

Supporting the Mental Health of Newcomer Students at School



Schools in Ontario have an amazing opportunity to be part of the welcome that newcomer students, families, and parents/caregivers receive. When we create and foster supportive learning environments that are culturally responsive, identity-affirming, and equitable for newcomer students we help to inspire a mentally healthy welcome to life in Canada. We also know that school staff are well-positioned to notice when a newcomer student may need additional support through the transition to their new country or school, or when they show signs that their mental health might be impacted. Together, we can create a sense of belonging, care, and support that can help newcomer students to flourish.

In Canada, people who have recently left another country to settle here are commonly referred to as “newcomers to Canada” (Government of Canada). This info sheet is designed to provide introductory information for schools that will help to support the mental health and well-being of newcomer students – those with immigrant and/or refugee backgrounds – in schools. It reflects an identity-affirming and inclusive approach that recognizes that (1) good settlement experiences are essential for good mental health, (2) newcomers from war-torn countries are typically resilient and possess many intrinsic strengths that they can draw upon as they transition to their new life in Canada, and (3) despite best efforts, some students may experience mental health difficulties and early identification and support is extremely helpful.

School staff who are receiving newcomer students will want to learn more about the student(s) throughout the development of a caring relationship, and to engage in reflection to surface any assumptions or potential biases that could interfere with good welcoming and support. Each newcomer student is unique, and their journey, strengths, losses, and supports should be considered as they transition to school in Canada. Working together with the student and their families, parent/caregivers, school staff have a chance to make a wonderful difference as the student joins their new learning environment, surrounded by care and support.



Creating Welcoming School Environments

Ideas for the School Leader and the Full Staff Team

An identity-affirming, inclusive, and supportive school environment contributes to a student's sense of belonging and overall well-being and may help to prevent adjustment difficulties that can lead to mental health concerns. All school staff have a unique and influential role to play in creating a welcoming environment and in orienting and supporting newcomer students. This begins with practising [cultural humility](#). When staff members identify their assumptions, reflect critically on their implicit biases, and work to build their understanding related to the experiences of newcomer students, they can more authentically engage and interact with every student, identify potential mental health concerns early and provide meaningful support when needed.

The first welcome

- Establish a school wide welcoming team that represents the diverse, intersecting identities of students (e.g., administrator, office administrative assistant, ESL/ELD teacher, adult interpreter, settlement worker).
- Consider having an open house for newcomer families with the support of settlement workers to engage newcomer families/students and to help communicate school procedures (i.e., navigating google classroom)
- Ensure supportive spaces for parents/caregivers and families to engage with the reception team to meet and share information.
- Provide comfortable spaces for families to gather (to read announcements in their first language or meet fellow families, and parents/caregivers) to assist them while their children are in learning environments. Welcoming and affirming places for prayer should also be considered.
- Post multiple signs in the top languages that are used by newcomer students, families, and parents/ caregivers with other common languages that are visible across the school. This validates the language, ethnicity, and race of the students, parents/caregivers, and families.

Orientation to school

- Ask the student, parents/caregivers and families what support and information they need. Collaboration and partnerships are key.
- Consider hiring a certified interpreter who speaks the same language as the student and parents/ caregivers so that they are comfortable, if needed. If this is not possible, seek support from settlement workers or appropriate community agencies.
- Offer specially trained student helpers, such as student ambassadors who have received cultural humility training, to provide school tours for the whole family and make introductions to students with similar interests. Be mindful of language capacity.
- Outline safety procedures in their language with an adult interpreter, if needed (e.g., what to do in a lock down drill, managing inclement weather).



- Explain the ways that parents/caregivers can contact the school in the event of absence, late arrival, or early leaving, and share a printed/written document in their language that describes these procedures.
- Demonstrate the various procedures within the school. For example, for borrowing books, using school equipment and technology, lunchtime routines, and using locks on their locker.
- Provide details to facilitate and encourage entry into sports programs, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. Despite linguistic barriers, these are opportunities for newcomer students to take an active part in the school culture and to further strengthen their linguistic skills.
- Think about possible triggers for trauma (e.g., announcements, bell ringing, fire drills, lockdowns, busy hallways) and prepare students for them. Explain what time the bells ring in the school and what they mean with an adult interpreter, as needed.
- Be aware that communication with the school can be complex for newcomer parents/caregivers and families. If you notice a lack of engagement, consider the many factors that could be impacting their interaction. For example, newcomer parents/caregivers may be working during the time you reach out to them, and unable to attend to your call. It is important this does not lead to assumptions that the parents/caregivers are not attentive or supportive.

Communication

- Consider learning about the experiences of parents/caregivers and families within educational systems by respectfully inquiring about what their experience (if any) with school has been. Use this information to help you understand what they expect from the school in terms of support for their child's growth, and to anticipate any possible support they may require. Remember: respect, mindfulness and kindness are crucial.
- Ask the parent/caregiver and student how they would like to be addressed, focusing on correct name pronunciation, and making every effort to say names correctly.
- Inquire about the child's strengths, interests, and needs. It may be supportive to provide a list of strengths and interests in their language for parents/caregivers to check off, or to have a dialogue with to learn about the students with support of adult interpreter if needed.
- Dedicate ample time for an intake interview (in the first language of the student and their parent/caregiver), and for orientation information about school and basic routines. Schedule a follow up meeting once some time has passed, if needed.
- Ensure that the student and their parents/caregivers and family have access to competent adult interpreters who can assist with filling out forms, etc.
- Inquire about best methods to share information (paper, email, telephone, via adult interpreter).
- Make translated information about community resources widely available by partnering with [local settlement organizations](#) (e.g., libraries, community centers, adult ESL classes, places of worship, cultural organizations, medical clinics) and utilize resources that have already been translated by other school boards.
- Ask parents/caregivers the best way to connect with them regularly if they request information to reassure them about their child's transition to school.



Creating Welcoming School Environments Ideas for All School Staff

Reflect: Is this the first time you are co-creating a welcoming school environment with newcomer students? Have you had other experiences in supporting newcomer students that you can draw on? Are you aware of your biases, power, privilege, and feelings when engaging with newcomer students? How do you affirm the identities of newcomer students in school environments in ways that are meaningful to them? The following reflection questions were designed to prompt thinking about ways to build and maintain a mentally healthy school environment for all students, from an anti-oppressive and identity affirming lens. It may spark ideas for actions that will enhance conditions for learning and strategies to support newcomer students' mental health and well-being. It may also help you to identify strengths and areas for action, improvement, and growth.

WELCOME: Social and physical environments

Mental health promotion (tier 1) is an important practise with every student, including newcomer students. Welcoming all students every day in a warm, supportive, and caring way helps to build their sense of belonging within the school environment, which contributes to positive mental health and well-being.

Reflect:

- How can we start each day so that students who are newcomers in schools feel welcome and a strong sense of belonging (e.g., greet each student individually with a smile, correctly pronouncing their name; encourage students to greet each other in different languages, helping them to take risks together!)?
- What strategies can help newcomer students to feel comfortable in a school environment that may feel very new for them (e.g., have predictable visual routines in the school environment; announce changes in advance)?
- What are some ways that we can help newcomer students to feel visible and valued in the schools (e.g., use materials and décor that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of students; speak clearly and check understanding for those learning a new language)?

INCLUDE: Student engagement and belonging

Welcoming newcomers to the school is a shared responsibility, including leadership and involvement from students. Caring adults should model an environment of respect and acceptance for students. Newcomer students require space to share what they need and to nourish the many unique skills, strengths, and knowledge they bring into the learning environment. It is important to encourage students to share what is meaningful to them about their culture, without expecting them to be "experts" on their culture or to take responsibility for educating others. Newcomer students require the space to speak about their lived experiences as they choose, and to highlight aspects of their culture that are meaningful to them.

Reflect:

- What are some ways we can provide opportunities for all students to learn and share information about their own unique identities, skills, and talents (e.g., sharing circle)?



- Are there opportunities to build student leadership (e.g., seek out newcomer students for leadership opportunities on student well-being teams)?
- How might the power imbalance that exists between staff and students play out for newcomer students and how might we address this (e.g., opportunities for student decision-making)?
- Are there ways we can empower newcomer students, so they grow in confidence (e.g., providing options and choice for demonstrating and representing their knowledge)?

UNDERSTAND: Mental health literacy and knowing your students

Although all school staff are not mental health professionals, all caring adults within schools should have basic knowledge about mental health that can help with everyday wellness in schools, early identification of mental health problems, and helpful ways to offer ongoing support when a student is struggling. It is also important as a caring adult to [reflect on your own wellness](#) and capacity. You are a key part of the eyes, ears, and hearts of a caring school community. With this background, and when all school staff know their students, they are often the first to notice when extra mental health assistance might be needed. Taking the time to get to know newcomer students and their parent(s)/caregiver(s) early on can help school staff to notice any changes that might require more support.

Reflect:

- How can we get to know newcomer students in schools (e.g., provide time to learn about students' unique stories and strengths; take a learning stance when interacting with newcomer students and encourage students to do the same; avoid making assumptions)?
- What are some steps we can take to ensure that newcomer students do not feel pressured to share more than they are comfortable with (e.g., model respectful and inclusive communication with newcomer students; watch for non-verbal cues that might signal discomfort being mindful of cultural differences, for example, refraining from eye contact may be a sign of respect for people in positions of authority)?
- What steps can we take to learn and understand the unique and individual ways that students feel supported (e.g., check in with students regularly, signalling that you are available to listen and provide support; listen for familiar ways of coping; stay attuned to the nonverbal and verbal cues of students' well-being)?
- Where can I learn more about mental health in my role as school staff (e.g., check in with your boards [mental health lead](#) for information, take advantage of flexible, role-specific mental health learning through School Mental Health Ontario like web-based info sheets)?
- How might student experiences of racism, oppression, and marginalization impact mental health negatively, and at the same time create barriers to service access (e.g., consider how mental health is impacted by race and culture, recognizing that some newcomer students and their parents/caregivers will understand mental wellness and illness in different ways, and may be accustomed to different ways of coping and support than might be offered in the Ontario context)?
- How can I help (e.g., know your community circle of support, including specific newcomer supports in the community, and be aware of the services you can access in your school/board if a student requires more support than you can offer in your role)?

PARTNER: Home, school, and community partnerships

Partnering with parents/caregivers, families, school settlement workers and community members creates opportunities for shared dialogue about culture, language, traditions, faith practices and journeys.




Reflect:


- How can we help parents/caregivers and families to be more comfortable in schools (e.g., invite newcomer students, parents/caregivers, families, and school staff to help with school activities and build on information with students/school staff about their traditions; be mindful and respectful of family stressors and their impact on the child’s attendance and learning)?
- What are some ways that I can engage newcomer families, parents/caregivers in schools (e.g., communicate good news with parents and caregivers frequently, seeking to build strong, positive connections with the school environment; acknowledge global events that may impact newcomer students/families and check-in to let them know you care)?
- What strategies can we use to create spaces for dialogue about culture, tradition, faith practices and journeys (e.g., make connections with settlement services and cultural/faith groups who can support and facilitate meaningful conversations with parents/caregivers)?
- How can I bridge connections, relationships and supports for student and families when needed (e.g., become familiar with the settlement services and identity-affirming/culturally responsive mental health services available in your school, board, and community; know how to support students, parents/ caregivers, and families to access services)?

Early Identification and Support Ideas for All School Staff


It is not unusual for students to feel worried, unsettled, irritable or stressed at different points in their lives, especially following a transition, such as moving to a new country. So how do we know when these natural feelings are becoming a concern and a student might need more support with their mental health? As each student is unique, there will be a wide variety of ways a student may experience and express distress. In general, when staff notice a change in how a student expresses thoughts, feelings or actions, they should also take note of how often (frequency), how intensely (intensity), and for how long (duration) the concerns have been present. It is also important to pay attention to how distressing the changes are for a student (impact) and how it is affecting their day-to-day activities. Depending on the age and/or developmental stage of the student some behaviours may be expected.




FREQUENCY
concerns are often present



DURATION
concerns have been present on an ongoing basis



IMPACT
concerns interfere with daily activities and well-being



INTENSITY
concerns cause increased distress



Consulting with the student and others who are currently in their circle of support (e.g., parent(s)/caregiver(s), teacher, settlement worker, ELL educator, school team, special education resource teacher, guidance educator, principal, child and youth care practitioner, social worker) can help to inform what possible next steps could be and whether a student's thoughts, feelings and actions have changed from what is typical for them. Just as school staff should not be alone in supporting students' mental health, neither should school staff be alone in trying to formulate an understanding of a student's needs.

Supporting Newcomer Students Experiencing Difficulties at School Ideas for All School Staff

As school staff are not mental health professionals, you are not expected to provide assessment or counseling support to newcomer students who are exhibiting signs of adjustment difficulty. The role of school staff is to provide a supportive and welcoming learning environment, with differentiated support for those who may need more care and attention than other students. If school staff have a concern about a student's mental health and well-being, they should use the school and board processes and pathways to access the consultation of school mental health professionals focusing on identity-affirming and culturally responsive practices. Note that every school board in Ontario has a [mental health leader](#), and many have other front-line school mental health professionals and settlement workers who can help.

SUPPORT: Offer ongoing school support

Newcomer students who are struggling with adjustment may need more support in schools. Accommodations can be offered to support them and to set them up for success.

Reflect:

- How can I create relationships with newcomer students to best provide support when challenges arise (e.g., provide support for anxious feelings without inadvertently facilitating avoidance, allow students to take breaks or to go to a quiet supervised space when needed)?
- Am I aware of the impact that tone, voice and volume make when interacting with students (e.g., can I make adjustments that will help to soothe and comfort students)?
- What strategies has the student named that work for them when they are feeling stressed during school (e.g., listen; normalize and validate feelings of sadness, anger, and worry; remind students that they are supported; consider helping students to stay in the moment through the use of [grounding strategies](#) during moments of distress)?
- Are there ways I can build on a student's strengths and natural coping strategies and supports when they are struggling in the classroom (e.g., inquire about ways of coping and, if necessary, offer additional skills and strategies; model and support students with steps for problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution)?



- How will I be mindful that newcomer students may have gaps in education that will require skill-building, practice, and extra time for completion (e.g., offering newcomer students the opportunity to complete their assignment in their own language)?

When students have an identified mental health concern, it is important to engage and maintain contact with the student's parent/caregiver or family to ensure that students and families understand how to seek extra professional support with adjustment if the need arises (e.g., guidance educator, multi-disciplinary team, community agencies, etc.).

Maintain a list of community resources that specialize in working with newcomer families and can help children adjust to school. Such resources may include:

- Refugee HealthLine – This program provides transition care for refugees in several areas including mental health. The contact number is: 1-866-286-4770.
- Mental health related topics for parents (available in a variety of languages) can be found [on the Caring for Kids new to Canada website](#).
- [Supporting newcomer youth - Kids Help Phone](#)

As school staff you have the capacity to support the newcomer students in your care, and you know where to find more support in your school and board when needed. School staff are also an integral part of a student's circle of support, which may include supports from both within and/or outside the school (e.g., parents/caregivers, ELL consultants, settlement workers, school mental health professionals, community agencies) that work together to meet a student's needs. All you do each day to support every student and parent/caregiver in your school community through nurturing, caring relationships goes a long way in fostering student mental health and wellness for newcomer students.

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