



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Are your kids interested in global issues like the refugee crisis? Do you want to help them understand the facts? The global refugee crisis is a highly politicised issue and can be the subject of intense and often emotional debates in the news media. Children may see images of refugees on the move or in distress and struggle to interpret what this means, particularly when they see other children who are suffering.

There are currently 68.5 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, which includes 25.4 million officially recognised refugees – that's one person who has to flee their home every two seconds. This Plan International Australia guide has been developed with our child protection experts who have extensive experience working with refugee children all around the world.

It is aimed at helping parents to explain to their kids – in simple terms – why people flee their homes, how a person becomes a refugee, what happens to refugees when they arrive in a new country and gives context around why refugees have a right to be treated with dignity. It also provides practical advice on what children and parents can do if they're concerned about refugees.

FOUR STEPS



Starting a discussion with your child

What your children already know and what they worry about might surprise you. So let them take the lead in your conversation. Ask them what they'd like to talk about and let them know that you will do your best to answer any question they might have. This will ensure their questions are addressed, and not just your assumptions.



Stick to the facts

A good first step is to educate yourself about refugees: find out more about where they come from and the problems they've faced.

Give children the facts tailored to their age and development stage and the opportunity to ask questions or express concerns that they have as you go.

Children gain a sense of comfort if you talk openly. It's OK to admit you don't fully understand the topic, no-one expects you to be a professor of politics and social sciences, but let your child know that you're willing to learn more together.



Use empathetic framing and language

It's best to begin the conversation by acknowledging that refugees are people just like you and I. Try to avoid talking about refugees as outsiders. Never refer to refugees as 'boat people'. Instead, try to refer to refugees as everyday people caught up in a terrible situation.

Many refugees have been born into their refugee status and many have become refugees later in life. Emphasise that it's not linked to your wealth, education or your standing in society.

Phrases like 'refugees have the same rights as you and I do' and 'everyone deserves to be safe' can help. Keep in mind that refugees are often in a desperate situation, through no fault of their own, and are just people who are trying to find a safe place.



Invite your child to do something to help, if they want to

If your child is upset or concerned by the situation for refugees, reassure them that lots of fantastic work is being done, right here in Australia, and all over the world, to support refugees. This is important work not only to help refugees access their basic needs, but to help them build brighter futures for themselves and their families.

It might help to invite your child to do something practical to assist. You could:

- Support a local organisation that funds services for refugees with a donation or simply by following them on social media or looking at their website together to learn more about refugees. For example, Plan International Australia has several [active appeals](#) for refugees around the world you could donate to.
- Reach out to refugee families at the child's school who might be struggling to settle in when they first arrive in Australia. This could be something as simple as inviting them for a cup of tea or simply striking up a conversation and finding out more about their culture and situation.
- Get involved in a campaign to improve conditions for refugees, for example, by signing a petition (like [this one](#) to protect children on Nauru). Or look up your local Member of Parliament and send them an email or letter to tell them you want refugee children to be safe.
- Consider volunteering with a local organisation that supports refugees, particularly services that provide for newly arrived refugee families. Often these services run food and clothing drives or are actively seeking volunteers for various projects.

ALL ABOUT REFUGEES:

QUESTIONS YOUR CHILD MIGHT ASK

“I MISS MY LARGE FAMILY. I DREAM OF BEING REUNITED WITH THEM AND HAVING FUN.”

Iman*, 7 came to Jordan as a Syrian refugee and is now living in a Plan International supported refugee camp.

What is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their home because of a well-founded fear of violence or persecution. This could be, for example, because of their race, religion, or nationality.

How many refugees are there in the world, how many of them are children and where have they come from?

The United Nations' Refugee Agency – known as the [UNHCR](#) – is responsible for keeping count of refugee populations. The most current figures are that there are 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, that includes 40 million internally displaced (which means they are still in their country but have lost or left their homes), 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers. The UNHCR estimates that 44,400 people are forced to flee their homes every single day in 2017. That's one person every two seconds. Of the 25 million refugees, more than half are children (aged under 18).

Where do refugees live and in what type of conditions?

Many refugees live in a designated place that a hosting country has provided, commonly called a refugee 'settlement' or a 'camp'. Some refugee camps are very new and could be less than a year old and others might have been there for more than 30 years. Some refugee camps look like dusty plains with tents and some look like villages, with families living in bamboo or mud shelters, complete with shops and hairdressers and food markets. Some refugees live amongst their host community, with host families or in public or rented accommodation. Many refugees quickly adapt to life in their host country, they go to school, they work and they contribute positively to their community.



Nurjahan, 18, now lives in a temporary shelter made of bamboo and tarpaulins in Cox's Bazar after fleeing her home in Myanmar.

How are refugees different to other groups who have left their homes?

Refugees are different from groups of people who migrate. Refugees have been forced to leave their homes, have been assessed under international law as being a refugee, and are people who cannot return home because it is not safe for them there.

How does Australia help refugees?

Australia helps in two ways. The Government gives money to organisations like Plan International and the UNHCR, who have the global responsibility for protecting refugees to provide basic services in countries where refugees are residing. These countries are called 'hosting' countries.

The amount of money our Government allocates depends on how severe the situation is and size of the refugee population. Most commonly, the money is for education, food, nutrition, medicine, protection and shelter.

Australia also resettles refugees through its refugee and humanitarian program. This can happen, for example, when an asylum seeker is recognised as a refugee or through UNHCR's resettlement program. From 2016 to 2017, almost [22,000 refugees](#) were granted visas through this program. Once they arrive in Australia, they are provided with accommodation, healthcare, education and support to learn English, find jobs and become independent.

Australian organisations, like Plan International, take part in global meetings to try to create better conditions for refugees around the world and provide expert advice on how to support and protect the increasing number of refugees worldwide.

Plan International Australia believes the Government can and should increase its support for refugees by ending mandatory detention, especially for children.

There are also a large number of refugee-led organisations providing support to other refugees in the community and campaigning for refugee rights.

What does Plan International do for refugees?

Plan International provides refugees all around the world with basic services like shelter, food and education. We also provide specialised services for particularly vulnerable refugees like women and children; including safe spaces and psychosocial support services and helping them reunite with their families and to start businesses to make a living.

We work in countries with large refugee populations, including the Rohingya people in Bangladesh, Burundi refugees in Tanzania and South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. We also work in Lebanon and Jordan with Syrian refugees.

Plan International also sits on a number of the global consortiums that try to influence in achieving better outcomes for refugees.

“WE LIVED LIKE PRISONERS IN ALEPPO, SYRIA. MY MOTHER WOULDN'T LET ME AND MY THREE BROTHERS OUT, NOT EVEN TO GO TO SCHOOL. I NEVER SAW MY FRIENDS.

WE CAME HERE ABOUT A YEAR AGO. ALTHOUGH THE CIRCUMSTANCES ARE HARSH, I FEEL SAFE IN THE CAMP. I HAVE MADE FRIENDS, AND IT FEELS GREAT TO WALK TO SCHOOL WITH THEM, DO HOMEWORK AND PLAY ON OUR PHONES.”

Hayat*, 14 is currently living in a Plan International supported refugee camp in Jordan.

What does the law say when it comes to helping refugees?

Australia has signed the Refugee Convention which recognises the individual right of a person to seek asylum in another country, due to persecution in their own country. Australia has also signed up to seven important international human rights treaties, including the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

Do refugees have rights? What are they?

Yes, they have rights just like everyone else. There is a specific global legal document relating to refugee protection, called the Refugee Convention. Refugees are also born with the same rights as anyone else, outlined in all the human rights frameworks: these rights exist so that any child and person has the opportunity to survive and thrive. Every person on the planet is born with rights and they can't be taken away from you.

Do refugee children get to go to school?

Like all children, refugee children have the right to education but sometimes access to education is more difficult for refugee children because they're moving to a place of safety, they can't get to a classroom or continue their studies.

In many situations, education is only available at primary school level, sometimes secondary level and only very rarely is tertiary level education an option for refugees.

Education is either provided for by the hosting government or by organisations like Plan International, who provide school resources and buildings that are safe to learn in, with materials that are relevant to the children.

One of the biggest barriers is the language that the education is taught in and the certificate they graduate with which may not be recognised in their country of origin.



Girls who have fled to Egypt from Syria are taking remedial classes supported by Plan International.

Are some countries better at helping refugees than others? Why is that?

Not all countries have signed the refugee convention and some do not accept refugees. Different countries provide different services, depending on the country's capacity and willingness to provide protection.

The majority of the world's refugees are hosted in low or middle income countries. Turkey, Pakistan, and Lebanon host the highest number of refugees, with Lebanon the highest when compared to its own population. In Lebanon, the refugee population is about a quarter of their whole population. Other countries, like Australia, provide a 'durable solution', which includes the opportunity for a refugee to permanently migrate to Australia to seek safety and start a new life.

Why are there so many refugees around the world currently?

There are 68.5 million forcibly displaced girls, boys, women, and men worldwide: a record high. Conflicts are getting bigger and lasting longer, sometimes for many decades like in Syria, Myanmar, South Sudan and Somalia. Many refugees live in limbo, not knowing if or when they can ever return home.

Why do they stay in bad conditions and camps? Why don't they just go back to their countries?

When you fear for your life and the lives of your children, the option to go back to your home is not a real option at all.

Some people do want to return but they can't. For example, a recent survey of Syrian refugees found that many wanted to go home but they couldn't because it's not safe for them.

For many refugees, you have to consider: what does home look like? Their city may no longer exist, their land and house might not be there anymore. Their families have left and they might not know where their relatives are. This is why it's never as simple as just returning home.

“I HAVE MADE A FEW FRIENDS HERE, BUT I MISS MY FRIENDS FROM HOME. I’VE SEEN SOME OF THEM ONCE OR TWICE BUT THEY LIVE A LONG WALK FROM OUR TENT. I DON’T WANT TO LIVE HERE ANYMORE, IT DOESN’T FEEL LIKE HOME.”

Eight-year-old Nasan's family fled Myanmar after their village was burned. He is now living in the Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh.

Do refugees leave a country all at once?

It's common for women and children and the elderly to leave at the point where war is breaking out and it's dangerous for them to stay. Sometimes they get lost and separated along the way, because they travel long distances with sometimes hundreds of thousands of people, crossing rivers, going through jungles and getting on boats to cross rivers or the ocean.

So while families and neighbours might leave together, it's not uncommon that they end up at their destination separated from loved ones. This happens to many children. These children are known as 'unaccompanied and separated' and organisations like Plan International will help these children to find their family members.

Isn't it really dangerous to travel on a boat or on foot for a long time with children?

Yes it can be. But it's important to remember that refugees don't necessarily have a choice about how they leave, or they know that they're not safe where they are and they have to do all they can to get to a safer destination.

Parents don't willingly put their children in danger. They weigh up the risks and make the best decision they can with the options available to them. For many refugees, the only option is to get on a boat or to cross hundreds of kilometres through the desert.



Families arriving by train in Tabanovce, Macedonia near the Serbian border.

Are the people living on Manus and Nauru Islands refugees?

Australia has international obligations, due to the international treaties they have signed, to protect the human rights of refugees, regardless of how and where they arrive in Australia.

The majority of people who seek asylum in Australia arrive by plane. For those who arrive by boat, recent changes in policies have meant that their claim to become a refugee will no longer be processed here in Australia and they're sent to the islands of Nauru and Manus.

The people who enter Manus and Nauru came to Australia to seek asylum with the understanding that on arrival they would be processed to be considered to be a refugee under the international convention. It means that they need to be processed within a reasonable timeframe, however for many of the asylum seekers on Nauru, they've been waiting indefinitely.

When it comes to children, there are options available other than 'offshore detention'. Organisations like Plan International believe that these options should be put in place, because an alternative must be found for children and families so they can live in a safe place.

Why do some people not want to help refugees?

There are more refugees than ever before so for some people, the problem seems impossible. And for countries like Australia, it can seem so far away.

Refugee policy has changed over the decades. For example, after the Vietnam War in the 1960s, in what became known as the Indochina refugee crisis, 450,000 Indochinese refugees were resettled in 18 months, mostly in the USA, Canada, Australia and France. These large-scale global commitments to resettlement do not exist today. In recent times, in response to the 13.1 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, Australia committed to resettle an extra 12,000 people only. For the majority of Syrians, long-term solutions to their forced displacement have not been found.

Some people think their government is not doing enough for refugees, but there are other people who think that their government is taking too many. It can be a very emotional and political issue that people feel very strongly about.



Children have fun in playground at a Plan International supported ECCD centre in Uganda where many people have fled to from South Sudan.

“MY HOPES FOR SOUTH SUDAN ARE THAT EVERYTHING WILL CHANGE FROM BAD TO GOOD. HERE WE ARE STUDYING SO THAT IN FUTURE WE CAN BE THE NEW LEADERS OF SOUTH SUDAN ...MAKING IT A GOOD COUNTRY AGAIN.”

Jemma, 16, is now living with a foster family in Uganda, she is not sure where her parents are but hopes to return to her home country one day.

Further activities and resources for parents and kids

- The UNHCR teacher’s toolkit <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/teachers-toolkit.html>
- Against All Odds educational online game: what it’s like to build a life in a new country <http://www.playagainstalldds.ca/>
- The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre’s guide for students <https://www.asrc.org.au/resources/for-students/>