



Strategies to Increase Newcomer Youth and Family Participation in Programs and Services

Guidance for service providers, foster parents, volunteer mentors, and school professionals

This info guide provides strategies to encourage newcomer youth and families to participate in programs and services. These strategies can be applied in both mandatory programs (e.g., school attendance, foster care requirements) and voluntary programs (e.g., after-school activities, recreational programs). This guide is especially relevant to support youth participating in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program.

Engagement strategies should consider youth age and autonomy—those under 18 may be required to participate and benefit from caregiver support, while older youth often engage voluntarily.

Why is participation and engagement a common challenge?

Service providers and foster parents work hard to help newcomer youth access services. Still, they may encounter resistance.

Trauma can make it hard to trust adults or new environments. Cultural and social differences also play a role: many youth are not familiar with structured programs, required attendance, or

expectations around school, therapy, and independent living (IL) skills.

Additionally, youth often juggle competing priorities, such as coping with concerns about loved ones in their country of origin, sending money to family, and managing responsibilities in their new home or program. Language barriers can make participation feel even more overwhelming. And many teens may just feel uninterested or disengaged.

Encouraging Youth and Family Involvement

Build Trust Through Meaningful Relationships

Establishing trust is essential for engaging youth and families.

Build rapport through regular check-ins and informal conversations to demonstrate consistency, reliability, and a genuine interest in the participants' well-being. Ensure interactions are [trauma-informed](#) and adapt to differing cultural backgrounds to create welcoming, nonjudgmental environments showing youth and families they are safe, seen, and supported.

Use Strength-Based Approaches

A [strength-based approach](#) builds upon the inherent strengths and resilience of youth and families.

To increase engagement, **highlight skills, offer leadership opportunities, and equip families** with the tools and [knowledge](#) they need to support their children's growth in areas such as [education](#), employment, and independent living skills.

Recognize and celebrate what youth already bring to the table—skills, resilience, leadership potential—and build from there.

Ensure Accessible Programming

Accessible programming is key to opening the door for all youth and families to fully engage.

Remove participation barriers by offering clear, multilingual communication, flexible scheduling, transportation, and interpretation as needed.

Consider cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic impacting factors: some families may be unfamiliar with youth-only or caregiver-only programs, or may come from cultures where group participation or direct communication with authority figures is uncommon.

Provide Hands-On and Participatory Learning Experiences

Incorporate experiential learning opportunities to help youth develop life skills, such as:

- [Housing & Budgeting Workshops](#)—offering guidance on rental applications, budgeting, and tenant rights.
- **Transportation & Driver's Education Support**—providing information on licensing, insurance, vehicle [safety](#), and public transportation.
- **Community & Social Life Discussions**—practicing conflict resolution, [healthy relationships](#), and cultural integration.
- [Employment & Financial Literacy Training](#)—supporting youth with resume building, interview skills, money management, and tax education.
- **Virtual Reality**—integrating emerging technologies such as [virtual reality \(VR\)](#) technology into your programs to create immersive, interactive simulations that introduce refugee and newcomer youth and families to essential community settings and services (e.g., [going to high school](#), [parent pick-up](#), [taking a school bus](#), [public transportation](#), [grocery stores](#), [pharmacies](#), [navigating Google maps](#).)
 - Combine VR experiences with [digital literacy](#) support to help youth and families engage in virtual spaces, reduce isolation, and address acculturation, mental health, and well-being needs.

Organize Social and Community-Building Events

Create ongoing traditions that foster connection, belonging, and participation, such as:

Winter Wonderland Celebration—a festive gathering featuring:

- **Cultural Food Exchange:** Families bring and share traditional dishes.
- **Storytelling & Open Mic:** Youth share personal stories, poetry, or music.
- **Winter-Themed Game Stations:** These might include snowflake craft corners, hot cocoa trivia, and community-building challenges.

Summer Festival & BBQ—a lively outdoor event with:

- **"Amazing Race" Team Challenge:** Youth, staff, and foster families complete fun mini-games highlighting different cultures.
- **Live Music & Dance Showcase:** This could feature performances from different cultural traditions.
- **Community Mural Project:** A collaborative art piece can symbolize unity and shared experience.

Outdoor & Recreational Activities—rock climbing, rafting, sports games, and college tours can encourage participation and socialization.

Unstructured Social Spaces—youth may prefer open, relaxed environments where they can simply spend time together, as opposed to structured activities. Events featuring arcade games, go-karts, or other high-interest activities can increase attendance, and don't forget the power of including food as an engagement incentive.

Spark Engagement with Creative, Interactive Approaches

Engagement strategies should be **dynamic** and **responsive** to different learning preferences. Use visual storytelling with multimedia (e.g., [Rental Housing in the U.S.](#), [Hygiene in the U.S.](#)) to simplify complex topics, and offer tailored support through small groups, mentorship, or one-on-one check-ins. Adaptable **downloadable resource guides** can also reinforce learning and support to your program's specific needs.

- [Youth Refugee Employability Toolkit](#)
- [Independent Living Life Skills Checklist Booklet](#)
- [Independent Living Skills Checklist Template](#)

Leverage Community Partnerships

Building connections with community resources

strengthens support networks. Enhance engagement by making youth and families aware of available ([community](#)) resources and services, **collaborate** with trusted community leaders to build credibility, and partner with schools, faith-based organizations, and cultural groups to strengthen connections.

Implement the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework](#) for increasing school engagement and focus on developing the capabilities of both educators and families to foster effective partnerships.

Applying this model can help tailor engagement strategies that recognize different cultures and are mutually beneficial..

Center Youth and Family Cultural Backgrounds with Trauma-Informed Care

Recognize and respect the cultural backgrounds and experiences of youth and families. Train staff in cross-cultural and care ideally building a team that reflects the communities served. Celebrate traditions, align programming with community values, and connect participation to personal and family goals. Acknowledge that when the benefits of a program are not clearly understood by youth or families, other responsibilities—such as work or caregiving—may understandably take priority over participation.

Uplift Youth and Family Voice in Decision-Making

Involve youth and caregivers in program development through advisory boards or feedback sessions. Empower them to shape services that reflect their needs and experiences.

Youth and families are the experts on their own experiences—when they help shape the program, they’re more likely to participate and stay engaged.

Offer Incentives and Recognize Engagement

Providing incentives can **increase motivation** and participation, particularly in voluntary programs. Carefully assess when and where incentives are appropriate and meaningful, making sure they align with funder requirements. Depending on the context, this could look like offering stipends, certificates, or gift cards as rewards. For independent living (IL) youth, this might include reduced rent or increased stipends tied to educational or skill-building activities. **Reward consistent attendance** to encourage long-term engagement, and design flexible options that account for the varying schedules of youth and families.

Conclusion

Newcomer youth are navigating enormous transitions—adapting to new systems, languages, expectations, and cultural norms—while carrying the weight of past experiences and present responsibilities. Supporting their full participation in programs and services is essential to their long-term well-being.

That engagement doesn’t happen by accident. Service providers, such as foster parents, educators, and mentors must intentionally build trust, offer relevant opportunities, and adapt programming to reflect the realities and strengths of the youth they serve.

These strategies aim to recognize youth as valuable, contributors, lower barriers to empathy and creativity, and create spaces where youth and families feel seen, respected, and motivated to engage. With thoughtful implementation, they can help newcomer youth and families build long-term success.

Resources

Family Engagement

- Switchboard & Rupani Foundation, Blog: [Adopting a Family Engagement Model is a Game-Changer](#) (2023)
- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS), Webinar: [Family Engagement with Refugee Populations](#) (2018)
- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS), Guide: [Raising Teens in a New Country: A Guide for the Whole Family](#) (2018)

Independent Living (IL) Skills Engagement

- Switchboard, Toolkit: [Getting Started with Virtual Reality: Guide for Introducing VR Technology in Refugee Resettlement Service Provision](#) (2024)
- Refugee Housing Solutions, Tool: [Rental Responsibilities and Housing Necessities Checklist](#) (2023)
- Switchboard, Video: [Adjusting to Life & Work in the U.S.—Perspectives from Refugee Youth](#) (2020)

Youth Leadership Opportunities

- [New American Youth Leadership Council](#)
- [Global Refugee Youth Network](#)

Leveraging Community Resources

- Switchboard, Blog: [Advice for Mentors Who Work with Newcomer Youth](#) (2023)
- Switchboard, Guide: [Promoting Supportive Mentoring for Refugee Youth](#) (2023)

School Engagement

- Cary Institute, Webinar: [Engaging Refugee Parents and Families in School](#) (2020)
- Switchboard, Webinar: [Increasing Family Engagement within Schools to Support Refugee Students](#) (2024)

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www.SwitchboardTA.org.



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