



## Supporting Resettled Afghan Children and Adolescents Experiencing Grief-Related Distress

Since the U.S. military's evacuation from Afghanistan in 2021, political upheaval has led thousands of Afghan families to resettle in the United States. Many Afghan children and adolescents have experienced separation from and loss of loved ones, and service providers should understand how these losses impact Afghan youth clients' overall mental health and wellbeing. This resource (generated with research from the Boston College School of Social Work's [Strengthening Afghan Evacuees: A Community Based Family Strengthening Intervention](#) project and written in partnership with Switchboard) explains key concepts in understanding grief-related distress for newcomer Afghan youth, as well as best practices for supporting children, adolescents, and caregivers in processing their experiences.

### Understanding and Identifying Grief in Newcomer Afghan Youth

The 2021 evacuation of Afghanistan was marked by chaos and violence, leading to the **separation of family members** with little to no knowledge about the possibility of reunification. Such separations led at least 1,550 unaccompanied children to the United States.

Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, unaccompanied Afghan children continue to flee the country and cross the U.S. southern border seeking safety.

Many Afghan youth have also experienced significant traumatic events, loss, and violence that is compounded by displacement. In the U.S., they face new challenges, like cultural shifts and language barriers. Recognizing and addressing their unique grief is crucial. If left unprocessed, it can impact mental health and hinder integration.

No matter their resilience and strength, newcomer Afghan youth often experience complex forms of grief related to the profound changes in their lives. This grief is a natural response to the multiple losses they face,

Licensed Mental and Behavioral Health Providers: If you detect **symptoms of grief that may indicate or intertwine with other disorders**, use **validated measures** endorsed by experts for making diagnoses with refugee children and adolescents. The Children and War Foundation provides a [list of measures](#), including scales like the Inventory of Prolonged Grief, that can measure different constructs related to distress. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offers [measures appropriate for refugee children and families](#). General service providers should refer to licensed mental and behavioral health clinicians provide diagnostic assessment.

including separation from family and friends, leaving behind familiar surroundings and cultural touchstones, grappling with shifts in their social status and identity, and confronting an uncertain future in a new land.

For these young people, grief may be further complicated by:

- Sudden and often traumatic departures
- Ongoing conflicts in their home country
- Challenges in family reunification
- Difficulties adapting to a new culture

Grief symptoms can overlap with and co-occur alongside anxiety, depression, and trauma disorders. Key indicators of prolonged or complicated grief may include:

- Identity disruption
- Disbelief about loss
- Avoidance of reminders
- Intense emotional pain or numbness
- Difficulty reintegrating into daily life
- Feelings of meaninglessness or intense loneliness

Additionally, "survivor's guilt" is common, with youth questioning why they survived or were able to leave when others couldn't.

## Approaching Grief with Afghan Youth

Addressing grief with resettled Afghan youth requires a [trauma-informed approach](#). Understand that everyone grieves differently, and that youth may not be ready to

revisit traumatic events. When working with child and adolescent Afghan newcomers, consider:

- Children's grief patterns differ from those of adults. They may switch rapidly between discussing loss and playing happily or may not show distress for years.
- Be aware that children may fear burdening their caregivers with their own grief and emotions. Afghan youth may suppress their feelings to avoid causing more distress to their caregivers, who are often struggling with numerous resettlement challenges.
- For Unaccompanied Afghan Minors (UAMs), grief may be intensified by social isolation and difficulties expressing feelings to caregivers who may not share their cultural background. Additionally, UAMs may be reunified with family members who share their cultural background but may not hold a close relationship with the UAM, which in turn can amplify challenges in communicating feelings with their caregivers.
- Recent arrivals may find events too fresh to process immediately. Allow them time and space to address their experiences at their own pace.
- Approach difficult topics with patience, cultural sensitivity, and awareness of the specific challenges faced by newcomer Afghan youth.

## What Providers Can Do

There is limited [research into known interventions targeting grief-related distress specifically for newly arrived Afghan youth](#). However, there are many evidence-based recommendations for approaching grief with children in general, as well as some tailored to newcomer children.

### Establish routine and structure

Despite the challenges of resettlement, consistent habits provide safety and comfort for grieving children. Simple practices like regular mealtimes or scheduled activities can significantly ease intense emotions and foster a sense of stability.

### Remind children that what they are feeling is normal

Validate children's feelings to help them understand that grief is a normal response to their experiences. Emphasize that there is nothing wrong with feeling out of control or experiencing other intense emotions.

## Learn more about the typical grieving process in Afghan culture

A large majority of Afghans identify as Muslim. To best aid clients, understand what [the mourning process](#) looks like when a community member within the faith passes away.

Islam indicates that burial should take place as quickly as possible after death. Families may therefore need immediate assistance with funeral costs. Help families navigate these expenses through any support your organization or community members can provide.

Muslims traditionally observe a 40-day mourning period for family and community members experiencing a loss, referred to as “*shab e jummah*.”

During this time, mourning families will typically receive food and flowers. Community members play a critical role in Afghan Muslims’ grieving process and mourning families will often hold collective prayers on Friday evenings, either in their mosques or their homes.

Non-Afghan caregivers for UAMs may need additional support to understand what the child in their care is going through. Share information about the traditional mourning process in Muslim culture and encourage them to consult relevant resources.

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS) [offers a training and resource hub for foster parents of immigrant and refugee youth](#).

## Foster community connections

Help the families and children that you work with build connections to local organizations and mosques to promote their access to community support during the grieving process. New arrivals may need assistance in identifying these support systems right away. Clients who are hesitant about seeking out formal mental health services may find special value in engaging within the Afghan community and Muslim faith.

## Empower caregivers

Both Afghan and non-Afghan caregivers may need support and advice on how to best aid the grieving children in their care.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offers tip sheets for caregivers which cover best practices for caregivers seeking to support [young and school-aged children](#) in processing grief, [including coping with unconfirmed death](#). These resources highlight the specific feelings that children and adolescents may be experiencing but unable to voice.

Encourage caregivers to create a home environment where all feelings are welcome, and remember that caregivers may also be grieving, which can affect their ability to support their children.

**Mental health stigma** [can prevent resettled Afghan families from getting help](#), but professional services and evidence-based interventions offer opportunities for healing from complicated and traumatic grief. For caregivers who are undergoing the grieving process themselves, working with a mental health professional can help them heal, which, in turn, provides additional support for their child.

Certain **culturally adapted** treatments involving [CBT-driven therapy](#) and [written exposure therapy](#) have been proven to reduce grief-related distress and trauma symptoms in Afghan adolescents. Additionally, [trauma- and grief-focused groups](#) have shown success in decreasing symptoms of traumatic grief in refugee children and adolescents.

## Recommended Resources

To learn more, consult these resources on grief for newcomer youth:

**The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI):** [Post-Resettlement Behavioral Health Support](#)

**National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN):**

- Webinar: [Trauma-Informed Care: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Unaccompanied Children \(UC\)](#)
- [Being Culturally and Trauma Informed While Assisting Displaced Afghan Families](#)
- [Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) for Unaccompanied Children](#)
- [PFA for Displaced Children and Families \(includes tips in Arabic\)](#)
- [PFA: Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters](#)
- [PFA: Parent Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children after Disasters](#)

- [PFA: Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children](#)
- [PFA: Parent Tips for Helping Adolescents](#)

**The KonTerra Group:** [Video: Coping with Grief and Loss](#)

**United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime:** [Caring for Children through Conflict and Displacement](#) (available in six languages, including [Pashto](#))

#### Switchboard:

- [Webinar: Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) to Support Clients Affected by the Crisis in Afghanistan](#)
- [Evidence Summary: What can help refugees process traumatic grief?](#)
- [Faith-based Healing among Afghan Muslims: Guidance for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S.](#)

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