NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

PFA®

Psychological First Aid for Unaccompanied Children

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What is PFA UC?

- PFA UC is an evidence-informed modular approach to assist UC immediately after arriving in the US.
- Includes a set of tools to assist staff/volunteers in supporting UC through early transitions (e.g., while in an Influx Care Facility or Emergency Intake Site).
- Useful for working with UC preparing to reunite with family members, or transitioning to an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) permanent program/shelter.
- Can support staff/volunteers in caring for themselves while engaging in this challenging work.

Understanding UC and Past Experiences

UC are defined as those under 18 years of age with no lawful immigration status in the US who either have no parent or legal guardian in the US or no parent or legal guardian in the US who is available to provide care and physical custody. UC come from different countries, speak diverse languages and/or dialects, and observe different traditions and customs. Many UC have experienced or witnessed stressful or traumatic events in their country of origin, along their migration journey, and upon resettlement in the US. These experiences include separation from family and their support network; physical or sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation, and coercion; community and gang violence; injury or death of loved ones; lack of consistent caregiving; food and housing insecurity; lack of education; exhaustion; lack of proper medical care; hazardous transports; harassment and bribery by authorities; kidnapping; detention; and uncertainty about their future.[1]

Providers who work directly with UC have identified that these youth often demonstrate tremendous resilience and strengths, including supportive families, adaptive coping strategies, and a desire to help others. However, migration-related stressors can strain a youth's adaptive coping strategies. PFA UC offers an approach to helping these youth in the immediate aftermath of their migration journey.

Photo by: Diego Mesones

How to Use this Guide

PFA UC is a flexible intervention. You will not use each of these core actions in every interaction with a UC. However, keep them in mind as opportunities to offer support to a UC. Because each UC comes with their own experiences and circumstances, it is important to tailor your interactions to meet their unique needs. Please remember that you matter and the work you do is important. When you create a connection with a UC, help them feel safe, and get to know them, you become part of a healing system of care.

[1] https://www.nctsn.org/resources/unaccompanied-migrant-children

1. Contact and Engagement

Your first contact with a UC matters.

- UC have experienced or witnessed stressful and often traumatic events.
- They may feel ignored, invisible, unworthy of love and care, overwhelmed and confused by their new environment.
- In their home country and on their migration journey, many adults may not have been trustworthy.
- Making UC feel welcome from the start will help them feel a greater sense of safety.
- Even though UC may only be with you for a short time, they can learn from repeated interactions with you and others at the facility that adults are working together to keep them safe and that they deserve to feel safe and well cared for by others.

THE WAY YOU ARE MATTERS

Through your vocal tone, body posture, and things you say, you show UC that:

- Staff in this facility care about and respect them
- They are loveable, precious, and important
- They are in a safe space

To help UC feel safe, welcome, important, and worthy:

- Make the first contact warm, respectful, and non-threatening.
  - Introduce yourself and describe your role at the facility.
  - Clarify that you are a helper and not responsible for immigration decisions. This may reduce their anxiety.
  - Think about your vocal tone and body posture. When people feel they are in danger, they may respond to your non-verbal cues even more than your words.
  - Understand that some UC may be afraid to speak with you because they do not want to say anything that might hurt their family.
- Create healing and connection: Ensure you have time to learn about the UC (e.g., their name and something they want you to know about them).
- Use open-ended questions, to determine if they understand you or to learn what language or dialectic they speak. Many UC may nod or signal that they understand out of respect, when they do not truly understand. (Note: Many UC from Central America do not speak Spanish, but rather speak indigenous languages or dialects, especially youth from Guatemala).
  - Orient them to the facility.
  - Explain or show them the resources that are available to them (e.g., food, showers, education, recreation). Consider having posters on the wall depicting the layout to help UC remember where resources are located.
  - Explain facility rules clearly and in a matter-of-fact way (e.g., where they will sleep, if they can make calls to their parents, play/recreation time).
  - If they came to the facility with siblings or other family, let them know if they can stay together or when they can see each other.
  - Explain the limits of confidentiality so UC are clear about what information is private and what information will be shared and why.
  - Check to see if they understand or have questions.
- Be prepared to repeat this introductory information many times. When youth feel scared and are in a new place, they often cannot process what people tell them. As they feel safer, they may be able to hear and understand more of what you have to share.

2. Safety and Comfort

Many UC come to the facility terrified. Most were harmed in the past and need to see that you will treat them respectfully. Some UC may have experienced a recent death of a loved one. When you help them feel safe and comfortable, it makes it more likely that they can fully participate in available services to get their needs met.

- **Tailor what you do to the youth's developmental stage.**
  - Younger children
    - Sit or kneel down to meet their eye level.
    - Speak in simple terms.
    - If available, give the youth a stuffed animal to hold, as this may offer comfort and help them regulate.
    - Talk with them as you are doing an activity (e.g., drawing, playing with a toy).
  - Older UC may want more details and may have more questions about the safety protocols at the facility and what will happen to them and their family next. Answer questions honestly.
- **Clarify misinformation.**
  - UC may not understand why they were brought to the facility. They may worry that they will be put in jail or worry about the safety of their family. Open-ended questions and discussion can help you learn why the UC thinks they are at the facility, worries they have about their family, and what they think will happen next.
  - As best as you can, clarify the protocols, if there is knowledge about their family's whereabouts, and potential next steps (i.e., how long they could potentially stay at the current facility, where they could go next, or who will provide answers). Let them know that you and others are available to them for support.
- **Acknowledge feelings and experiences.**
  - Listening deeply and acknowledging feelings can help the UC feel understood and supported.
  - Help them name their feelings by acknowledging what they have shared. For example:

    "It's been very scary for you to stay here without your parents to help you, and you miss them."

    "You have had so many losses and have been feeling so sad. I am so sorry that you are going through all of this."

    "You are so angry about everything that has happened. That makes so much sense. You have been through a lot."
- **Recognize that some UC are hyper-alert and vigilant, watching out for danger.** These skills have helped them to survive. It may be difficult for them to relax, even in the most comfortable environment.
- **Respect body movement.** When UC experience danger, their bodies produce stress hormones designed to help them fight or flee. Even when they are safe, their bodies may not feel safe, and their bodies may continue to produce these stress hormones. Having regular movement (e.g., exercising, singing, dancing, walking) is important in helping the body recover from stress and danger.
- **Maintain routines and predictability.** Inform UC about the scheduled activities and consider having a daily routine calendar that outlines meal times, shower times, play/recreation times, etc.

3. Calm and Orient: Responding When UC are Upset, Agitated, or Withdrawn

UC can appear highly anxious, agitated, or withdrawn. These feelings and behaviors are common reactions to changes in their environment and fear that others will harm them. Withdrawn youth often are overlooked as their behaviors are not problematic, but they are in need of your attention too. Regardless of why a youth behaves in such a manner, you will want to calm and orient them as part of creating a secure environment for them and others.

If a UC appears agitated, or distressed, you can help calm and orient them by:

Photo by: Diego Mesones

- **Remaining calm, quiet, and present.** Youth respond to how others are reacting. If you remain calm, speak in a soft voice, and keep your body relaxed, a child may begin to relax. Take a slow breath in and maybe the child will breathe with you.
- **Creating space if needed.** Some UC may not want to talk right away and may need space to calm down by themselves. Give them that space but let them know you will stay nearby if they want you.
- **Inviting the UC to go to a quieter place to talk.** Make sure the space is private but not isolated. Some children may prefer to go outside or take a walk, when possible.
- **Offering a regulatory object.** Younger UC may be helped by holding a familiar object, a stuffed animal, or a blanket. Even older UC may be helped by holding something soft and soothing, like a blanket, pillow, or stuffed animal.
- **Helping youth calm.** Here are a few strategies to help a UC regulate their emotions:
    - Taking a few slow breaths to calm their body down.
    - Take a walk with you around the facility or, for younger children, have them stretch or wiggle their body.
    - Think with them about a phrase, situation, or affirmation that helps them calm and feel safer and stronger. For example, a pleasant memory of their home country, or saying a prayer or connecting to their spirituality.
    - Offer an activity that distracts them.
    - Encourage them to draw or color a picture about their home country, something they would like you to know about them, or something they enjoy drawing.
    - Release pent up energy by exercising, playing a sport, singing, etc.
    - If the UC needs additional help, talk to your supervisor or a member of the medical team.
- **Offering to listen.** As the UC calms, gently ask what is worrying them and provide them support.
- **Acknowledging positive behaviors.** As staff and volunteers, you may focus on a youth's challenging behaviors. However, UC do better when you notice and acknowledge their strengths and positive behaviors. Find ways to show that you notice when they interact positively with peers, work hard on an educational assignment, talk with you, or engage in any of the facility's activities. The simple message of "I see the positive things that you are doing" can go a long way. The more specific you can be, the greater the likelihood the behavior will continue or increase (e.g., You are doing a great job sharing with others; I like the way you are trying so hard on your work; You did a great job practicing your calming breaths.)

4. Information Gathering

Learn about a youth's immediate worries and needs and help them address their concerns. Each UC will have a different experience and circumstances. It is important to understand what their needs are by asking rather than assuming.

- Let the youth know that you are asking them questions to figure out how staff can help them while they are at the facility.
- Let them know that they can also ask questions. Answer questions that are within your role and connect the youth to the helpers who can answer other questions. Examples:
  - When can I see a doctor?
  - Who are all the different people working here? What do they do?
  - Where will I go after I leave here?
  - Can I talk to my parents?
  - How is my sister/brother?
- Some UC may not be interested or ready to talk with you. This can frustrate staff and volunteers wanting to help. In time, as a youth feels safer at the facility or more connected to staff and volunteers, they may be willing to share their current needs and concerns. In the meantime, try to find ways to connect by showing interest and join in on a shared activity. Sometimes just pointing out what the UC is doing rather than asking too many questions may open up a conversation.
- Some UC may share experiences about their home country, along their migration journey, or about when they were apprehended. Listen with empathy, but do not probe for more details. Try to listen without interrupting.
- Listen actively (every so often, sum up what was said and ask if you have it right), carefully, receptively, and non-judgmentally.
- UC may disclose to you that they are thinking about hurting themselves or somebody else. Even if you cannot tell if this was said seriously or as a joke, you must take it seriously. Connect the youth with an on-site medical provider, other on-site clinicians, or follow specific facility protocols.

Potential areas of need:

- Basic needs – food, clothing
- Health concerns (medications)
- Hygiene supplies
- Contact with parents, other relatives, or sponsor family
- Information about life in the US - what schools are like, common interest of peers, popular food
- Emotional support due to past or present hardships or traumas
- Comfort object – stuffed animal, toy, book
- Religious/spiritual services

5. Practical Assistance

After you gather information, reflect on the UC's needs and the available resources and services. Consider those needs that are a priority to the youth. Determine which needs can be met in the current placement and which may be better addressed in a more stable setting. Elevate those needs that are critical. UC may have difficulty asking for help or being clear about their needs. They may be unaware of the available resources, they may not trust unfamiliar adults to help them, or they may feel powerless to take steps towards getting their needs met.

Help UC get their needs met by:

- **Identifying Needs:** Jointly create a list of the needs identified through the initial information gathering. Check with the youth to make sure that the list is accurate and complete.

- **Prioritizing Needs:** Help the youth to determine which needs are the most urgent and most important to them. Set expectations about which can be met at this facility. Create steps towards meeting needs that are doable at the facility, things that you can work on together. For example, some UC may "need" to know what is happening with their case. Not knowing when they will have an opportunity to speak with a case manager can be a source of significant worry and stress. If you are able to access information about the status of their case then share appropriate information. If you do not have information, you can instead help the youth think about what they want the case manager to know about them (e.g., who are their loved ones, what are their most significant needs). Often children have needs that they are not yet ready or willing to address. For example, a teenager may acknowledge that they are feeling sad or upset because of their past experiences, and have the need to get support for these feelings, but they may not be ready to share more. You can make a plan to check in with the youth and help them see that they can also ask for services when they are at their next placement and when they are ready.

- **Creating an Action Plan for Today:** Work with the UC to create an action plan of things they or facility staff can do today. Sometimes it helps to write out an action plan including: 1) a statement of their goal or need; 2) steps towards the goal; 3) names of people who will help the youth, and 4) date for doing each step. How much a youth can do independently will depend on the individual. Make sure that you follow through on your tasks, so that you build trust. Begin with a simple short list of tasks that the youth can accomplish easily, rather than a long list that may feel overwhelming. Remember to acknowledge when the youth accomplishes a task.

My Goal: Contacting my Parent

STEPS TOWARDS GOAL		WHEN WILL I DO THIS
Step 1:	Plan a time I can use the phone.	
Step 2:	Think about what I want to say to my parent if we do not have much time to talk.	
Step 3:	Talk with a staff member after the call about what I learned and how I am feeling.	

6. Connection with Social Supports

UC who have a positive social support system are better able to tolerate the stressors that lie ahead. While UC may have limited access to family members, there are ways to create a supportive environment that helps meet their needs for emotional and practical support.

Help UC engage in pro-social, positive activities at the facility to increase their social support:

- **Peer Support.** Identify group activities at the facility that match the UC's interests, such as educational, recreational, and support groups.

- **Staff Support.** When UC develop a positive and appropriate relationship with an adult staff member or volunteer, they learn skills that enable them to form more positive and appropriate relationships with others. As you offer support to the youth, it is critical to understand and follow agency rules about boundaries and communicate these boundaries clearly. Maintaining appropriate boundaries at all times not only protects you but also helps UC learn about appropriate, safe relationships.

- **Family Support.** Even though UC are separated from their families, there are ways to honor family relationships. Examples:

  - Draw a picture or write a letter for their family.

  - Let them share memories or stories about favorite things they enjoyed doing with a family member.

  - If they are able to speak with a parent or family member, see if they need help starting the conversation or emotional support afterwards. Create space, so they can share feelings about being separated and any worries they may have about their safety.

- **Family Reunification.** While the ultimate goal for UC and their families is reunification, coming together after long and traumatic separations can sometimes be emotionally challenging for the UC and their parents. Listen to concerns that UC may express and help them label their emotions associated with upcoming reunifications. If they have any safety concerns or you develop any safety concerns about who they are being reunified with, make sure to inform the appropriate staff. Inform the UC that you will be notifying staff in order to make sure they are safe.

- **Sponsor Family or Foster Family Support.** UC may have different levels of familiarity with their sponsor family and the place where they are moving. Help them identify different supports they can use after they transition to this placement (e.g., teachers, coaches, peers, faith leaders). If you know where they are moving, help them learn about that community, including the climate, geography, cultural traditions, and popular foods.

7. Information on Coping

In addition to traumatic separation, UC have often been exposed to multiple traumas. It can be beneficial to assure UC that their stress reactions to such victimization and losses are understandable and to help them find positive ways of coping.

Understanding Common Reactions to Experiences of Danger

- Difficulties in the following areas are quite common:
  - Sleeping: Sleeping too much, not being able to sleep, having nightmares.
  - Eating: Eating too much (e.g., hoarding food, stuffing self with food) or not having an appetite.
  - Health (e.g., stomach aches, headaches, nausea).
  - Connecting with and trusting others, including peers and adults.
  - Paying attention, concentrating, may seem spacey or forgetful.
  - Behavior (e.g., being defiant to adults, withdrawing from interactions).
  - Emotions
    - Feeling overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, shame, hopelessness.
    - Seeming moody or irritable.
    - Having difficulty calming down when upset.
- Other trauma related reactions may include:
  - Feeling a constant sense of danger and being on the lookout for danger.
  - Being hyperalert, nervous, jumpy.
  - Getting upset when something reminds them of past traumas (e.g., smells, sights, feelings, or other triggers).
  - Not wanting to talk about bad things that happened and avoiding doing things that remind them of what happened.
  - Not being able to stop thinking about bad things that happened.

Positive Strategies for Enhancing Coping

UC may be aware of, or concerned about their own emotional reactions, including the reactions described above. If they talk to you about this, help them learn that these responses are understandable and expected in youth who have had similar experiences and that they can heal from these experiences. Many UC have lived with trauma for so long, that these reactions are a common part of their everyday existence. They may need support to realize they deserve to have a safe place. Sometimes becoming safe leads to feelings and thoughts that they were not aware of before, and this is normal. For those who are struggling with aspects of their past, consider positive coping strategies they can use while at the facility:

- Talking to a provider or a peer for support.
- Engaging in activities that keep them active or busy (e.g., reading, drawing, songwriting, dancing).
- Trying to keep a routine/schedule.
- Writing in a journal or participating in creative art activities.
- Using calming strategies such as breathing and exercise/movement.
- Using coping methods that have been successful in the past.
- Telling themselves that it is natural to be upset.
- Positively reminiscing about a loved one who died.

8. Link with Collaborative Services

UC may have been separated from adults who would typically have helped them access resources and supports. When you help them obtain services and supports and plan for transitions, you help grow their sense of trust and support.

Provide a direct link to additional needed services. Connect the UC to additional services at the facility depending on what was learned in the information gathering. For example, a referral to a medical team member, a supervisor, a religious/spiritual leader, or an educator may be appropriate. During these transitions, assist the youth with meeting these new individuals and help to explain their roles. Before leaving, check in to see if the youth has any additional questions. They may not feel as comfortable asking the new person as they do with you.

Promote continuity in helping relationships. Let the youth know how long your shift is and if you are expected to return back to the facility. For those UC having a hard day, consider a "warm hand-off" to a staff member or volunteer who is relieving you from your duty. Encourage the youth to let that staff member or volunteer know how best they can help them moving forward. Communicate one aspect of your conversation that represents a strength so the youth feels valued and heard. If worried about a UC, privately share your observations and interactions with the staff member or volunteer coming on duty so that person can continue to support them.

Provide referrals for community placement. Follow facility policies for providing recommendations for additional services a UC may need (e.g., medical, mental health, educational) when they are reunified with family, transition to an ORR facility, or are placed with a sponsor or foster family.

Your work with UC can enhance their connections, link them with services, and provide a safe environment that makes a difference in their lives. Lending them your heart and mind can remind them that they matter. They will carry this message with them long after they leave the facility.

Photo by: Diego Mesones

Managing Professional Stress

Staff and volunteers who work directly with highly traumatized UC are vulnerable to high levels of work stress. Consider ways to manage your own well-being by using the Pause-Reset-Nourish (PRN Framework).[2]

Pause:
Take 3 slow breaths and take time to consider how you are feeling. Pause and notice everything happening inside you, because you matter.

- **Body:** Notice how you are holding stress or tension in different parts of your body.
- **Mind:** Is your mind cluttered or full of worries? What are you thinking about?
- **Feelings:** How are you feeling? Notice and name any intense emotions (e.g., frustration, anger, anxiety, sadness).

Reset:
Be kind to yourself and remember that these are difficult times. Choose something you can do to help you feel steadier, more calm, confident or focused on your next task.

- **Take a quiet moment:** Help calm your mind if it is overly full or worried. Breathe slowly (e.g., 3 - minute breathing space), meditate, practice mindfulness, take a brief walk outside, or look at a photo that puts a smile on your face.
- **Acknowledge your own experience:** Observe your thoughts and feelings, acknowledge them, and let them pass through your mind like they are on a conveyor belt or leaves floating down a stream. Accepting the current situation allows you to acknowledge your desire for things to be different than they are. Send yourself some kindness. You are dealing with a lot.
- **Focus on something positive:** Read an affirmation, share gratitude, think about a positive thing that you did, watch a funny short video, or talk with a trusted colleague. Remind yourself that even though there are many challenging things, there are positive things too.
- **Talk to yourself as if you are a caring and supportive friend:** When you become critical of yourself, try to reset by interrupting those thoughts with self-compassion. What would you say to a friend who brought you these concerns and feelings? Give yourself the same advice.

Nourish:
Ask yourself, "What do I need to nourish my mind-body-heart-soul-spirit right now?" Turn your focus towards something that helps you remember your own strength and resilience, or reminds you to take time to care for yourself.

- Consider engaging in playful, light-hearted moments and creating meaningful social connection including enjoying a family activity; laughing, singing or chanting; dancing, or other things that bring you joy; engaging in meaningful cultural practices or rituals; connecting with a significant other or a beloved pet; celebrating a success at work; or doing something for others in need (e.g., donating time for charity, baking for a neighbor).
- Remind yourself that your work matters. Hold on to an aspect of your work that made a difference for a child, a family, a co-worker, and/or yourself.

When you need more than PRN:

Contact your Behavioral Health Force Health Protection (if available at your site) or manager, or contact a mental health provider, healthcare provider, or trusted colleague for additional services.

[2] https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/wellbeing-and-wellness.pdf

RESOURCES

- NCTSN Resources Related to Traumatic Separation and Refugee and Immigrant Trauma
  https://www.nctsn.org/resources/nctsn-resources-related-traumatic-separation-and-refugee-and-immigrant-trauma

- Directory of NCTSN Centers and Affiliate Members Serving Immigrant and Refugee Populations
  https://www.nctsn.org/directory-of-nctsn-centers-and-affiliate-members-serving-immigrant-and-refugee-populations

- NCTSN Traumatic Grief Resources
  https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/nctsn-resources