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Ingrid Slikkers

*Andrews University*, [ingrids@andrews.edu](mailto:ingrids@andrews.edu)

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## Talking to Our Children about Refugees

BY INGRID SLIKKERS

There have been refugees since Biblical times; however, due to the current world-wide refugee crisis, many refugees are in our communities which produces political controversy with opinions discussed, not only in the public sector, but in our homes and churches. So, how do we talk to our children about this?

Sometimes the recommendation is to wait until a child brings up a topic or asks a question before discussing it. Chances are your child has heard things about this, especially in the months prior to the elections with unbarred verbalization of opinion that infiltrated even into the most intimate family



circles. Earlier this year, Guillermo Fouce, Ph.D., president of Psychologists Without Borders, said “Children are not oblivious to what happens in their environment, and when something is on everyone’s lips, they understand it.”

Experts agree that pictures are important in helping not to dehumanize, however, children may feel frightened by images they have seen from media sources and may need reinforcement in their sense of safety. As they get older they can benefit from hearing actual stories. Encourage them to look up words like “refugee” in the dictionary. The Bible also is a good source to gain understanding and perspective. Stories from the experience of the Children of Israel and Mary and Joseph fleeing with Baby Jesus to Egypt as refugees can start a conversation at family worship times. Encourage them to imagine how it would feel to flee and what it would be like to live in a refugee camp in a foreign land.

The United Nations High Council on Refugees reported this past summer that there have never been this many displaced people on earth with over 65 million people who are fleeing due to war and persecution. It is estimated that

approximately 50 percent of these are children, many unaccompanied by a relative adult. As a family you can pray for the refugee families, the unaccompanied children and the world leaders that have to make decisions regarding their care.

Children may express a desire to be involved; there are many ways this can

be accomplished. Ask your children if they know any students attending their school who may be refugees. Ask them how they can be like Jesus in their interactions with them. Ask how they would want to be treated if they found themselves in a new school in a different country.

It is vital to have open dialogue and acknowledge the spectrum of feelings. Older children can engage in discussions about policy and programs; you could ask how they would address the current refugee crisis if it was up to them.

Most of us have a story of immigration in our family’s history. Share what you know of your own family’s story with your children. For some, it may be generations ago, but imagine what it would be like to be in their shoes.

As a mom, I’ve learned that it is okay to admit that I don’t have all the answers to my children’s questions. But together, we can go to Matthew 25 and talk about what it means to care for strangers.

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Ingrid Slikkers is an assistant professor in social work at Andrews University.