

young refugees

setting up youth groups for young refugees in the UK



Save the Children

what is this guide about?

This guide is an introduction to setting up groups for young refugees and provides information on:

- why there is a need to establish groups across the UK
- the substantial benefits groups can provide to young refugees
- practical tips on setting up a group
- group membership
- group leadership and support
- key contacts and further reading.

This will help readers consider how to go about setting up a group. However, it is not a comprehensive guide. Readers are encouraged to contact established groups for advice before setting up a group (see back page for contact details).

The guide is for professionals working with young refugees including:

- social workers
- teachers and other professionals working in schools and colleges
- personal advisers at Connexions
- youth workers
- voluntary and community organisation workers.

introduction

Young refugees in the UK

Young refugees¹ arrive here accompanied by family or another carer, or else entirely alone. The total number of young refugees under 18 living in the UK is not known. It is estimated that there are 82,000 refugee children in schools.² There are an estimated 6,750 unaccompanied children.³

Many young refugees have experienced conflict and suffered trauma. They have fled countries where major conflicts have taken place or where serious human rights abuses occur, including Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Angola, Somalia and Iraq. Young refugees experience new difficulties on arrival in the UK, including the following inter-related problems:

- living in poverty and having little or no money for social activities
- poor housing – often living in run-down B&B and hostel accommodation
- emotional or mental health problems, such as loneliness or depression
- social isolation and not speaking English
- discrimination and racism
- difficulties in accessing mainstream services, such as school and college places
- confusing asylum application procedures, for example, dealing with complicated appeals procedures
- separation from family and friends
- living with parents or carers who may be experiencing emotional problems themselves, which could increase the risk of family breakdown
- taking on adult responsibilities, such as translating for parents in their contact with authorities.

Young refugee groups

“I am very grateful for this group. It has offered me much assistance, stopped me from getting bored and I have met people and made friends. I don’t know why these groups aren’t running everywhere.” (A young refugee group member in Manchester)

Despite the many challenges facing young refugees, there is very little support available for them and currently there is little youth provision aimed at young refugees.⁴ Being part of a group can play a crucial support role for young refugees.

Since 2000, the Government’s policy to disperse asylum-seekers across the UK has meant more young refugees are now living in cities and towns where there are few established refugee communities and support networks. This has increased the need for groups to support young refugees in dispersal areas across the UK.

Groups for young refugees should be set up in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, mainstream youth support. Young refugees have had extraordinary experiences and being part of a refugee group can help to address some of their specific support needs. However, young refugees also need to integrate with British-born young people and should not be excluded from mainstream provision, such as youth clubs and after-school sport activities. As one 17-year-old refugee said: *“My biggest need is to have more contact with English people.”*⁵

why start up a group?

Getting involved in a young refugee group can have many positive effects on members. Benefits of young refugee groups will vary depending on the aims and type of group.

Making friends and reducing isolation.

Many young refugees have little social contact, especially when they first arrive in the country. Getting involved in a group provides opportunities for them to make friends and meet with people who have had similar experiences.

“The advice I’d give to other people like me coming here is to find people to talk to, close friends with whom you can share your problems and who can help you. It is very hard living like this and you get upset and sad. You can’t cope without them.”⁶

Some young separated refugees have talked about groups being like family to them. Being part of a group can give them a sense of belonging and help them cope with the separation from friends and family.

Having fun. The chance to have fun in a group can be a great release from responsibilities and worries that many young refugees live with.

Identity. Being part of a group can help young refugees deal with discrimination and help them feel more positive about their identity as young refugees. Loss of cultural links with their country of origin and immersion in a new culture can also bring up issues of identity. For teenagers, this may be compounded by identity issues often faced by this age group. Mutual respect and understanding of group members can help with these issues and boost young people’s confidence.

Accessing information. Young people who have recently arrived in the UK will have very limited information about their rights and entitlements, and about services that are available to support them. More established members of the group can recommend places to go to get support, based on their experience. They can give advice on settling into an unfamiliar environment and on integrating into a new country and culture. Support workers can also provide useful information.

Acquiring skills. Groups can help young refugees develop new skills. This will depend on the aims and activities of a particular group, but often include improved skills in communication, presentations, group work, drama, sports and IT. Groups also provide a comfortable environment in which to practice English.

Raising profile. Young refugee groups can help highlight the specific needs of young refugees to the professionals they come in contact with. This can lead to extra resources being allocated to support young refugees and ensure that the needs of young refugees are included in, for example, Children Fund strategies or Connexions plans.

Self-advocacy. Young refugee groups can provide opportunities for members to raise common concerns, get their voices heard and achieve change. Clearly, this will depend on the aims of the group. Often groups start by focusing on social activities and emotional support, but once the group becomes more established and the members settled they may start to want to participate in self-advocacy activities alongside social activities.

Achieving change – the Young Refugee Rights Project

A group of young refugees in west London meet weekly. One of their aims is to influence the local authority to improve support to young separated refugees.⁷ Since the group was established in 2001 a number of positive developments have occurred in the local authority. These include:

- appointing a specialist social worker to support 16/17-year-old young separated refugees
- replacing the use of local authority vouchers with a cash allowance
- providing £5 weekly cash allowance for young refugees in full board hostel accommodation (previously they received nothing)
- publishing a booklet for newly arrived young refugees to help them know their rights and what support is available locally.

10 top tips

1 Aims and membership

Be clear about the group's aims and involve young refugees in this process. It is likely that young people will get involved in the project for different reasons, for example, social reasons or to access support and information. Young people who have recently arrived will often have different reasons for joining a group to those who are more settled. It is therefore important to have a programme of different activities for young refugees to choose from. Before setting up a group it is important to consider membership criteria of the group, including age range, sex and nationality (see overleaf).

2 Participation

Young refugees need to be fully involved in all stages of the group's development for it to be successful. There are different levels and ways of involving young people, from employing a young person to lead the project (see overleaf) to having a core advisory group of young refugees guiding the project. Think of ways to ensure that all members get involved. For example, make sure people understand what is being said, avoid members from a particular nationality or gender from dominating, create an atmosphere where younger members feel comfortable to get involved. Find out when it is convenient to meet – lunchtimes, after school, evenings, weekends.

3 Resources

The cost of running a group will vary significantly depending on a range of factors, including the type of group, its aims, how often it meets and how many young refugees are involved. Staff and premises are two key costs.

Staff – Group members need a lot of support because of the difficulties that many of them face. This might be emotional support or help in accessing services. If the project is run by a young

person, then they will require substantial support both in running the group and personally. All staff working with young refugees should be police-checked – when planning the project bear in mind that police checks can take some time to come through, and adults should not work unsupervised with children prior to checks being received.

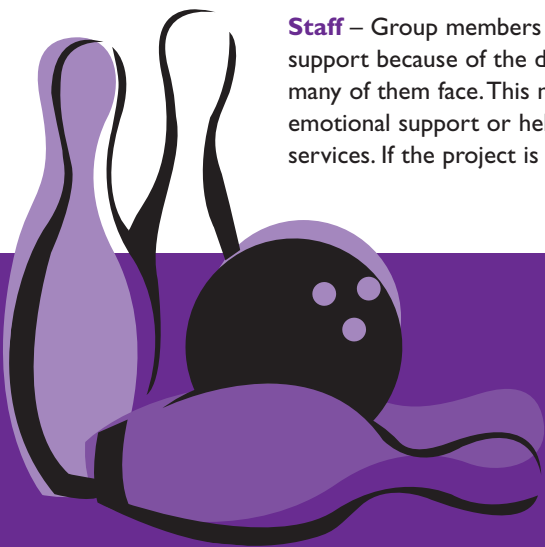
Premises – Finding an accessible place for the group to meet encourages young people to turn up. For example, school-based groups are popular because they are convenient to get to straight after school. It should be an environment where the group feel comfortable to 'hang out' and where there is room available for one-to-one meetings. The premises should be conducive to meeting the specific aims of the group, so if the group plan to run regular drama workshops or IT classes, for example, then the premises need to be able to accommodate this. It is also important to make sure that appropriate health and safety standards are met.

4 Individual advocacy

A good sign-posting system is essential. Staff need to know of organisations that are able to support the young people with their particular problems. Members will often have problems they need help with, for example, problems with accommodation, bullying, racism, accessing benefits, asylum applications, or getting school or college places. Staff supporting the project may not have the skills or qualifications, or be legally registered to deal with these issues.⁸ Support workers therefore need to be allowed time to build up a sign-posting system. If staff are involved in individual advocacy work then adequate time also needs to be allowed for this to ensure it is done effectively.

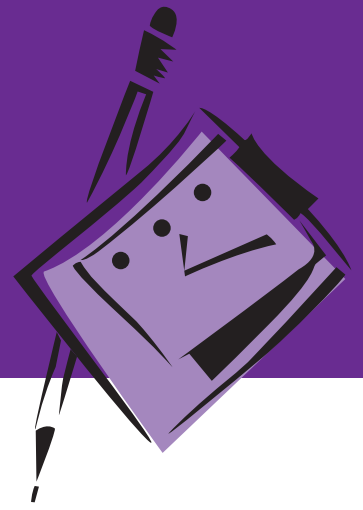
5 Organisational support

Young refugee groups will find it difficult to establish themselves without the support of a statutory, voluntary or community organisation. These organisations can offer the group: staff support – running the group, and



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setting up and running a young refugee group



management and administrative support; financial assistance; premises; office equipment, such as computers; help with networking and accessing mainstream services; and access to different support services within the organisation, such as the press office or IT help desk.

The organisation supporting the project needs to make a long-term commitment to the group and be clear on what the group can expect from them.

6 Skills development

Offer training to group members to help them become actively involved in the group and its development. Training needs to be tailored to link with the aims of the group. It could include presentation skills, group working, managing a meeting, English, IT, or website design. If the group is being run by a young refugee then he or she will need specific training to develop the necessary skills to run the group, for example, training in youth work, group work skills, participatory methods, management, administration or IT.

Support workers involved in the group may also require training to ensure they have a good understanding of the often complex issues facing young refugees. Awareness training should be provided to all staff who have contact with the group, including reception and administrative staff. This will give all staff in contact with the group the opportunity to learn about issues affecting young refugees, which will help in providing a welcoming and supportive environment for the group to meet in.

7 Social

The social element of young refugee groups should not be underestimated. Many young people say this is the most important aspect of the group. The most successful and popular groups are those that combine socialising and social activities with other activities. Having fun in the group meeting is also important. One popular way

of encouraging this is through learning about different countries, for example, sharing food and playing games from different countries.

8 Language

Some young refugees may find it difficult to take part in the group because they do not speak much English. Support workers and group members should talk slowly and regularly check that group members understand what is being said. Group members with a good level of English can support those with less English. Consider providing English classes as one of the group activities.

Allowing those with less English to communicate in the group in other ways can help build their confidence, for example, non-verbal drama, playing an instrument or singing a song in their own language.

9 Emotional support

Many young refugees will have problems and obstacles to overcome while they are attending the group. For example, group members may get negative asylum decisions and be concerned about deportation, or may turn 18 and be dispersed to another part of the country. Some group members will turn to the group for emotional support. Others may be less forthcoming. Support workers need to be in a position to support young people through their difficulties, both individually and as a group.

10 Evolving groups

Groups constantly evolve and the aims develop and change. Membership changes regularly, sometimes as a result of dispersal and deportations, and this has an impact on planning and group dynamics. Regular recruitment drives are needed to bring in new young people.

who should join the group?

There are three main criteria to consider when deciding the membership of a group – nationality, age and gender. This will depend on what already exists in the area, aims of the group, the remit of the organisation running the group, etc.

Nationality

The main choices here are:

- involving all young people – including British-born children and young people
- involving young refugees from any country
- involving young refugees from specific countries or regions.

Pros and cons of the different options:

Labelling. Some young refugees do not like to be labelled as refugees. A group that involves a mix of refugee and non-refugee young people and is not seen as a 'refugee group' may be more inviting to some young refugees.

Integration. Involving all young people will encourage integration with British-born children and young people. Limiting the group to young refugees from a particular country or region reduces the opportunities for members to integrate with the wider community. However, by building young people's confidence, country-specific groups that recognise

this can still play an important role in helping young people to integrate, once they feel confident enough to do so.

Focus. Including British-born young people may mean the group is less focused on the needs of young refugees. Only involving young refugees provides an opportunity to share common refugee experiences. It can provide both opportunities to raise collective concerns and a good base to advocate for the rights of young refugees.

Culture. Limiting membership to young refugees from specific countries or regions will mean members are more likely to share the same language, culture and identity. Involving young people from diverse cultural backgrounds may initially cause tensions in the group. However, a skilled support worker, who is able to deal with this in a positive way, can ensure diversity is an attribute of the group.

Age

The age of group members will clearly have an impact on the aims and activities of the group. For example, older aged groups are more likely to have aims on creating change. Activities will be different too – a day trip to the zoo might appeal to young children, but a group of teenagers might prefer a day ten-pin bowling or a trip to the cinema.

The most effective use of resources is to target a particular age group – keeping the aims and activities focused on their needs. However, sticking rigidly to only involving young people from a specific age range can exclude particularly vulnerable people. For example, a group for young people up to the age of 18 could exclude very vulnerable 19-year-olds dealing with transition into adult support services. Having a degree of flexibility in relation to age will avoid this – targeting a particular age range, but not excluding those who are slightly older or younger and who want to join or remain involved.

Gender – single sex or mixed groups?

Single sex groups can provide a safe environment for young people who may feel uncomfortable in getting involved in a group that is dominated by the other sex or is more focused on their needs. For example, the limited organised social support that is available to young separated refugees tends to focus on boys' needs as they make up the majority of young separated refugees in the UK. Often girls feel excluded.

Mixed groups can be very successful, but support workers need to have the skills to ensure the equal participation of both sexes, particularly where there is a gender imbalance.

Aims and activities

The aims and activities of young refugee groups vary and will depend on the membership of the group. Below are some of the aims and activities that established groups are currently engaged in:

- Social activities – sport, holidays and day trips, community orientation, meeting friends, hanging out – a place to feel free to come and go
- Self-advocacy – peer research activities, advocating for the rights of young refugees, creating change and promoting a positive image of young refugees
- Advice and Information – support on accessing services – sign-posting or direct support
- Educational activities – life-skills, homework clubs, language classes, IT classes, maintaining cultural links and awareness.

who should run the group?

This section looks at the four main options on who leads and supports the group.

Young worker led

This is where a young refugee leads the project – recruiting members, agreeing aims and activities, running group sessions, etc – but with significant back up and support from a statutory, voluntary or community organisation.

This is a highly participative approach that can have substantial benefits:

- a young refugee worker will have a better understanding of issues facing young refugees and consequently have more empathy in dealing with sensitive issues. This will also help keep the group focused on the specific needs of the group.
- a young refugee worker is likely to have good links with other young refugees – this will help in recruiting young people on to the group.

Statutory agency led

Statutory agencies working with young refugees are well placed to establish young refugee groups. These could be anything from an after-school group run by education professionals to a life-skills group run by social services. The benefits include:

- enabling professionals with statutory responsibilities to provide valuable extra support to a group of clients in an organised and effective way
- helping young refugees to see the workers in a more relaxed informal role, which can remove barriers and help build relationships
- increasing access to information on statutory services for young refugees
- providing an opportunity for staff to get feedback from clients on the service provided.

Community or voluntary organisation led

Community and voluntary organisations working with young refugees are also well placed to set up young refugee groups. The benefits of these agencies running a group are:

- they are seen as neutral and independent of statutory agencies. Young people may feel more comfortable about getting involved in a group which is not run by a government agency.
- they can be effective in advocacy work with young refugee groups – both on a collective and individual basis – to ensure young refugees are accessing the right support services and their rights are being met.

A multi-agency approach

This is where statutory, voluntary and community organisations with expertise in supporting young refugees work together to set up a young refugee group. The benefits can be significant and include:

- combining resources and expertise from a number of different organisations can provide substantial and broad-ranging support in establishing a group
- improving joined-up working, which will ultimately provide more effective support services for young refugees.

Partnership work can be challenging. This type of project needs clear aims, substantial commitment from each agency involved and one agency to take on a co-ordinating role.



key contacts & further reading



Save the Children

General enquiries on setting up young refugee groups contact – Elli Free on 020 8741 4054 x 124 or email e.free@scfuk.org.uk

Young Refugee Rights Project

Young refugee led group working to promote the rights of young refugees in west London. Contact: Radhika Howarth 020 8741 4054 x 123 or email r.howarth@scfuk.org.uk

Young Separated Refugees Support Project

Save the Children runs a young refugee group project in Greater Manchester. It provides social support through a drop-in and promotes self-advocacy of the group. The project also supports agencies to work with young refugees.

Contact: Miranda Kaunang or Farah Kurji on 0161 434 8337 or email m.kaunang@scfuk.org.uk or f.kurji@scfuk.org.uk

Young Refugees Project

The Children's Society supports a group of young refugees in Newham and neighbouring boroughs – working together to get their voices heard.

Contact: Susan Clare on 020 8553 9619.

Salisbury World

Runs an after school club for primary aged refugee children in Brent, London.

Contact: Ben Smith on 020 7372 2244 or email bensmith@salisbury.brent.sch.uk

Albanian Youth Action

Based in Vauxhall, London, this project offers support and activities for young unaccompanied Albanian-speaking refugees from the Balkan regions, and children with families. It helps them to adapt to their new environment, while keeping in touch with their own culture.

Contact: Caroline French Blake on 020 7582 6082

Asylum Welcome

Runs various young refugee groups in Oxford. Contact: Jamie Hewitt on 01865 722 082

Young Refugee Project

This project runs various groups and a drop-in centre for young refugees. Based in Lambeth, London.

Contact: Tesfai Behane on 020 7622 0752.

further reading

Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England, Kate Stanley, Save the Children, 2001. Research with young separated refugees in England and professionals working with them. Includes chapters on support and social networks. £7.50. To order a copy contact Plymbridge distributors, tel: 01752 202 301 or email: orders@plymbridge.com

Out Of Exile: Developing youth work with young refugees, Ros Norton and Brian Cohen, The Barbara Melunsky Fund, 2000. It challenges local and national policy-makers to tackle the hopelessness, isolation and alienation of young refugees through undertaking a comprehensive review of services in terms of policy direction, resources and priorities. £8.50. To order a copy contact the National Youth Agency, tel: 0116 285 3700 or email: nya@nya.org.uk

Series of short guides on working with young refugees, Save the Children, published between September 2002 and March 2003. The guides are on: working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children at ports of entry; setting up mentoring schemes; mental health support; providing social services support to young refugees where there are small numbers; and a guide to help personal advisers working at Connexions to support young refugees. To order and reserve copies contact Elli Free on 020 8741 4054 x 124 or email: e.free@scfuk.org.uk

A Guide to Setting Up Young Refugee Groups in Schools, Salusbury World, to be published early 2003.

Contact: Ben Smith, 020 7372 2244

notes

1 In this guide the term 'refugee' is used to describe people seeking asylum, as well as those with leave to remain, including Exceptional Leave to Remain and refugee status.

2 *Sold Short: Educational finance and refugee children*, 2002, GLA, London

3 Research Development Statistics, Home Office, 'Asylum Statistics United Kingdom', 2001

4 Ros Norton and Brian Cohen, *Out of Exile: Developing youth work with young refugees*, 2000; K. Stanley, *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*, 2001

5 K. Stanley, *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*, 2001

6 K. Stanley, *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*, 2001

7 Separated children are children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents or their legal/customary primary care-giver.

8 Any person offering immigration advice is regulated by the Office of the Immigration Service Commission (OISC) by either registering with or applying for exemption from the OISC.

Supported by:

Diana

THE WORK CONTINUES

Local Save the Children contact details: