



LEARNING SUMMARY:

Rising Practices & Policies in the Workforce | Supporting War Refugees

About the 2022 Rising Practices & Policies Learning Series

In the Spring and Summer of 2022, the Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network (MHTTC) brought together regional leaders and implementers in a four-part learning series on emerging issues for the mental health and school mental health workforce with the goal of identifying considerations and elevating promising practices.

Session 2: Mitigating Distress & Maximizing Supports for Refugees from War

» [View the Webinar Recording Here](#)

MHTTC convened leaders in the school and mental health workforce to share strategies for responding to clients and students who are refugees from current and previous wars. Highlights from the panelists and group discussion, along with resources shared, are presented below.

Considerations	Rising Practices and Strategies	Resources
<p>Children and families have been affected by war in various ways. All have experienced displacement and some have experienced or witnessed violence directly. Many also face secondary trauma, be it from media about current wars or from geographic stressors (e.g., police raids) in their communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It can be beneficial to broaden definitions of “war-impacted” to include both declared and undeclared wars/conflicts, and include children and families who are coming through traditional refugee resettlement programs, as well as asylees, unaccompanied youth, and newcomer students. It is crucial that school teachers, staff, and mental health providers are mindful about how to engage children and families in sharing their experiences of war. Avoid asking them to recount their trauma repeatedly, but make space for them to tell their stories (in their own languages) if they choose. This can include making space for colleagues to share their own life experiences. When wars and other tragic events are in the media, teachers and mental health providers can consider brainstorming with students about ways they would like to support others who are in need. 	<p>Resources to support refugees and asylum seekers</p> <p>Guidance on working with refugee children struggling with stress and trauma</p> <p>Talking to children about war</p> <p>Psychological first aid for displaced children and families</p> <p>Ways to Help Students in Response to World Events</p>



Considerations	Rising Practices and Strategies	Resources
<p>The approach of providers—particularly those with positional power—is essential to build trust and offer effective support, especially given the extent of trauma and structural barriers that refugees, asylum-seekers, and unaccompanied children face.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Be reflective to be effective.”</i> It is critical for providers to engage in self-reflection to understand their own beliefs and motivations for working with this population, with the goal of engaging not as saviors, but as partners. • <i>“Listen first, then speak.”</i> Providers should lead with curiosity, asking students and families about their experiences and needs instead of assuming. • <i>“Practice patience and flexibility.”</i> Providers can effectively support individuals and groups by attuning to the context and being willing to let go of planned content and processes. • <i>“Default to compassion.”</i> If a client is expressing difficult behaviors, providers can offer support even without knowing their story. 	<p>Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Mental Health Professionals</p>
<p>Healing trauma requires more than individual-level mental health interventions. The mental health response in school settings must also occur at the family, school, and district levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools can consider hiring newcomer clinical social workers to support families in getting their basic needs met first, which makes it possible for mental health needs to be met. • Combining individual and school-level interventions allows for impact at multiple levels. In addition to individual case management and mental health services, it is helpful for schools/districts to: have mental health staff to respond to incidents in classrooms and on the school yard; create a welcoming physical environment (e.g., signs and materials in newcomers’ languages); and educate teachers, staff, and leadership. • Schools can tailor administrative processes to support newcomer students. For districts with a large number of newcomer students, this may look like a central intake unit to gather information and triage students/families. • Schools can partner with community organizations to engage with families and communities to develop trust between communities and providers; provide education about culture, mental health, and community needs; and work to de-stigmatize seeking mental health services. 	<p>Oakland Unified School District Newcomer Wellness Program</p> <p>School Mental Health ASSIST program (Canada)</p> <p>Creating Welcoming School Environments (Canada)</p> <p>I Am You: A Book about Ubuntu by Refiloe Moahloli (children’s book)</p> <p>Trauma-informed group learning</p> <p>Trauma systems therapy for refugees</p> <p>The Community Resiliency Model in Schools</p>
<p>Approaches to healing should elevate the strengths and cultural assets of children and families who have experienced war and violence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health programs should focus not only on cultural humility, but also on cultural wealth. Programs may employ approaches such as the Cultural Wealth Model that recognize cultural assets, particularly of students of color. • It can be powerful for schools and community-based programs to focus on healing in community using culturally based interventions that recenter culture as a central element of well-being and identity restoration. • Programs can support students and families to reclaim their stories in empowering ways, such as through civic engagement and advocacy. 	<p>988 Crisis Jam Learning Community</p> <p>Cultural Wealth Model</p> <p>Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement</p>

What current issues is our region facing in supporting refugees from war?

The need to support refugees, asylum-seekers, and other newcomers remains as critical as ever as the war in Ukraine intensifies, dozens of other armed conflicts continue throughout the world,¹ and, at the time of this brief, the Biden administration is restricting access to asylum at the southern U.S. border and is considering reinstating detention for migrant families who cross the border illegally.²

In this context, mental health and school mental health professionals must continue to assess, triage, and connect students and families to needed resources; support schools and districts in creating school climates and policies that support newcomers; and engage in culturally-rooted, community-based healing that lifts up the strengths of those who have migrated to the U.S. after experiencing the trauma of war and violence.

¹ *Today's Armed Conflicts - The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights.* (n.d.). <https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>

² Sullivan, E., & Kanno-Youngs, Z. (2023, March 7). *U.S. Is Said to Consider Reinstating Detention of Migrant Families.* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/06/us/politics/biden-immigration-family-detention.html>

