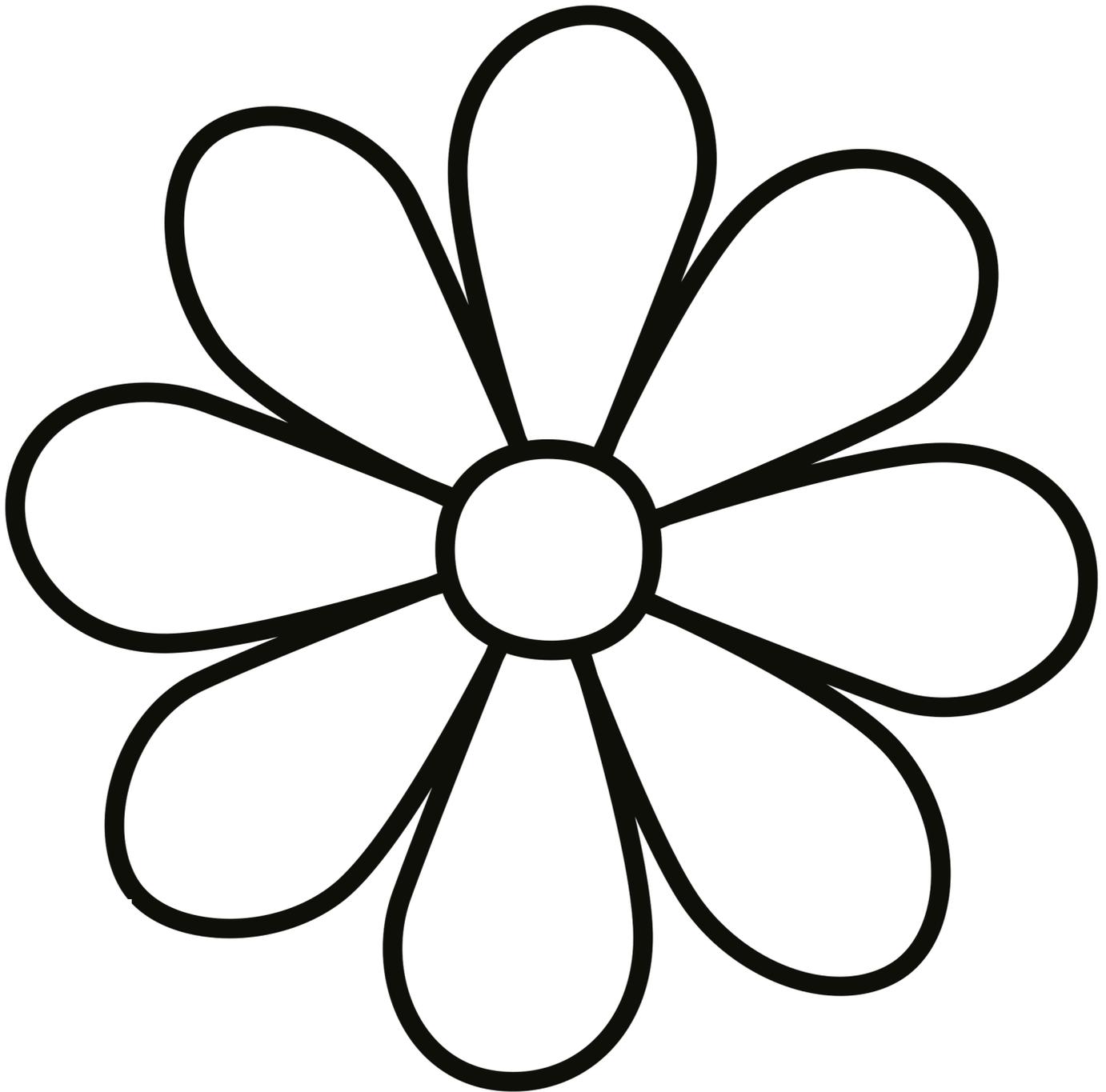
1. Write their name in the center of the flower.
2. Think of the special people in their life.
3. In each petal, write the name of a person with whom they have a meaningful relationship and why they consider the relationship to be meaningful.
4. Color or decorate their flower if they wish.

Adaptations

Younger children or those with limited English or writing skills can draw pictures in the petals instead of writing.



RELATIONSHIPS FLOWER



Tree of Strengths Activity*

Activity

*This worksheet is available in Arabic, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Pashto, Spanish, and Ukrainian at [refugees.org](https://www.refugees.org).

Each young person carries unique strengths, dreams, and relationships that shape who they are.

- **Support networks** remind us we're not alone – family, friends, and community members can all play a role in supporting us.
- **Goals and interests** give us direction and motivation, whether they're big dreams or everyday passions.
- **Strengths** are the personal qualities that make us unique and capable of overcoming challenges.

Activity Guide

Help the youth complete each part of the tree.

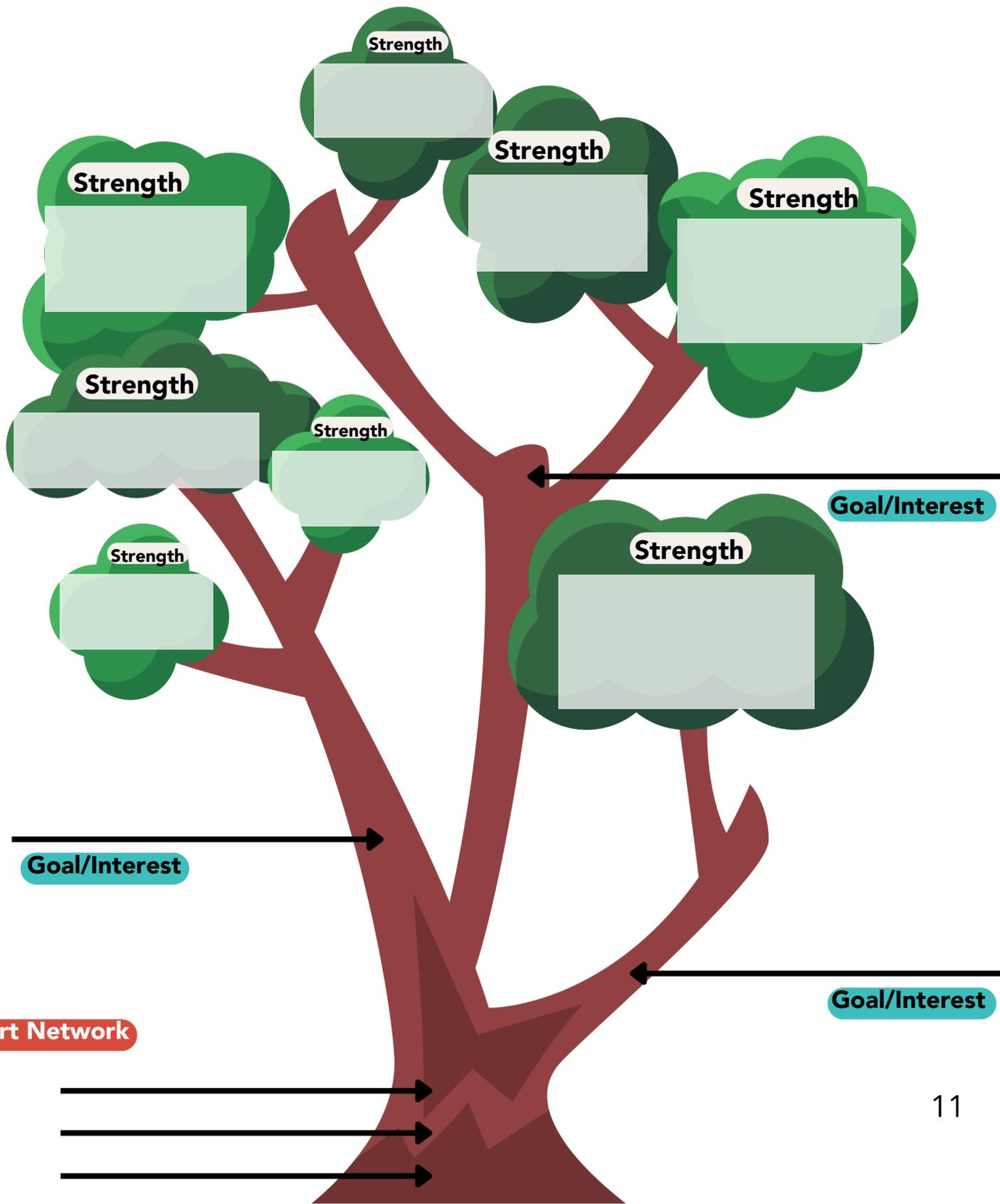
- **Trunk** – List people in their support network (e.g., family, caregivers, friends, community members).
- **Branches** – Identify their goals and/or interests. These can be specific (like a desired career path) or more general (like hobbies or subjects they enjoy).
- **Leaves** – Name their personal strengths. If the youth is unsure of their own strengths, offer examples based on what you've observed.

Adaptations

For older youth and teens, after completing the tree, discuss the following:

- How can your interests and strengths shape your education or career goals?
- How can your support network and strengths help you reach those goals?
- Which goal or interest is most important to you right now? Where do you want to start?

TREE OF STRENGTHS



Goal-Setting Tips

Include the youth in the goal-setting process. This helps ensure they're invested, making the youth more motivated to follow through.

- Follow up consistently with the youth by checking in on their progress and providing support where needed.
- If goal-setting feels overwhelming for the youth, start small. Ask them to choose a "goal for the week" based on one of their strengths.

Exploring Goals and Aspirations

Try these activities with youth:

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



Setting and Achieving Goals Activity*

Activity

*This worksheet is available in Arabic, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Pashto, Spanish, and Ukrainian at [refugees.org](https://www.refugees.org).

Help youth reflect on their goals and what matters most to them by guiding them through the following steps:

1. Identify a SMART Goal

- A goal is something we hope to accomplish. Help the youth choose a goal that is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound.
- They can write or draw their goal.

2. Define the Priority

- A priority is something we've decided is important and deserves our attention.
- Ask: What made you choose this goal?

3. Explore the Underlying Value

- A value is a belief or principle that guides our actions.
- Examples: honesty, integrity, reliability, dedication to family or friends, etc.
- Ask: Why does this goal matter to you?

4. List the Steps

- Break the goal into small, manageable steps.
- Ask: What do you need to do to reach your goal?

5. Identify Strengths

- Help the youth name personal strengths they can use to achieve their goal.
- If they're unsure, offer examples based on what you've observed.

6. Name Support People

- Who can help them along the way? This might include family, friends, mentors, or community members.

Adaptation: Create a Vision Board

Youth can use drawings, magazine clippings, or handwritten words to create a visual representation of their goals and dreams.

SETTING AND ACHIEVING GOALS



MY GOAL

VALUE

PRIORITY

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

STRENGTHS

SUPPORT

*These question prompts are available in Arabic, Dari, English, French, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Pashto, Spanish, and Ukrainian at refugees.org.

Self-Reflection and Personal Growth

Reflection is a powerful tool for helping youth build self-awareness, confidence, and emotional resilience. These prompts are designed to encourage thoughtful conversations or journaling, giving youth space to explore their identity, values, and experiences in a safe and supportive way.

You can read the Learning Journal prompts on the following page aloud to spark a discussion with the youth, or offer them as journaling prompts for private reflection.

Reflection Prompts

- Name three qualities you love about yourself.
- How do you take care of yourself when you feel scared or stressed?
- Describe a time when you did something you were afraid to try.
- What is your greatest strength? What would you like to improve about yourself?
- Describe a conflict you had with someone. How did you handle it and would you do anything differently?
- Describe a time you resisted negative peer pressure. How did you do it?
- Describe a time you misjudged someone who was different from you. What did you learn?

The “I Have, I Am, I Can” model ([Grotberg, The International Resilience Project](#)) is a strengths-based approach that supports resilience by helping youth recognize the resources, qualities, and capabilities they already possess.

- **I Have** refers to the people and resources in their life that offer support and safety – such as family, friends, mentors, community programs, and places the youth feels safe.
- **I Am** focuses on the youth’s strengths and positive qualities that shape who they are, like kindness, courage, curiosity, or determination.
- **I Can** highlights the skills they use to navigate challenges, such as asking for help, setting goals, or managing emotions.

By helping youth explore these three areas, providers can help build confidence, better understand themselves, and feel empowered to face challenges and pursue their goals.

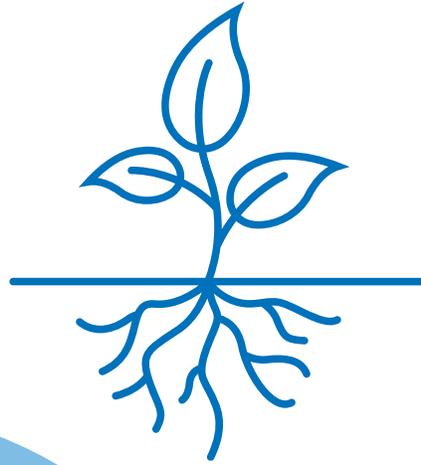
Use the worksheets on the following pages to help youth to reflect on their own personal resilience.

I have
I am
I can



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 _____

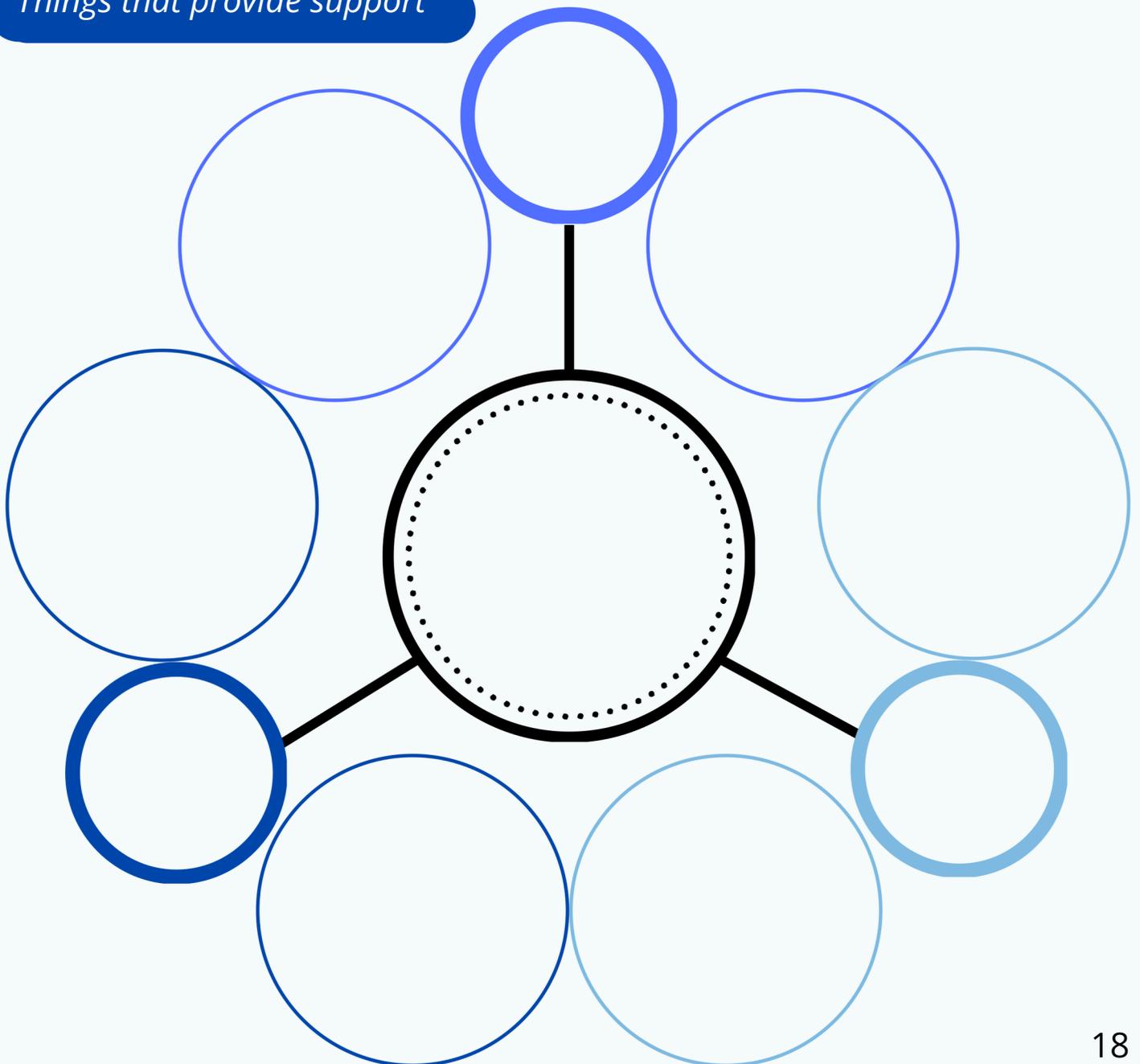
I Have Activity:

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

Places of support

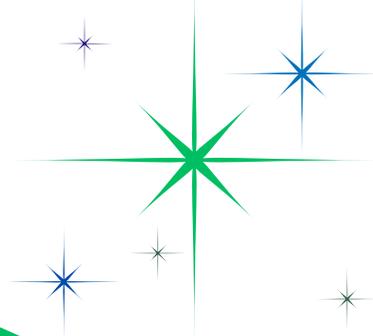
People who provide support

Things that provide support



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 _____

I Am Activity:

Positive Affirmation Jar or Cards — Create a list of positive “I am” statements. Write each one 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.



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

Resources

- Refugee Youth Resource Center **Toolkit for Providers: Strategies to Support Refugee Youth Engagement and Resilience** (USCRI)
 - Includes selected worksheets in Arabic, Dari, French, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, Pashto, Spanish, and Ukrainian
- 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 Trauma (NCTSN)
- 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)