

Tips for Communicating: Meeting with Parents or Caregivers with Refugee Backgrounds

Before you begin:	
	Reflect upon the best way of communicating this information. Is it best to meet in person? With a translator? With a member of the community as support?
	Be sensitive to your “position of authority.” Remember that the person you are meeting may have been hurt by former authority figures. Consider seating that is on the same level, building rapport before rushing into conversations, making sure that the environment is comfortable, free from distractions or surprises, etc.
	Time. Build in more time than you think might be necessary for the interaction.
	Stay calm. Understand that your emotional state will communicate messages of danger or safety. These messages are easier to pick up than English conversation, and very apparent for people who are sensitive to possible threat. Avoid feeling rushed or anxious. Take enough time to start in a calm state and maintain a calm state.
	Resilience. Remember that the person in front of you is resilient in ways that we yet do not know. Avoid confusing resilience with current circumstance, or intelligence with English language skills.
	The Value of School. Remember the value that refugee families often place on school as “the way to get a better life.” Tap into the family’s strengths around education (e.g., economic mobility, hope for the future).
	Be explicit. Is the reason for the meeting clear? Does the parent or caregiver have an understanding of the parent role in schooling (e.g., come to meetings, support homework activities, ask questions)?
	Consider “switching heads.” Imagine yourself in the same position in another country. What would help you in this situation?
During the interaction:	
	Speak slowly . Pitch of voice, rhythm, rate of speech, emphasis and emotions vary among cultures.
	Speak clearly .
	Vocabulary: Keep your vocabulary and sentences direct and simple. If using an interpreter, pause every 8-10 seconds to allow the translator to translate. If using an interpreter, address communication to the family.
	Avoid the use of metaphors, jargon, popular sayings or complicated terminology.
	Use examples to illustrate your point.
	Allow time for a response.
	Use visuals (diagrams, photographs, etc.) whenever possible. Link verbal and visual cues.
	Write down key information (points, details) and give the participants a copy.
	Acknowledge and support the other person’s efforts to communicate.
	Check for comprehension frequently. Ask, “What did you understand me to say?” “Tell me, please, what I said?” “What does that mean to you?”
	Repeat and paraphrase patiently.
	Understand that smiling can be agreement or apprehension or politeness.
	Understand that silence can be non-acceptance or disapproval or agreement.
	Avoid making assumptions about people and resist stereotyping.
	Make sessions short and concise . Communicating across languages is tiring.
	Be patient.
	Invite exchange of cross-cultural information . For example say “I am interested to know more about how you view this in your family?” “Who would you like to be part of this process?” “What do you think are the reasons for this?” “Do you agree with the recommendations or the plan?”
	Support follow up. Provide an easy to ready list of the follow-up activities agreed upon. Provide contact information.

- Adapted from BC Ministry of Education (2009). Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools” citing Settlement Workers in Schools Module on Cross-Cultural Communication,” BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (date unknown) pp. 14-16..