

# Promoting healthy integration of Syrian children into schools

## Case scenario

Your 8-year-old daughter comes home one day and tells you there is a new boy in her class—a Syrian child. She notes that he is very quiet. A few days later you get an e-mail from your daughter's teacher inviting you to come and speak to the class. "Some children are worried about infectious diseases," she wrote. "It would be helpful to have a physician speak to our class and reassure the children that the Syrian refugees do not pose a health risk." You decide it is important to get things off to a good start for the new Canadian at the school and agree to come visit.

## Context

You greet the class and begin by telling them some stories. You show them pictures of the 6 world heritage sites in Syria and say, "Syria is a wonderful and very old country. Way back in the time of ancient Egypt, in 3500 BC, the Pharaoh was friends with the king of Ebla—where Syria is now—and they used to make trades."<sup>1</sup> You note that Syria was similar to Canada in a way—it had people who came to live there from all over.

"The main language is Arabic, but dozens of languages are spoken there. And people in Syria used to be lucky because all Muslim and Christian holy days were official holidays. But people in Syria were not lucky anymore. A great war had come. There had been bombs and fighting and more than half the population had to leave their homes. They fled to the countryside, or they left the country. Almost 5 million people are now refugees.<sup>2</sup> Imagine! It's as if all the people in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver suddenly left.

"So did anybody decide to help the Syrian people?" you ask.

All the children nodded and one child shot up his hand. "Yes, we brought some to Canada."

"You are absolutely right. When our new Prime Minister was elected, he said Canada would bring in 25000 refugees and we did." Then you ask, "But how did we do that? And was it safe?" The children are all looking at you now. "Well, I am happy to tell you that a very careful process was put in place. Canada worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify who would be best to come here. Every incoming refugee was checked by a physician and cleared for travel. Public health officials in Canada have published the statistics and no infectious disease concerns have been identified.<sup>3</sup> Syrians were given health cards right away and they started to learn English and French and settle in. In fact, the Syrian people have

done amazingly well." You then explore the concept of resiliency and how everyone can help new Canadians.

## Bottom line

No substantial health issues have been identified among Syrian refugees. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has identified that some refugees will have high needs, and the emotional trauma arising from living in a war zone and then a refugee camp might not be immediately apparent.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, bullying of refugee children and adolescents is not uncommon.<sup>5,6</sup> Syrians are known to generally have good family cohesion and this is a protective factor,<sup>5</sup> as is having a positive attitude toward their cultural origin.<sup>6</sup> Encouraging healthy integration of Syrian children into Canada's school system will help to foster well-being among our new Canadians. 🍁

## References

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