8.3: Immigrant and Refugee Populations

An immigrant is a person who has been granted permission by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to reside permanently in the United States as a Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR). They are eligible to apply for citizenship after five years. In general, immigrants come to the U.S. voluntarily, while refugees are forced to leave their homeland, often with little time for preparation. Some people entering the U.S. are considered undocumented immigrants (those who enter the country without invitation or application; or who enter legally as a visitor, student, or temporary employee, and stay after their visa expires). In addition, some groups are awarded a temporary status (such as “Temporary Protected Status”) by USCIS due to extraordinary and temporary conditions in designated countries that would threaten personal safety. This type of status can be terminated at any time, and it therefore provides an uncertain future to those it covers.

Refugees are a special class of immigrants who have fled their countries of nationality and have been determined unable or unwilling to return to their countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees are screened and approved for resettlement to the United States by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Refugee migration may involve a long and difficult journey, long waits in refugee camps or other countries, extreme deprivation, and/or physical and emotional trauma, including torture. Asylees are approved according to similar criteria, but apply for asylum after they arrive in the United States.
In absolute numbers, the United States has a larger immigrant population than any other country, with 47 million immigrants as of 2015.

What Programs Can Do

For refugee and immigrant children and youth, it is important to help them nurture a strong and positive connection to their ethnic heritage, to maintain their home language, and to develop a positive bicultural identity as Americans. This helps to keep families strong and thereby provides the support that children need to succeed in this country.

Refugee and immigrant families come to the United States with a wealth of parenting strengths, drawing on culture, tradition, and family experience. Like most parents in the U.S. they tend to be responsible and nurturing, and have often sacrificed tremendously to provide their children with an opportunity for safety and success in this new country. At the same time, families that are new to the U.S. have often experienced incredible loss and trauma, including the loss of extended family members, community, and homeland, and they must adapt to new traditions and lifestyles that are often at odds with their own beliefs and practices. Refugee and immigrant families also must overcome cultural, language, and practical barriers to learn about and access the community services that are available to them as having newly arrived to our country.

It is important for early childhood education programs to use family- and community-centered, strengths-based approaches with refugees and immigrants. This helps to maximize family and community input and build upon cultural assets in order to successfully engage and serve families who have newly arrived in the U.S.

All providers can support families in identifying high quality early care and education options that can support a child’s development and strengthen school readiness. Understanding the opportunities, activities, and options for family engagement can help families form meaningful home-school partnerships that benefit the entire family, program and community.

Learning more about families is an important part of creating a relationship and gaining valuable information about a child’s culture. Consider using these or similar conversation starters:
• Describe what school was like in your country of origin.
• Who cared for your child when you needed support in your country of origin?
• How do you currently communicate and partner with staff at your child's school?
• What are some ways staff can learn more about your perspectives and needs?

Some cultural considerations that you should remember as you help families navigate an unfamiliar system of early
childhood education:

• Many families are most comfortable keeping young children at home with a parent, relative, or friend, especially with
families from the same cultural background. Some refugee families using in-home childcare providers may not be
aware of licensing requirements and restrictions.
• Some cultures may expect that the mother’s primary role is taking care of children and the home. However, both
parents may need to find work due to financial need, or due to resettlement program requirements.
• Families with limited English skills are likely to have difficulty gathering information about the varied early care and
education options and may rely on word of mouth or recommendations from others within their ethnic or religious
community.
• Families may seek reassurance that early care and education providers understand and respect their family’s
religion and will not inadvertently violate the family’s religious practices (e.g., Muslim children abstaining from pork
products).
• Families of a child with a disability may not be aware of the legal educational requirements, learning possibilities,
and school options for children with disabilities.
• Hiring staff from the same culture and language as families and providing opportunities for families from the same
cultural or linguistic backgrounds to connect may encourage family engagement and mutual support. However, it is
important to identify any areas of discrimination or political conflict that program staff or families from the same
region may have experienced.
• Some cultures show respect for teachers by not being intrusive and interfering with their job (e.g., not offering
suggestions or sharing negative opinions). Families may not know the expectations for family engagement in school
and their respect may look like lack of interest.
• Home-based programs may be an effective service model for some families that are less comfortable with center-
based programming, or those who do not drive. Home visits can help to build trust and relationships for future
center-based enrollment.

As you support the families, here are some valuable things that you can share with families about family engagement
and the central role that families have in early childhood education programs:

• Early care and education plays a vital role in providing the environment and support to prepare children for success
in school and in life. The quality of the relationships and experiences provided has long-term effects on their
development, capacity to learn, and ability to regulate emotions.
• Family engagement has a positive impact on children’s learning and skill development. Families and staff are
encouraged to engage in open communication and develop meaningful relationships.
• To ensure responsive engagement, it is important for staff to build trusting relationships with families over time.
Through these relationships, staff can learn about family’s culture, values, and beliefs (e.g., health and nutrition
practices, child rearing practices, home language, family composition, cultural celebrations, etc.).
• Families can offer their knowledge, skills, culture, and language by participating in decision-making classroom, and
community events, at parent-teacher conferences, and as a volunteer in the program.
• Translation and interpretation services can support family engagement. This includes face-to-face experiences e.g.,
meetings and events, as well as written communication from the program and are essential to engage families who
staff cannot speak or communicate with directly.

• The frequency of family engagement opportunities will vary from program to program. Programs will often meet with families at the time of enrollment to share information, to discuss a family’s interest and ability to participate, and to consider cultural and linguistic needs or preferences.

• In the U.S., all children, including children with disabilities, are required to start attending school when they reach their state’s compulsory school attendance age (generally between 5 and 7 years of age but dependent upon each state’s laws). [105]

When integrating immigrant and refugee families into the community, celebrate cultural diversity. Work to create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that respects families and engages them in meaningful ways. [106]