

Identity matters: addressing inequity starts in early childhood

- ▷ *Refugee children internalise a sense of otherness from a young age.*
- ▷ *Refugee Trauma Initiative works to help children feel valued and respected.*
- ▷ *Developing a sense of self-worth helps children heal their traumatic beginnings.*

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Evidence shows that race and identity heavily influence key life outcomes including physical and mental health and income (Pachter and Coll, 2009). Across the world, people from black and ethnic minority communities bear the brunt of growing inequity. It starts with how young children experience difference: children as young as 3 are shown to internalise a sense of otherness based on their identities (Connolly, 2009). The formative early years can build a strong foundation of self-worth and resilience, or set up a child for a life battling prejudice and discrimination.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the experiences of refugee children. They spend their childhoods in exile, dislocated from their communities and often facing racist prejudice and discrimination, vilification by politicians, and aggressive behaviour from border agencies and the police. In the media, almost every image of a refugee is either threatening or depicts a victim without agency. Refugees are stripped of all other facets of their identity.

Refugee children internalise the experience of being ‘othered’ from a young age. I remember vividly the numerous times when landlords refused to rent my family accommodation because we were refugees. Grief would hang over my family for days. I would wonder in my child’s mind what we could do to repent for our circumstances. To dismantle the trauma of such experiences in adulthood requires difficult emotional work and regular psychosocial support that is rarely available.

Refugee children often grow up in contexts where their history, language and traditions are not understood, even purposely ignored. Families live under inhumane and arduous conditions, sometimes for years, lacking security, nourishment, education and healthcare. Women in the groups that my colleagues and I run often talk of the claustrophobia that their situation inflicts on them. When ‘I can’t breathe’ – the final words of George Floyd – became a rallying call for protests against racial injustice in 2020, I reflected that I had long heard similar sentiments expressed, metaphorically, about the experience of being a refugee.

Creating spaces to respect identity

At Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI), an organisation I set up and run, we take care to create spaces where the identities of the families and children we work with are recognised, respected and celebrated. The practice of understanding and respecting where the children come from forms the foundation of our work.

'Baytna', our early childhood intervention, is value-based (*baytna* means 'our home' in Arabic). Our training focuses on building the skills of facilitators to embed and disseminate the intervention's values into the lives of refugee families. Our first aim when training new facilitators is to establish the sense of safety that is necessary to recognise and dismantle the unconscious bias that we all hold, and understand the ways in which it can impact practice with children.

These sessions are often incredibly emotional and unsettling, requiring an experienced trainer to hold the space safely and guide the trainees through the difficulties into a space of awareness and community. In one such session, a tearful facilitator shared her feelings of resentment and judgement towards the families of the children who came to her sessions. It was difficult for her to disclose these feelings, but it opened an opportunity for discussion with her peers. She was supported through her difficult emotions and the group helped her brainstorm strategies for managing her judgemental feelings when they arise.

Children can leave their own imprint in Baytna spaces



Our facilitators receive meaningful and continuous training, peer coaching and supervision, enabling them to run sessions for young children where there is authentic support and respect for children's identities, history and curiosity. They practise understanding when children bring difficult emotions into a session, always welcoming their feelings and helping the children to express them through play, art, movement and storytelling.

We emphasise lived experience and representation of the community when developing our programmes. Baytna was designed with the support of refugee parents and children, and we search for facilitators from the communities we serve so that the children can see themselves represented in those who take charge of the space. In Polycastro, for example, a small town on the Greek–North Macedonian border, a group of Kurdish mothers run a Baytna kindergarten with RTI providing training, coaching and financial support. Often sessions end with songs from the Kurdish community.

We encourage parents to participate, and to bring stories and songs from their own childhoods so that their children can grow up from a young age with a sense of connection to where they came from. When parents experience guilt and shame for not being able to provide for their children, we listen to them and remind them of the courage and resilience it took for them to make the journeys that brought their children away from violence.

Identity-informed practice helps families reconcile the culture and traditions of their country of origin with their country of asylum



Building a sense of self-worth and agency

My own family's journey from Kabul to London took four years. We faced countless instances of racism and discrimination – sometimes intentional, but often stemming from a lack of understanding of what we had endured and the colonial roots of violence in the history of Afghanistan. Being a refugee means battling powerful, dark forces for the sake of the safety of your community.

In developing my own practice of working with children and families who have faced similar journeys, I recognised how important my identity was to my resilience. Connecting to the history and storytelling tradition of Afghanistan – and understanding the courage and tenacity of my own parents, who brought up five children in the most difficult circumstances – has healed deep wounds and nurtured a sense of pride in where I come from.

RTI's work aims to help children feel valued and respected so that they can develop emotional literacy, a sense of self-worth and agency, which in turn supports healing from their often traumatic beginnings. Affirming the identity and history of children who have faced difficult beginnings, and will continue to face discrimination, can be an important foundation for healing and resilience for years to come.

➔ [Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2020-11](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2020-11)

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