PRACTICE GUIDE 03

MEETING A CHILD FOR THE FIRST TIME

How can a first meeting create safety, clarity and the basis for trust?

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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB

Ten years of practice. Shared for others to use, question and build on.

The RYS Learning Hub brings together learning from ten years of work alongside children and young people on the move. It shares approaches developed through the work, questions that challenged our thinking, and practical resources others can adapt and use.

These resources are not a fixed model to follow. **They are an invitation to reflect, adapt and develop practice in your own context.**

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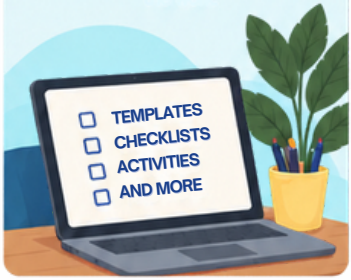
INSIGHTS
Ideas, experiences and questions that shaped our thinking.



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Approaches and learning developed through frontline practice.



TOOLS
Practical resources used and adapted through the work.



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INSIGHT 04
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The principles underpinning our approach.



TOOL 02
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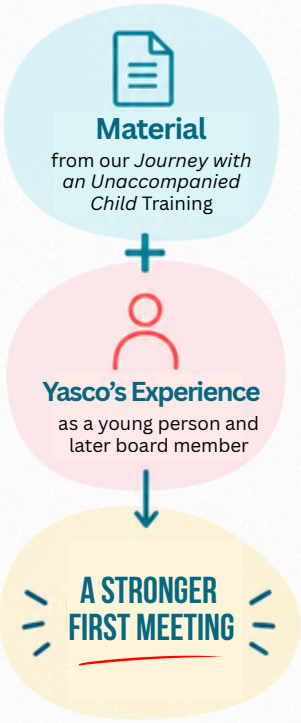
REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE LEARNING HUB

IN THIS PRACTICE GUIDE

This Practice Guide brings together material from RYS's Journey with an Unaccompanied Child training with the experiences of Yasco, who was first supported by RYS after arriving in the UK alone and later became a member of RYS's Board.

The training was developed through years of frontline work alongside unaccompanied children and young people, exploring how practitioners can approach first meetings with greater care, awareness and understanding. Yasco's reflections deepen that learning by showing what those encounters can feel like from the other side.

Throughout this guide, we revisit the training material through Yasco's experiences and words. Together, they help us look more closely not only at what we do in a first meeting, but at how our actions might be understood and experienced by the child.



01



BEFORE YOU MEET

Prepare yourself, the setting and the conversation

02



START WITH SAFETY

Why being safe and feeling safe are not always the same thing.

03



BE CLEAR ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

Helping a child understand your role, intentions and what happens next.

04



LET THEM SET THE PACE

Listening without demanding their story.

05



DON'T EXPECT TRUST

Recognising that the child is also getting to know and assess you.

06



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

How trust is earned and maintained through what happens next.

01 | BEFORE YOU MEET

Yasco's Experience

Arriving without knowing.

When Yasco arrived in the UK, he didn't know what to expect. He had never heard of social services and didn't understand what a social worker did. Like many young people, he arrived with fear and uncertainty, shaped by what he had already experienced and what he imagined might happen next.



> *When I first arrived here I understood one point about it: somebody is going to meet you today to deport you back home. This nightmare is what we think whenever you meet us. Especially if you come from a government organisation, we will think you are there to send us away, because we don't have any similar system back home. I didn't have knowledge of what social services are, or what the job of social workers are.*

What this tells us

A child may arrive with assumptions about who you are and why they are meeting you. They may not understand your role, organisation or what will happen next. Taking time to consider this can help us better approach the first meeting.

01 | BEFORE YOU MEET

Practical guidance

The first meeting starts before you speak.

How a first meeting feels is shaped by more than the questions you ask. The setting, who is there, how you introduce yourself, your body language and even the energy you bring into the room can all affect how a child experiences you. **You cannot know exactly what a child will bring into a first meeting. But you can think carefully about what you bring into it.**

THE SPACE

Is it calm, private and comfortable? Can the child see the exit, move around or ask for a break?

COMMUNICATION

Is an interpreter needed? Have you considered who that interpreter is and how their presence might affect the conversation?



WHAT THEY KNOW

Does the child know who they are meeting, why, and what your role is? What might they have already been told about you?

YOURSELF

What does your body language, energy or tone convey? You do not need to arrive overly cheerful. Respond to the child in front of you.

DON'T PLAN TO GET THEIR STORY

Go into the meeting ready to understand what the child needs now, rather than trying to establish everything that has happened to them. There will be time to learn more if and when they choose to share it.

02 | START WITH SAFETY

Yasco's Experience

Being safe is not the same as feeling safe.

Yasco remembers being told that a taxi was coming to take him to new accommodation. But he did not understand where he was being taken or why. He thought the taxi might be taking him to the airport to be deported. **So he refused to get in.**

> *"There was a woman who worked where I had been living, and explained to me I was safe and was just moving home. I still said no. When she offered to go with me, I said OK."*



What this tells us

The worker knew this was a taxi to new accommodation. Yasco thought it might be a taxi to deportation. Nothing about the journey itself changed when Yasco agreed to go. What changed was how he experienced it. Someone took his fear seriously, explained what was happening and offered to go with him.

Safety could not simply be stated. It had to be demonstrated.

02 | START WITH SAFETY

Practical guidance

Safety needs to be experienced.

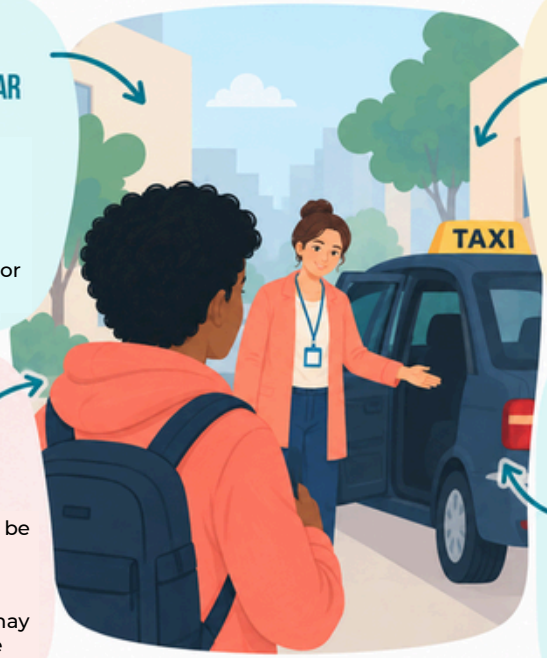
Feeling safe is shaped by what happens around the child, not only by what we tell them. In a first meeting, look for practical ways to reduce uncertainty, return some control and show through your actions that you are paying attention to what the child needs.

MAKE THE UNFAMILIAR UNDERSTANDABLE

Explain what is happening, who else may be involved and what will happen afterwards. Do not assume that systems or services are familiar.

RESPOND TO WHAT MATTERS NOW

Your agenda may not be the child's priority. Hunger, tiredness, anxiety or another immediate concern may need attention before anything else.



GIVE MEANINGFUL CHOICES

Look for small, genuine choices the child can make. Where to sit, whether they want food or a drink, when to take a break, or whether they need more time can all return some control.

LET YOUR ACTIONS SUPPORT YOUR WORDS

If you say you are there to help, think about what the child will actually experience. Be patient, explain rather than assume, and respond to what they show or tell you they need.

ASK YOURSELF

What might make this situation feel unsafe to this child, even when I know that it isn't?

03 | BE CLEAR ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

Yasco's Experience

Your job title doesn't explain who you are.

When Yasco arrived in the UK, the professional roles around him were unfamiliar. He did not know what social services were or what a social worker was there to do. His immediate concern was much more fundamental: whether the people he was meeting were safe and what might happen to him.

> *I didn't have knowledge of what social services are, or what the job of social workers are.*



> *If you speak to me but don't understand me, there's no point you being here.*

What this tells us

We may know exactly what our role is and why we are there. The child may not. Being clear means helping them understand what you can and cannot do, why you want to speak with them and what they can expect from you.

Understanding works both ways. As Yasco puts it, try to "put yourself with this young person" and understand what they are feeling and what they want.

03 | BE CLEAR ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

Practical guidance

Don't assume your role speaks for itself.

A job title may tell a child very little. Explain who you are in terms that make sense to them, including why you are there, what you can do and what they can expect from you.



01 EXPLAIN YOUR ROLE

Say who you are and why you want to speak with them. Avoid relying on professional titles or assuming the child understands what your organisation does.

02 EXPLAIN WHO ELSE IS INVOLVED

If you introduce another professional or service, explain who they are and why they are involved. Help the child make sense of the people and systems around them.

03 BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR POWER

If you represent an authority, explain what that means in practice. Be clear about what decisions you can make, what you cannot control and what may happen with information the child shares.

04 DON'T PROMISE WHAT YOU CAN'T GUARANTEE

Wanting to reassure a child can make it tempting to say that something will be OK. Be careful. Clarity includes being honest about uncertainty and following through on what you do say you will do.

ASK YOURSELF

If I knew nothing about my role or organisation, would I understand what I had just explained?

04 | LET THEM SET THE PACE

Yasco's Experience

Feeling listened to changes what you share.

Yasco remembers trying to speak to his social worker about what was happening. He felt that she did not have time for him and eventually stopped approaching her for support, turning instead to a staff member where he was living. The staff member took time to ask about him and his family, including things she did not 'need' to know. Yasco sensed that she genuinely wanted to listen.

FEELING UNHEARD



"If I tried to tell her something she said: 'Yeah I know, I know'... It was the sense I got from her, that she didn't care or had no time.

TAKING TIME TO LISTEN



"She asked how I was. She asked about my family... I loved how they were patient with me, how they treated me, how they were with me.

What this tells us

Children notice whether we are genuinely making space for them.

Listening is not about getting through our questions or reaching the information we think we need. Patience, curiosity and allowing the child to decide what they want to share can shape whether they want to keep talking to us at all.

04 | LET THEM SET THE PACE

Practical guidance

You don't need their whole story.

A first meeting does not need to establish everything that has happened. Start with what the child wants or needs from the interaction, and let them decide how much they are ready to share.

01 START WITH THE PRESENT

Focus first on what is happening for the child now. Stay with the present unless they choose to take the conversation somewhere else.



02 DON'T ASK FOR THE JOURNEY

Avoid directly asking about the child's journey or seeking a full account of what has happened to them. It is not your role to piece together their story.

03 LET THEM LEAD

Pay attention to what the child wants to talk about, what they move away from and when they need a break. Silence or reluctance to answer does not need to be filled.

04 DON'T EXPECT A NEAT ACCOUNT

A child's account may be incomplete or change over time. Trauma, painful memories, shame, coercion or fear can all affect what someone is able or willing to share. Inconsistency does not automatically mean dishonesty.

ASK YOURSELF

Am I listening to what this child wants to tell me, or trying to get them to tell me what I want to know?

05 | DON'T EXPECT TRUST

Yasco's Experience

They are getting to know you too.

When Yasco first spoke with RYS by phone, he was still unsure who was contacting him and why. He remembers feeling confused and scared. Meeting face-to-face felt different. It gave him an opportunity to understand the person behind the phone call and form his own impression.



> *When I met you face-to-face, it changed my mind about the organisation and about you... I was putting you under the light.*

Meeting in person gave Yasco the chance to "put us under the light" too: to observe, assess and begin deciding whether we could be trusted.

What this tells us

A first meeting is not only an opportunity for us to get to know the child. They are getting to know us too.

They may be noticing how we speak to them, whether we listen, whether our actions match our words and how we respond when they are uncertain, frustrated or afraid.

Trust is not something we should expect from a first meeting. Our role is to give the child reasons to believe that trusting us might eventually be possible.

05 | DON'T EXPECT TRUST

Practical guidance

Trust is not the starting point.

At first, a child may be cautious, distant or unwilling to engage. Try not to read this as a judgement on you. They may simply be trying to work out who you are and whether they are safe with you.

01 DON'T EXPECT CONNECTION STRAIGHT AWAY

A first meeting may not feel warm or productive. Do not expect trust, disclosure or gratitude. Give the relationship time to develop.

02 DON'T JUDGE THE FIRST RESPONSE

A child may be angry, withdrawn or say things you find difficult. Their response may reflect fear, uncertainty or previous experiences rather than how they will relate to you over time.

"Remember you can't judge a person from their first meeting. I might be angry with you, I might say bad words to you, because I don't trust you yet... I'm scared, I don't know you yet."



03 LET THEM ASSESS YOU

While you are learning about the child, they are learning about you. Give them time to observe how you listen, respond and behave rather than expecting them to take your intentions on trust.

04 SHOW, DON'T CLAIM

You do not need to persuade a child that you are trustworthy. Be consistent, listen, respect their boundaries and let your behaviour give them evidence over time.

ASK YOURSELF

Am I expecting this child to trust me before I have given them a reason to?

06 | WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Yasco's Experience

Trust is built beyond the first meeting.

When Yasco was moved from one accommodation to another, RYS asked him to send through the details of where he was going. Although we would usually meet every couple of weeks, we arranged to see him the following day to check how he was and understand his new surroundings.

> *Even how you reacted when I moved from one location to the next hotel you said send me all the details, when you are moving, so much care you showed me, maybe you think it was just your job but for me it meant a lot.*



What this tells us

Trust is not won in a first meeting. It is earned over time. A difficult first encounter can still lead to a trusting relationship, while a positive one means little if our later actions do not support it.

Small actions can carry great meaning for a child. Remembering what they told us, checking in when something changes and doing what we said we would do all help build trust.

06 | WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Practical guidance

Treat the first meeting as a beginning, not a test.

You do not need to secure trust or establish the whole relationship in one encounter. What matters is what the child experiences from you over time. Each interaction can strengthen, weaken or reshape what came before.

01

DO WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD DO



If you agree to call, find something out or take an action, follow through. If something changes or you cannot do what you expected, explain that rather than leaving the child uncertain.

02

REMEMBER WHAT MATTERS TO THEM



Pay attention to the things the child has told you are important. Remembering them later shows that you were listening and that they did not disappear from your attention when the meeting ended.

03

RESPOND WHEN THINGS CHANGE



A move, difficult news or another change may be routine within a service but significant for the child experiencing it. Think about whether your usual pattern of contact is enough for what is happening now.

04

KEEP GIVING THEM EVIDENCE



Trust does not become permanent once it has been established. How you show up, communicate, respond and follow through continues to shape whether the child feels able to rely on you.



ASK YOURSELF

What will this child experience from me after I leave this meeting?

A FIRST MEETING IS A BEGINNING

There is no perfect first meeting.

A child may leave feeling reassured, uncertain, frustrated or still unsure whether they can trust you. You may leave knowing very little about them.

That does not mean the meeting has failed.

What matters is whether the child has experienced something that makes another conversation possible: being treated with respect, understanding what is happening, having some control, being listened to and not being pushed to give more than they are ready to give.

Trust does not have to be achieved in the first meeting. It can be built in everything that follows.

> *"Be in, be with, let me feel you are a safe person to me."*



WHAT MAKES ANOTHER CONVERSATION POSSIBLE?

FEELING SAFE
Not simply being told so.

BEING HEARD
Without pressure to share.

HAVING CHOICE
Some control over the encounter.

Trust develops through what happens next.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.



REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

Published 2026
Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub