



From Power Struggles to Partnership: Supporting Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Foster Parents

Supporting [unaccompanied refugee minors \(URMs\)](#) often involves helping foster parents navigate disagreements around household expectations, school requirements, and increasing independence. For refugee foster parents, these conversations are further shaped by cultural differences as refugee youth adapt to life in a new country. Though some foster parents may share aspects of a refugee youth's cultural background or lived experiences, they still may encounter misunderstandings while parenting across cultures. This guide explores how service providers can support foster parents in building connection and avoiding power struggles when disagreements arise.

Why Power Struggles Happen

Adolescence (typically ages 12–18) is a developmental period characterized by increasing independence, identity exploration, and growing influence from peers and broader social environments. Most refugee youth in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program are within this age range; they are often seeking greater autonomy and independence. This guide uses “refugee youth” to refer to these URMs. Disagreements with foster parents are common during this stage and often reflect normal developmental processes rather than intentional defiance.

For refugee youth, adolescence occurs alongside additional transitions, including adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, and adjusting to new family relationships. These overlapping experiences can increase stress for both refugee youth and foster parents.

As a result, foster parents and refugee youth may approach the same situation from different perspectives. Foster parents may prioritize safety and responsibility, while refugee youth may prioritize [autonomy](#) and belonging. When these competing priorities go unaddressed, everyday disagreements are more likely to become **power struggles**.

Common areas where power struggles may arise between foster parents and refugee youth:

- Household expectations, such as cleanliness or chores
- Communication styles
- Curfews
- [School](#) attendance or homework
- [Engaging in services](#) such as mental health therapy
- Participating in family activities such as shared mealtimes
- Social media or cell phone use
- Dating and friendships
- Independence

In parenting, a power struggle occurs when a disagreement becomes a back-and-forth effort to gain control or compliance rather than an attempt to understand one another. Over time, repeated power struggles can weaken communication and trust, making refugee youth less likely to seek guidance from trusted adults.

Foster Parenting Across Cultures

Every refugee foster parent is parenting across cultures. For some, those differences may be most visible through language, culture, or religion. For others, they may emerge through differences in generation, migration experiences, technology, or adaptation to life in the United States. Each of these differences shapes expectations and influences how foster parents and refugee youth understand the same situation. These differences may also shape beliefs about authority, discipline, [communication](#), and how respect is shown. For many refugee youth, experiences before or during migration may also influence how they respond to adults in positions of authority—which may show up as avoidance or fear.

There is no single cross-cultural foster parenting experience. Sources of misunderstanding will differ depending on the experiences foster parents and refugee youth bring into the relationship.

For example:

- **Foster parents who share a refugee youth's cultural background** may still experience misunderstandings. A foster parent and refugee youth may both speak Dari and have family roots in Afghanistan. The foster parent may be a first-generation American who grew up in the United States, while the refugee youth recently arrived as a URM. Although they share a language and cultural heritage, they may have lived these shared experiences differently.
- **Foster parents who share a refugee youth's resettlement experience** may face different sources of tension. A foster parent may still be [adapting to life in the United States](#) while the refugee youth may learn English, technology, or school norms more quickly. This can shift family dynamics, particularly if the refugee youth begins navigating daily life more independently. Different rates of adaptation are a common part of resettlement and should not automatically be interpreted as disrespect or unwillingness to follow expectations. Without conversations about these changing roles, differences in expectations can become power struggles.
- **Foster parents who do not share a refugee youth's background** may interpret behaviors through their own experiences. For example, a foster parent may say, *"Make eye contact with me while we're talking."* While this advice is well intended, the refugee youth may come from a culture where direct eye contact with adults is viewed differently. Understanding those differences can help foster parents respond with curiosity rather than assuming that their foster child is being disrespectful.

Strategies for Service Providers Supporting Foster Parents

Educate and Discuss Ahead of Time

Explore potential sources of misunderstandings in advance to help identify where power struggles may arise before one occurs. Education on adolescence, common areas of tension, and parenting across cultures should be built into existing conversations, such as licensing discussions and pre-placement planning.

Encourage foster parents to learn about the refugee youth's individual experiences. For example, asking about [traditions](#) that are important to the refugee youth and their culture can strengthen the relationship and help foster parents better understand the youth and what's meaningful to them.

Service providers can encourage foster parents to ask themselves:

- Which of my experiences influence my expectations as a foster parent?
- What experiences might be shaping the refugee youth's perspective?
 - How might differences in beliefs about authority, discipline, or respect influence this situation?
 - Are there cultural customs or family traditions that may be shaping this situation?
- Where might those experiences lead to different expectations?
- How can those differences be discussed?

Service providers can use **reflection questions** during conversations with foster parents. These questions help providers notice assumptions, anticipate differences, and support foster parents in approaching refugee youth with more understanding. The goal is to reduce assumptions before they become power struggles (regardless of shared backgrounds), not necessarily to eliminate all future conflict.

Normalize the Challenge

Parenting is hard. Foster parenting adds another layer of complexity. Parenting an adolescent who is adapting to life in a new country adds another layer still. Foster parents may question whether they are responding in the right way when disagreements arise. They may also wonder whether a refugee youth's behavior is related to adolescence, resettlement, cultural differences, or something else entirely.

Reassure foster parents that these questions are common even outside of the resettlement context. Normalizing these challenges help foster parents move from, "What am I doing wrong?" to "What does this young person need right now?"

Keep an Open Mind

Encourage foster parents to be open-minded and curious about the world refugee youth are experiencing today rather than relying only on their own adolescent experience. Every generation grows up with different opportunities, challenges, and influences.

Transitioning to [life in a new country](#), for many refugee youth, involves experiences of loss and grief, alongside strength and growth. It is helpful for both providers and foster parents to start from a place of curiosity and learning before attempting to problem-solve, recognizing that assumptions based on their own experiences may not reflect what the refugee youth is navigating.

Look Beyond Behavior to Understand the Need

Many behaviors illustrate an underlying need. Instead of focusing on stopping or criticizing the behavior, encourage foster parents to become curious about what may be driving a particular behavior. Curiosity does not remove accountability. It creates opportunities to understand the refugee youth's perspective before solving the problem together. Responses such as, "Help me understand," or "Can you tell me more about that?" help **reframe** foster parents' thinking and invite [conversation](#) before problem solving. Center the question: *what need might this behavior be meeting?*

Consider underlying needs:

- Avoiding family activities may be an outcome of feeling overwhelmed or unsure how they fit into the family.
- Staying out past curfew may be an outcome of finding belonging they have not yet experienced elsewhere.

One need to consider is belonging. Belonging shapes behavior. For refugee youth, that sense of belonging may be changing as they adapt to life in a new country. When refugee youth do not experience belonging in one place, they naturally look for it somewhere else. For example, avoiding family activities may indicate that the youth is overwhelmed or unsure how they fit into their foster family. Staying out past curfew may provide a clue that a refugee youth is finding belonging somewhere outside the foster home. Looking beyond the behavior helps foster parents recognize when an unmet need for belonging may be influencing a refugee youth's choices.

Understanding the need behind a behavior does not remove expectations. In this example, recognizing a youth's need for belonging does not mean foster

parents should remove the curfew. However, they can use the potential need as information to strengthen the relationship while addressing the concerning behavior. In this case, the foster parent might ask the youth what they value about the time they spend with others. The parent can then work with the refugee youth to identify another way to meet that need—such as offering to host friends before curfew. Change is more likely when refugee youth can see a meaningful path forward.

This example illustrates how foster parents can work with refugee youth to build skills rather than relying only on rules or restrictions to control behavior. **Foster parents can use what they learn about a refugee youth's underlying needs to problem-solve together.**

Maintain Boundaries

Understanding a refugee youth's perspective does not guarantee agreement. Encourage foster parents to **maintain clear and reasonable boundaries**. Disagreements may continue even after both perspectives are understood. For an example, see the case study at right. You may need to remind foster parents that change is often gradual and takes time.

For additional support, consider referring foster parents to evidence-based family strengthening programs and learning resource, such as Dr. Karol Kumpfer's [Strengthening Families Program](#). This resource supports parent-child attachment, family relationships, and communication that can help foster parents maintain clear boundaries and expectations with youth.

Focus on Values and Strengths

Refugee youth arrive in the U.S. with significant strengths and may deeply value independence. Some have traveled independently across multiple countries. Others have worked, managed daily responsibilities, cared for family members, or made life-altering decisions on their own. They may arrive with strong goals for education, employment, or supporting their families. These experiences shape how refugee youth respond to expectations in and outside of a foster home. A refugee youth who has been making decisions independently may struggle with rules that limit their autonomy.

For example, if a refugee youth questions why they need adult supervision, **rather than viewing independence as an obstacle, partner with them.** Ask what responsibilities they managed before arriving in the United States. Consider how strengths can be

Case Study: Technology Use Across Cultures

The framework in this guide can be applied to many common areas of disagreement. Here is one possible scenario: A foster parent who grew up in the U.S. says, *"When I was your age, I didn't need to be on a phone all the time."*

As a service provider, you can help prevent future power struggles before they happen by **educating and discussing ahead of time**. Ask:

- "What expectations do you have around technology use?"
- "What experiences have shaped those expectations?"
- "How would you respond if a refugee youth challenged your rules?"

If a power struggle emerges, **normalize the challenge**. You might say, *"Technology can be such a hard topic for all parents."* Remind foster parents to **keep an open mind**. Try saying: *"Every generation grows up in a different world. Have you tried asking [youth name] about how they use their phone, and what role it plays in their life?"* **Looking beyond the behavior may reveal a need** to stay connected with family or build friendships with new classmates through the phone usage.

Then, you might tell foster parents, *"You can acknowledge [youth name's] perspective while maintaining boundaries: 'I understand how important it is to stay connected to your family. We are still going to put phones away during meals so we can spend time together.'"* Remind foster parents to **focus on the values** they hope to teach rather than the technology itself. Respect, responsibility, and healthy relationships remain important regardless of how technology evolves over time.

Finally, encourage foster parents to **build trust through partnership and consistency**. Share resources such as [Common Sense Media](#) and [Connect Safely](#) that help parents teach safe and responsible technology use, including digital literacy, healthy boundaries, critical thinking, and respectful communication.

incorporated into the foster home, such as planning and preparing a family meal each week or taking ownership of another household responsibility. Building on a youth's existing strengths can increase trust with foster parents while introducing new expectations and preparing youth to make decisions beyond the foster home.

Build Trust through Partnership and Consistency

Encourage foster parents to ask, "How do I guide the refugee youth while maintaining our relationship?" rather than, "How do I get the refugee youth to comply?" When youth stop turning to trusted adults for guidance, they naturally begin looking elsewhere – which may not be in their best interest. Maintaining a strong relationship helps foster parents act as a safe and trusted source of guidance as refugee youth navigate adolescence and life in a new country.

Consistency helps build trust over time. Refugee youth benefit from knowing what to expect from the adults in their lives. Encourage foster parents to maintain clear expectations while responding consistently. This might look like following through on previously set expectations, communicating in a consistent style, and approaching disagreements using a similar process each time.

Connection looks different for every refugee youth. Some refugee youth seek more closeness, while others prefer more space. Encourage foster parents to follow the refugee youth's lead in how they build the relationship while remaining consistently available and engaged.

Conclusion

Parenting refugee youth in a new country is complex. Culture, resettlement, and adolescence all shape a young person's experiences. Power struggles are not inevitable. By helping foster parents understand the experiences shaping refugee youth behavior, service providers can support conversations that strengthen relationships while maintaining clear expectations.

The more we fight for control, the more we risk losing connection.

Additional Resources

- Society of Refugee Healthcare Providers, [Working Across Cultures in Mental Health Services](#) (2025)
- U.S. Department of Education (ED), [Supporting Young English Learners at Home: Family and Caregiver Activities](#) (2020) available in 8 languages
- UNHCR, [Refugee, children, and youth](#) (2024)
- Institute of Child Psychology, [Ending Power Struggles: How to Drop the Rope](#)
- KEEP Supporting Foster & Kinship Families, Foster/Kin Parent Handouts Standard Model, [Power Struggles pgs. 113-119](#)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), University of Minnesota, [Parenting in a New Context: Strategies for Practitioners Supporting Refugee and Immigrant Caregivers](#)
- USCRI Refugee Youth Resource Center (RYRC), [GROW Learning Journal](#) and [SMART Goals Planner](#) available in 9 languages

Switchboard

- Webinar: [Motivational Interviewing for Unaccompanied Refugee Minor \(URM\) Service Providers](#) (2026)
- Webinar: [Providing Culturally Sensitive Guidance on Caregiving Practices to Newcomers](#) (2024)
- Webinar: [Child Protection Roundtable Session 3: Hear Foster Parent and Staff Perspectives](#) (2025)
- Guide: [Strategies to Increase Newcomer Youth and Family Participation in Programs and Services](#) (2025)
- Webinar: [Traumatic Stress Among Refugee Children and Youth Part I: Viewing Trauma Through a Developmental Lens](#) (2023)
- Webinar: [Child Protection Roundtable Session 1: Abuse and Neglect in the Newcomer Youth Context](#) (2025)
- Webinar: [Trauma Attachment with Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Clients](#) (2024)

The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.