



# Helping Families Who Are Refugees Access Early Childhood Services

## Guidance for Refugee Service Providers

Publicly funded early childhood services can support refugee families by helping children build a strong foundation and families thrive as they resettle in a new country. However, families who are refugees or immigrants may be less likely to enroll their children in early childhood services compared with other eligible families. This guide aims to familiarize refugee service providers with early childhood services accessible to families who are refugees, common barriers to participation, and strategies to enhance family access. This content was developed by the Urban Institute in collaboration with Switchboard.

### Benefits of Early Childhood Services

Participation in early childhood services has both short- and long-term benefits. These services can

- support dual-language learners' school readiness,
- promote social-emotional development,
- help families identify and address developmental delays and disabilities,
- build resilience and nurturing relationships, and
- connect families to other comprehensive services that enhance well-being.



**High-quality early childhood services benefit children in refugee families because they learn skills and gain resources that promote their long-term well-being, health, and achievement.**

## What Are Early Childhood Services?

Early childhood refers to the period **from birth through age 5** when children undergo rapid physical, cognitive, and social development. Because of rapid brain development, experiences during this period can affect children for better or worse. High-quality services that support children and caregivers during early childhood can [impact long-term outcomes more cost-effectively than at other life stages](#). Early childhood services can set a strong developmental foundation and provide caregivers with needed resources and time to pursue educational, training, or work opportunities. **You can enhance your case management activities by supporting families in accessing culturally responsive early childhood services.**

In this guide, we focus on three types of services:

- **child care and early education,**
- **early intervention and preschool special education, and**
- **maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting.**

Visit [Find Child Care](#) to learn about the child care and early education options available in your community, including the financial assistance available.

## Child Care and Early Education

Children who are refugees are typically eligible to receive free or reduced-price child care and early education services. Providers offer these services in a variety of settings:

- **Head Start and Early Head Start,**
- **child care centers,**
- **child care homes, and**
- **preschool programs.**

Cost may vary across each state and depend on eligibility criteria. For example, **eligible families can receive free child care and early education through Head Start and Early Head Start. Some states, counties, or cities offer free or low-cost public preschool** that can be part time or full time. Families can also apply for [child care financial assistance that](#)

[comes in the form of vouchers, certificates, or subsidies](#), depending on the state, to access child care programs in their community. This assistance can **reduce or eliminate families' child care and early education costs.**

## The Quality of Child Care and Early Education Matters

Programs often report a “[Quality Rating](#)” or accreditation that indicates their level of performance on key features of quality. They may also share with you how they demonstrate quality and support for their culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

[Checklists](#) can support families with choosing high-quality child care. They can be useful when aligned with caregivers' goals for their child while in care.

**High-quality programs are linked with [greater short- and long-term outcomes](#):**

### Short-Term Outcomes

Compared with children not in high-quality early childhood education, children in high-quality care show greater gains in

- school readiness,
- language/verbal comprehension, and
- social-emotional development, including self-regulation.

These benefits continue to accrue with extended time in high-quality care associated with greater gains.

### Long-Term Outcomes

Compared with children who did not participate in high-quality early childhood services, children from families with low incomes who participated in high-quality early childhood services

- had higher academic achievement,
- were more likely to finish high school and attend college,
- were less likely to be arrested or involved with the juvenile justice system,
- had greater adult earnings, and
- relied less on public assistance.

## Benefits of Early Childhood Enrollment

Enrollment in high-quality child care and early education can bring many benefits, including

- **developing early language skills**, especially as a dual-language-learner;
- **promoting early academic skills**, such as reading and math; and
- **nurturing social-emotional development**, including self-control and social skills.

**Children in families with low incomes and children who are dual-language learners experience above-average benefits from high-quality child care and early education.**

## Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education

Children who are refugees and meet their state's eligibility criteria for a developmental delay or disability can receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [Part C \(0–3\)](#) or [Part B \(3–5\)](#).

- Children under age 3 receive **early intervention** services through IDEA Part C.
- Children ages 3 and older receive **preschool special education** through IDEA Part B.

With the parent's/guardian's consent, these services address a [range of possible developmental areas](#) where young children may be struggling or behind the age in which certain skills would be expected to develop in the following categories:

- **cognitive development (e.g., learning);**
- **physical development (e.g., motor skills);**
- **communication development (e.g., talking);**
- **social-emotional development (e.g., playing); and**
- **adaptive development (e.g., dressing independently).**

When needed, receiving early intervention in the first few years of life is very important, as early services can both prevent longer-term disability and reduce the long-

term impact of developmental concerns. Early intervention services can include speech, physical, and occupational therapies, in addition to connections with resources and other comprehensive services.

## Screening

Screening tools can help service providers and caregivers learn about what age-appropriate skills a child has developed and whether additional assessment is needed. Many [developmental screening tools](#) can be completed by caregivers or administered by service providers. Caregivers can also track their child's developmental milestones using available and free [online](#) or [application-based](#) resources.

When using these tools with a child who is a refugee, service providers should use and interpret the results based on what they know about the child and their family. For example, children who are learning two or more languages may develop expressive language later than children learning only one language. Also, developmental milestones or expectations differ across countries, so the service provider should consider the results based on the family's country of origin, their cultural practices, and their priorities for their child.

The tools that are widely used by trained service providers are not validated for use in all cultural and linguistic groups. Before using a developmental screener tool, explore whether the tool is validated for use in the family's and child's native language. If the screener is not validated in a particular language, some additional caution should be taken. You can [culturally adapt questions](#) and [consider whether scores match caregivers' and/or teachers' descriptions of the child](#).

## Requesting Evaluation

After determining that a young child should receive a full assessment, you can refer families, with parent/guardian consent, to the state's early intervention program for further assessment.

**Parents/guardians can also request an evaluation for IDEA services through their state's program at any time without a referral.**

All states have [a system to find and evaluate](#) children to determine if they are eligible for services and what kinds of services they need. However, many caregivers do not know these services are available for them and their children. Service providers, such as refugee and health care service providers, can support caregivers by **issuing a referral or helping them contact the right early intervention office or public school to request evaluation.**

For children from birth to age 3, service providers and caregivers can make their request to their [state's early intervention program](#). For children over age 3, service providers and caregivers can call any public elementary school to make their request. If you are calling with a caregiver, you can follow this adapted [CDC-recommended script](#):

*"I am calling with my client on their behalf, because they do not speak English. My client is a parent and is concerned about their child's development. They would like to request an evaluation. Can you help them or let us speak with someone who can?"*

### Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting

Specialized home visitors provide individualized services to pregnant mothers and caregivers of young children in their homes or other community locations caregivers choose. There are [many home-visiting program models](#) that have evidence supporting their effectiveness, and states often select the home-visiting models that meet communities' needs. Broadly, evidence-based home-visiting models

- **support caregiver health and well-being**, such as supporting maternal physical and mental health, reducing family violence, and promoting economic self-sufficiency;
- **promote healthy child development**, such as supporting child physical and social-emotional health and development, improving the safety of home environments, and enhancing children's school readiness;
- **improve caregiver-child interactions**, such as supporting positive parenting practices and reducing risk for child maltreatment; and
- **coordinate and connect families** to additional resources and services in their community to meet their holistic needs and goals.

Home-visiting programs are supported with federal, state, and philanthropic funds, although the greatest source of federal funding that exclusively focuses on home visiting is the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program. Home-visiting services were provided in [all 50 states and half of U.S. counties in 2022](#). The [most commonly used MIECHV models](#) included the following:

- Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)
- Healthy Families America (HFA)
- Parents as Teachers (PAT)
- Early Head Start (EHS), Home-Based Option
- Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)

**Home-visiting services are free and available to families and caregivers with certain backgrounds or experiences**, such as families with low incomes and caregivers with less than a high school diploma who are pregnant, teens, and single, never-married mothers.

### Barriers to Accessing Early Childhood

#### Early childhood services support caregivers to enter the workforce.

Early childhood services are an essential support for refugee caregivers of young children who are entering the workforce. Reliable and high-quality early childhood services can help caregivers complete educational or vocational training, secure stable employment, and achieve long-term financial stability.

### Services

Families may meet systemic barriers when trying to participate in early childhood services. To successfully promote access, it is important to understand and prepare to address these barriers.

#### Language

Among the U.S. refugee and immigrant populations, there is [significant linguistic diversity](#). For example, between 2003 and 2011, the U.S. welcomed refugees from more than 100 countries who spoke almost 300 different languages.<sup>1</sup>

- **Agencies offering early childhood services may not have sufficient resources to offer outreach materials in multiple languages other than**

<sup>1</sup> Capps, R., Newland, K., Fratzke, S., Groves, S., Auclair, G., Fix, M., & McHugh, M. (2015, June). *The integration outcomes of U.S. refugees: Successes and challenges*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/UsRefugeeOutcomes-FINALWEB.pdf>.



**English**, especially when the languages are less common in the community. Early childhood service providers often have limited funding and capacity to develop outreach, informational, and application materials in all languages spoken by community members.

- **Without materials available in their native language, it can be hard for caregivers to learn about and access early childhood services.** This issue can be compounded when caregivers are preliterate or when they speak less common languages.<sup>2</sup> As a result, families who are refugees often rely on their social networks to locate and apply for services, which can both expand or limit access depending on the information available.<sup>3</sup>
- **Application systems for early childhood programs can be complex and difficult to navigate.** Many application systems, including those that are web-based, are not designed for a wide range of linguistically diverse applicants and involve multiple steps to establish eligibility.

### Prior Experiences and Cultural Values

When working to connect families to early childhood services, consider that their understanding of early childhood services may be based on their pre-migration experiences, cultural values, and beliefs. Also, consider how these factors could influence their comfort level with and awareness of early childhood services.

- **Families may be unaware of early childhood services or their potential benefits.** Early childhood services may not be available to families in their communities or countries of origin, or they may differ from those available to them in the U.S.
- **Families may feel mistrust toward government-funded programs,** especially if they have previously experienced persecution in their country of origin or in intermediate host countries. Families may feel uncomfortable if they perceive that government-funded providers are evaluating their parenting or home environment.
- **Families may hold a wide range of beliefs and preferences about early childhood development and practices** that stem from cultural and religious traditions and norms. These may or may not

initially align with the design of early childhood services in the U.S.

- **Families may experience or perceive stigma related to early childhood issues,** such as developmental delays and disabilities, an issue that is also common among U.S.-born parents.

## Systemic Barriers in Early Childhood Services

### How to Help

You can support families and early childhood providers by addressing barriers:

- **Learn about the early childhood services offered in your community** and meet with and develop relationships with leaders and providers.
- **Utilize your relationship as a trusted provider** to introduce families to services and build their sense of safety by visiting programs together.
- **Directly support caregivers with translation and navigation** through the early childhood program search and application process.
- **Connect families with community-based organizations** that can provide system navigation and cultural brokering.
- **Supply information and training to early childhood services** on the cultural and linguistic needs of resettled families in your community.
- **Partner with early childhood services** to develop workforce and training pipelines of culturally and linguistically matched early childhood professionals.

<sup>2</sup> Park, M. & McHugh, M. (2014, June). *Immigrant parents and early childhood programs: Addressing barriers of literacy, culture, and systems knowledge*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-parents-early-childhood-programs-barriers>.

<sup>3</sup> Vesely, C. K. (2013). Low-income African and Latina immigrant mothers' selection of early childhood care and education (ECE): Considering the complexity of cultural and structural influences. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 28(3), 470–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.02.001>.

**Early childhood services are not consistently designed or resourced in ways that promote responsiveness to families' cultural values**, which can lower families' comfort levels. Although service providers may wish to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families and improve their cultural competence, some systems may not provide service providers with sufficient resources and stability to implement changes. For example, early childhood services may have difficulty with high staff turnover and waiting lists.

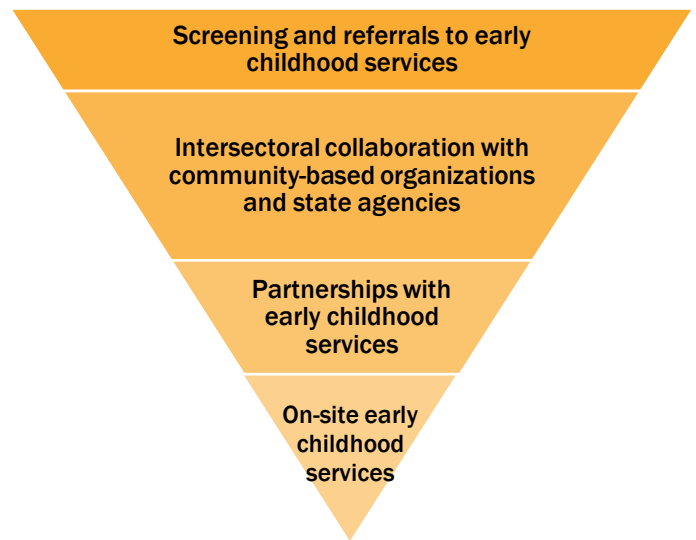
### Cultural Adaptations in Early Childhood Services

Early childhood service providers can partner with resettlement agencies by learning about the cultural backgrounds and preferences of families and considering ways to incorporate responsive practices, such as

- **celebrating and accommodating** the family's observed holidays, traditions, and dietary practices;
- **setting up special introductory experiences**, such as tours of programs in the family's home language;
- **hiring culturally and linguistically matched staff to deliver the program** or conducting trauma-informed and culturally informed trainings;
- **ensuring access to interpretation when linguistically matched staff are unavailable** as well as translated materials;
- **reviewing materials** such as books and toys to ensure that diverse cultures in the community are reflected; and
- **hosting or connecting families to workshops, playgroups, and events** for culturally and linguistically diverse groups of families to come together and learn more about child development topics of interest (e.g., early literacy events at libraries).

### Collaboration and Partnerships to Promote Access

Your team can build collaborations and partnerships to increase access to early childhood services in your community. Most collaborations and partnerships fall into four categories, discussed below. Efforts within these categories can range in intensity, with screening and referral to available programs requiring the lowest level of effort and embedding early childhood services on-site at your resettlement agency potentially requiring the highest level of effort.



### Screening and Referral to Early Childhood Services

**Your resettlement agency may find screening and referral to be the most cost-effective and straightforward way to give families who are refugees access to early childhood services in the community.**

With some training, refugee service providers can screen young children for developmental delays and disabilities and work together with families to make a referral for an early intervention evaluation. You can build your knowledge of available child care, early education, and home-visiting programs in your community. Where cultural and linguistic barriers might impede families' participation with a referred early childhood service, you can use **warm handoff referrals** to support relationships and build trust with new service providers. In a warm handoff referral, introductions to new service providers are made face-to-face with the client, a practice that can support a transfer of trust and rapport from the family to the new provider. You can also follow up with the family to find out about their experiences with the service

provider you connected them to. This follow-up practice can help your agency build a list of vetted service providers in the community.

### **Intersectoral Collaboration with Community-Based Organizations and State Agencies**

Refugee-serving state agencies and other engaged entities, such as resettlement agencies, can drive collective impact by bringing together a wide range of community-based organizations to support the needs of families who are refugees. Some useful [strategies](#) for successfully bringing these organizations together include (1) developing a shared vision and common goals, (2) coordinating activities, and (3) communicating frequently. Such efforts help providers connect with each other and can support families' continuity of care.

### **Partnerships with Early Childhood Service Providers**

Partnerships between refugee service-providing organizations and early childhood programs can streamline families' access to needed services. Partnership activities vary but can include embedding staff on-site to share information or facilitate enrollment, information-sharing across program staff, linking application systems so that eligibility for one service results in eligibility or referral to a partnered service, and communicating about trusted partnerships with families. Partnerships can result in resources and knowledge that enhance the services provided by the resettlement agency.

### **On-Site Early Childhood Services**

Some resettlement agencies have implemented early childhood services on-site or partnered with other programs. For example, resettlement agencies could run a preschool program [such as Head Start](#) or [home-visiting](#) services on-site. This approach can reduce barriers for families because early childhood services are provided alongside other adult-focused offerings available within your agency, such as language, educational, or vocational training courses and classes.

## **Success Stories**

### **The City of San Antonio Head Start**

The [Family Services Association \(FSA\) of San Antonio](#), a local Head Start grantee, partnered with Catholic Charities, a local refugee resettlement agency, to connect Iraqi families with Head Start in 2019. Their success was facilitated by **strong intersectoral collaboration between the state, city, and local agencies, including community-based organizations and the FSA**. In advance of their arrival, the state

resettlement coordinator hosted planning meetings to delegate roles and responsibilities, predict barriers, and brainstorm solutions. **The resettlement coordinator led trainings for the group** on the country, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts of newcomers. FSA collaborated with Catholic Charities to hire an immigrant parent on their team as a culturally and linguistically matched parent advocate. **The parent advocate was embedded on-site at the apartment complex where a large number of families with young children were initially resettled**. The advocate met with interested families to tell them about Head Start, provided language-accessible materials, answered questions, and addressed any concerns. Additionally, the advocate **scheduled walking and bus tours from the complex to the Head Start building**, with the goal of increasing parents' comfort and understanding of how to reach the facility from their homes. These efforts led to successful enrollment in Head Start. FSA reported that nearly all newly arrived Iraqi families with young children opted to enroll in Head Start services. More recently, FSA hired a parent who speaks Pashto to work with Afghan families, which has led to increased participation.

### **Utah State Referral Hub and Afghan Early Childhood Services Pilot**

In Utah, the Department of Workforce Services' [Refugee Services Office \(RSO\)](#) plays an integral role in coordinating efforts across resettlement organizations, other state agencies, and community-based organizations. They host a **monthly youth providers meeting** that gathers refugee and mainstream partners, and they support partnerships between organizations and agencies to effectively address various needs and populations.

In a recent example, the RSO implemented the Afghan Early Childhood Services pilot, a health and educational **partnership between the RSO and the Department of Health and Human Services**. The initiative utilizes a team of culturally and linguistically matched case managers to conduct **home visits with Afghan families with young children**. Case managers coordinate with families to provide wraparound services and support, including developmental screenings, home visits, early intervention services, Head Start and Early Head Start programming, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and educational resources, and maternal and infant health and mental health services. Case managers accompany and support families in accessing the services they are

referred to in an effort to break down barriers and ensure the services are tailored to each of their needs. RSO's Afghan community specialist, the Department of Health and Human Services, and a network of local resettlement partners serve as liaisons to community groups and refugees who may benefit from provided services. The cultural responsiveness of this initiative was **designed in consultation with the Department of Workforce Services, Department of Health and Human Services, and local Afghan refugee-led community-based organizations**, who advised on the development of initiative practices.

## Oregon Home Visiting and Early Intervention Screening

[The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization](#) (IRCO) is a large resettlement and community-based organization with a presence in the Pacific Northwest. IRCO **operates an early-learning division** that has grown to serve approximately 20 distinct cultural and linguistic communities since 1995. The early-learning department **includes preschool programs and a large home-visiting program** that applies a range of home-visiting models, including the evidence-based Parents as Teachers (PAT) model and Nurturing Parenting. The home-visiting team employs culturally and linguistically matched **refugees and immigrants as home visitors** and currently has language capacity to reach 20 distinct cultural and linguistic groups across staff members. Home visitors strive to establish strong, trusting relationships with families and progress through a range of topics over time, beginning with addressing basic needs and eventually discussing positive parenting practices with an emphasis on school readiness.

**IRCO home visitors are trained to implement a culturally adapted Ages and States Questionnaire (ASQ) and ASQ: Social-Emotional (SE) with all families to identify early intervention needs.** Home visitors consider a range of influences on screening outcomes and often implement the ASQ on more than one occasion to identify a pattern of results before making a referral for early intervention evaluation. Upon making a referral, home visitors ensure they are always included in the evaluation team's initial visits, **acting as cultural brokers** in the experience between families and the evaluation team. Through hiring diverse staff members, building trust with families, and developing culturally responsive programming, IRCO reports that 98% of children who have participated in their program for a period of three years are successfully prepared for kindergarten.

## Conclusion

Early childhood services can support newcomer families with young children and reduce disparities by school entry. The impacts of these programs are promising and can promote both immediate benefits to families and long-term gains for child health, well-being, and achievement. As a refugee service provider, you can play a key role in building family awareness and connecting families to these supports.

## Resources

[Toolkit on how Head Start Can Support the Refugee Community](#): This toolkit published by the National Head Start Association includes a comprehensive guide, posters, fact sheets on employing people with refugee status and enrolling children with refugee status in Head Start, social media resources, and templates to facilitate discussions on the benefits of partnership between resettlement agencies and Head Start.

[What Works To Increase Refugee and Immigrant Families' Access to Early Childhood Services?:](#) A Switchboard and Urban Institute summary of available evidence on strategies to increase access to early childhood services.

[Strategies And Tips For Refugee Service Providers To Promote Access To Early Childhood Programs:](#) A Switchboard and Urban Institute blog on increasing access to early childhood services.

## Child Care and Early Education

[Refugee Resettlement-Head Start Collaboration \(BRYCS\) Toolkit](#): This toolkit from Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) includes an illustrated handbook for caregivers on supporting early learning and health development and a communication guide for refugee service providers and Head Start.

[How Do I Find and Choose Quality Child Care?:](#) This resource provides an overview of quality in child care.

[Find a Child Care Resource & Referral Agency](#): This directory is designed to support families and providers in identifying their local Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) agency. CCR&Rs provide locally tailored support to families in finding care.

## Early Intervention and Developmental Milestones

[Milestone Tracker App](#): This mobile app supports families with milestone tracking from 2 months through age 5. It includes checklists, tips, and guidance.



[Why Act Early?](#): This CDC resource introduces early intervention and the value of acting early when a developmental delay or disability is identified.

[Early Childhood Developmental Screening: A Compendium of Measures for Children Ages Birth to Five](#): This compendium of 16 commonly used developmental screening tools for early childhood providers includes information on the reliability and validity of each tool for various linguistic groups.

[Brazelton Touchpoints Development Is a Journey Roadmap](#): This roadmap, along with [background and guidance on use of the tool](#), can be used by a variety of service providers to support conversations with caregivers on developmental concerns and next steps, before and after screening.

## **Home Visiting**

[Home Visiting Primer](#): This introductory resource on home visiting includes a focus on its importance for a variety of early life outcomes.

[Home Visiting for Refugee Families](#): “Flourishing in New Places” is a video spotlighting a home-visiting program operated within RefugeeOne, a resettlement agency in Chicago, Illinois.

*The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0052 and Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.*