A Foster Parent's Guide

Caring for Afghan Children

BY BETHANY CHRISTIAN SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive foster care is informed by our understanding of children's personal preferences and cultural practices. When we provide culturally sensitive and inclusive care, we contribute to children's ability to feel safe, respected, and empowered.

When working with foster children, it is important to ask ourselves:

- How does my perspective differ from this child's?
- Am I making any assumptions about this child?
- How might the way I physically interact with people affect this child?
- What actions can I take to help this child feel safe, respected, and empowered?

The Afghan population is not monolithic. The information provided in this guide is not meant to replace conversations with children about their needs and preferences; rather, it's to assist foster parents as they build relationships with Afghan children and families. Within each section of this guide are tips to provide a warm welcome to Afghan arrivals.

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Sources:
Brittanica
Translators Without Borders
Diplomatic Language Services
Culture Orientation
Wikipedia

LANGUAGES AND ETHNICITIES

Afghanistan is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Ethnic groups are comprised of various cultures and have adopted traditions and celebrations from each other. The proper term for a person who is native to, or an inhabitant of Afghanistan is Afghan. The term Afghani refers to the unit of Afghan currency and should not be used to refer to people.

With over 40 languages spoken in Afghanistan, multilingualism is common, and there is not always an exact correlation of language to ethnic group. Pashto and Dari (sometimes known as Afghan Persian or Farsi) are the official and most spoken languages in Afghanistan. Approximately 77% of people in Afghanistan speak Dari and 48% speak Pashto. Approximately 6% of people in Afghanistan speak English.

When seeking interpretation and translation services, it is important to note there are many dialects of the languages an Afghan child may speak. Dari and Farsi are often considered two accents of the same language; however, local usage may vary.

Give a warm welcome

- Ensure you connect with staff to discuss interpretation needs, especially when decisions need to be made that will impact the child and their family. Bethany has several interpreters who can provide services to Afghan children and staff can help find additional language services for the child.
- When an interpreter is not available, use an interpretation or translation app.
- Try to learn common words and phrases in the language of the child or arrival.

NAMES

Typically, Afghans don't have last names; traditionally, they use only first names. The western notion of a first and last name is so ingrained that Afghan first names (which happen to be double names similar to Mary Jane or John Mark) are frequently interpreted as first and last. It is polite to ask individuals what they prefer to be called. For example, an individual named Mohammed Abdullah may prefer to be identified as "Abdullah." Or an individual named Ilias Ahmed may prefer to be called "Ilias." Afghans who have contact with the western world typically adopt a last name or have one adopted for them.

Give a warm welcome

- Ask the child what they prefer to be called and ensure you pronounce their name the same way they do.
- Let the child know how they can address you and other members of your family.

FAMILY AND VALUES

Afghan households are generally large and multigenerational. The family is the single most important aspect of life in Afghanistan. Family roles vary between ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and regions. Most family structures are traditionally patriarchal, with the eldest man recognized as the leader of the rest.

In some, but not all, Afghan families (particularly those from rural areas) women and girls may not be allowed to speak if a man of the family is present. More commonly, children and youth are not allowed to speak without permission if an elder is present.

A key difference between Afghan and American mainstream cultures is that the latter stresses the independence of the individual while the former emphasizes the individual's dependence on the family. Respect for their individual and family choices is key in working with this population. In working with children in foster care, engaging in conversations with the youth regarding their choices is preferred over telling them what they need to do. Afghan children may not be used to this type of interaction, so gently remind them it is okay for them to share their ideas, feelings, and desires with you so they will feel comfortable in your home.

Modesty is very important within Islam. Most Muslims attempt to behave and dress modestly to be judged on their intelligence, skills, and contributions instead of their physical attributes. Practices of modesty in appearance may include men wearing beards or small head coverings and woman wearing loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing with a hair, neck, and/or body covering (hijab or headscarf). Some women choose to cover their face.

Other practices of modesty following puberty are "lowering of the gaze," avoidance of shaking hands, and avoidance of seclusion with the opposite sex. None of these practices should be seen as acts of insult, offense, or discrimination. Sensitivity and understanding should be shown to Muslim foster children in the way they interact (or don't interact) with other children in the home of the opposite gender or a foster parent of the opposite gender. When interacting with a foster child of another gender, foster parents should avoid touching or being alone with the child.

Give a warm welcome

- If you have an Afghan girl in your home, provide her ample alone-time with women in the family. Remember that, depending on her upbringing and town of birth, she may be hesitant to speak openly in the presence of a man or boy, and generally will be more comfortable speaking to an older woman about her needs and wishes. Do not make assumptions about this, however, and be open to her communication of her preferences.
- Follow the child's lead in terms of interactions and do not take it personally if the child prefers not to shake hands, make eye contact, or be alone with you.
- Most importantly, let the child know you are open to hearing their opinions and feedback on what they need from you. They may be hesitant at first to share their likes and dislikes and may need gentle reminders that their expression of their feelings will help you make sure they feel comfortable in your home.

RELIGION

Most Afghans practice Islam, an Abrahamic monotheistic religion teaching that Muhammad is a messenger of God. It is the world's second-largest religion with 1.9 billion followers—or 24.9% of the world's population—known as Muslims. Muslims make up a majority of the population in 47 countries. Islam teaches that God is merciful, all-powerful, and unique, and has guided humanity through prophets, revealed scriptures, and natural signs. The primary scriptures of Sunni Islam are the Quran, believed to be the verbatim word of God, and the teachings and normative examples (called the sunnah, composed of accounts called hadith) of Muhammad. Shia Muslims, at times a persecuted minority in Afghanistan, follow the Quran and the teachings of the sunnah as well as the last Caliph Ali and his descendants.

Many Afghans who have resettled in the U.S. have practiced a sect of Islam called Shia Islam, but Sunni Islam is more representative of the overall population in Afghanistan. When working with individuals from the different sects within Islam, it is important to have open communication to understand their preferences for practicing their religion and who they wish to be in community with, as values and practices may vary. Influences are ethnic, geographic, and religious and a single approach to religion is not suitable for all Muslims.

The Five Pillars of Islam are: Testimony of Faith, Five Daily Prayers, Annual Obligatory Charity, Fasting During the Month of Ramadan, and A Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca.

To support Muslim children, it is important to be aware of the five daily prayer times and the requirements prior to prayer. Before praying, Muslims must perform ablution, called "Wudu," which includes washing their hands, face, arms, feet, and rinsing mouths and nostrils with water. Muslims are also required to cleanse themselves with water after using the toilet, so having small plastic water bottles available in restrooms in foster homes is helpful. Prayers are usually performed on a prayer rug in a clean/quiet place, lasting 10-15 minutes, and facing Mecca (usually northeast in the U.S.). Prayer times vary as they depend on the rising and setting of the sun, so assisting children with finding local prayer schedules (via an online search, phone prayer time apps, or checking with a local mosque) is helpful.

Give a warm welcome

Remember that even within the same religion, everyone practices their faith differently.

- Prepare to be open to new religious practices. Foster parents should provide a prayer mat for each child and a Quran. Identify a private space in your home that can be used for prayer. No pets should ever be allowed to enter this space and it should be available to the youth at all prayer times daily. Support their prayer by downloading the app Qibla Finder, marking the correct direction to face in your identified prayer room and providing prayer times (as discussed above).
- Discuss the child's prayer preferences, then explore opportunities for them to pray in a private place during the school day, if desired.
- If a bidet is not available, provide a small plastic water bottle to keep in the bathroom for the child to cleanse themselves.
- Understand how pets, especially dogs, are viewed by most Muslims. Expect most Muslims to have a natural discomfort around dogs as it is typically prohibited for Muslims to keep dogs as pets, with a few exceptions such as guard, guide, and hunting dogs.
- Identify mosques in your area and whether they are in the Shia or Sunni branch. Do not take a newly arrived foster child to a mosque until you have clearly communicated with them about this through an interpreter familiar with Islam.
- Provide information and opportunities for the child to attend Jummah (Friday congregational prayer), if desired.

HALAL FOOD

"Halal" means permissible or lawful. Halal food meets the Islamic dietary guidelines (animals both raised and slaughtered humanely) and is similar to Jewish law regarding kosher food. Muslims typically do not consume alcohol, pork, animals not slaughtered properly, blood/blood byproducts, carnivorous animals, or birds of prey. If halal meat is not available, seafood or vegetarian meals may be used as substitutes. You may also search online for restaurants or stores near you that sell halal meats.

Staple foods in Afghanistan include Basmati rice and soft, fresh flat bread (a variation of naan). Common meats are chicken and lamb. Most Afghans do not eat pork, and beef is not a staple food. Many dishes are cooked with lots of tomato, onion, cardamom, salt, and oil. Fruit and nuts are familiar snacks.

Tea is the preferred beverage, though some drink coffee. Green tea prepared with a variety of ingredients, such as saffron, cinnamon, and cardamom is known as Kahwa. This is often served several times a day with sugar or honey and a sprinkling of crushed nuts. These drinks are often taken with a biscuit-like cookie, similar to Digestives. Fresh fruit juices or whole milk are common for breakfast. Most Afghans do not drink alcohol.

Mealtimes are communal. It may be considered rude to start eating when any member of the family is missing from the table. A household does not start a meal until everyone in the home is at the table together, regardless of how long it takes for them to gather.

Give a warm welcome

- Identify local halal (typically Indian, Arabic, or Somali-owned) stores and restaurants near you that sell familiar food and drink. Share these resources with Afghan arrivals or offer to take them to the store/restaurant.
- If purchasing or preparing food, ensure it is culturally appropriate and familiar to them (see the list above for ideas). If providing foster care, ensure an assortment of tea, fruit, biscuit-cookies, and rice is available in your home upon the child's arrival.
- Remember that finding foods that foster children like requires trial and error. Involving the child in decisions about meals whenever possible can provide them an opportunity to feel empowered and lessen the impact of culture shock. If there is something they don't like about the meal, invite them to be specific about what could be changed.

COMMON CELEBRATIONS AND RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

One of the most important aspects of holiday celebrations for Afghans is being with their families and community. Vital components of the celebrations include congregational prayers, family visits, exchanging gifts during Eid, and enjoying special meals and celebration. For children in foster care, purchasing gifts during Eid is very important, as this would be similar to American children celebrating Christmas by exchanging gifts. Foster parents should consider allowing children to miss school for some of the days during Eid to join in congregational celebrations at the local mosque.

Main holidays celebrated in Afghanistan:

- Nauruz—follows Afghan New Year
- Eid ul-Fit—celebrated after the last day of Ramadan; lasts three days
- Eid ul-Adha—celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar; coincides with the Hajj and lasts four days
- Ashura—occurs the first month of the Islamic calendar

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar and observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. The observance of Ramadan is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. It is critical to respect and honor the requirements for Ramadan if you work with youth in foster care or families through resettlement. Ask individuals what their preferences and needs are during this important tradition. While there are some exceptions, most individuals fast from sunrise to sunset every day of the month of Ramadan and are not permitted to eat, drink (not even water), smoke, or have sexual relations while observing Ramadan. Muslims break their fast right at sunset for an evening meal called Iftar.

Ways to support children in foster care during Ramadan include helping them prepare a pre-dawn meal, arranging for the child to sit somewhere else during school lunch, discussing exceptions for sports or gym class with coaches or school staff, having the evening meal ready at sunset (not waiting until sunset to prepare), providing a space for them to privately perform their sunset prayer following Iftar, and connecting the child with a Muslim community to partake in communal observations and celebration. It is also important to arrange for children and individuals to attend a mosque frequently during Ramadan, as there are prayers every night that are typically prayed within a community setting.

Give a warm welcome

- Purchase a Solar Hijri calendar for your home (the one traditionally used in Afghanistan) to keep track of celebrations and other significant dates.
- Talk to the foster child about which holidays they observe and how they celebrate them. Using the information provided above as a starting place, work together to identify ways to celebrate holidays while in your care.
- Arrange for foster children to observe and celebrate Ramadan. Consider having discussions with educational staff to advocate for the youth's ability to participate, as needed.
- Know that holiday celebrations may be bittersweet for the child as they grapple with being apart from loved ones and observing holidays differently than how they are accustomed.

TRAUMA

Some of the most pressing challenges for the Afghan individuals we work with include the physical and psychological aftermath of war. We can expect to see high rates of PTSD among the Afghan arrivals to our programs. Possible behaviors include frustration, anger, aggression, resistance to rules, withdrawal, apathy, and an unwillingness to talk about the future.

It is important to be present to whatever behaviors arise and to be gentle, clear, and open in all communication. Eventually, the goal can be to channel energy toward positive goals through communities and programs that provide a support system to counteract the intense loss they have experienced.

It is important that new arrivals at your home are involved in decisions that impact their lives. Ensure participation, feedback, and complaint mechanisms are integrated in all strategies and plans from the start. Decisions and actions should be responsive to the expressed priorities, needs, capacities, and views of everyone involved. Connectivity and participation are not luxuries, but rather lifelines for refugees.

In a crisis, people of every age, gender, and demographic need to be able to communicate with friends and family. For refugees, this means people in their country of origin and their country of flight. Ensure you provide children with ample opportunities to try to speak with loved ones with whom they were separated. It is also important that they have access to a local Afghan community. Participation in their community here will help to heal the loss they are actively experiencing.

Give a warm welcome

- Equip yourself with trauma-informed care training and psychological first aid training: Psychological First Aid for Unaccompanied Children | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org)
- Avoid making assumptions about what decisions are best for the individuals you work with. Include them in decisions and ask for their opinions and feedback regularly.
- Offer regular opportunities for the child to connect with their loved ones. Discuss the best time for them to make phone calls and work together to create a calling schedule, if preferred.
- Become informed about Afghan and Muslim communities near you and connect with them to provide information and opportunities for relationships with the Afghan child in your care.
- Discuss the foster child's interests and provide opportunities for involvement in positive activities, such as engaging in extracurricular activities, making art, cooking, and listening to music. You may find a playlist of popular Afghan songs or work together with them to create a playlist of their favorite music to play in your home or vehicle.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FOR FOSTER YOUTH FROM FOSTER YOUTH

Feel free to print these statements in your client's language and post them at your site and office.

Afghan youth who have come before you to the U.S. want you to know some important things:

"You are safe now."

"You have choices here and the freedom to say what you want and need."

"Don't give up."

"Take one step at a time."

"Ask for help."

"Be part of the community—they are here for you."

"Therapy can help you have a good life here."

"You are not alone."

"Explore new ideas."