



Learn When to Refer: Tips for Teachers

Teachers are often the first to refer for counselling or additional support. Teachers are consistent adults who see student’s emotional and mental states over time.

Students with refugee backgrounds

- are at risk for mental health issues from past losses, multiple stressors and traumas, as well as current acculturation challenges and additional stressors
- may have mental health needs that increase as they settle into life in Canada
- need to be understood on an individual basis. Even members of the same family may have different resilience to stressors or traumas.

There is no exhaustive list of when to refer for counselling. Here are how teachers responded to “When do you refer?”, and more suggestions from the mental health field.

When to Refer for Counselling Support	Tips from Teachers
	For me, having an intimate understanding of each student allows me to distinguish between coping mechanisms and more complex neurological conditions. Repeated out-of-control aggressive behavior that was unsafe to the student or others, signs of mental illness that do not diminish over time (such as apparent hallucinations, complete withdrawal, self- harming behavior) required consultation.
	When a student is being violent to others or themselves and has not responded to any interventions that I have provided, then I recognize that student needs assistance.
	When a student has been in the classroom for several months and is still not responding to teacher cues or participating in classroom activities I know that he or she needs further assistance.
	Sometimes it is hard to figure out the difference between all of the beginning challenges (like just settling in, getting used to Canada and a new language and school and all of that), and the other more serious pieces around mental health. It doesn’t help that there are often other things going on with the family, like needing to find housing or finding a job or no adult to help the student at home. It is best for me to have someone to talk to about it at school who is familiar with issues like this. That helps me know when to call in extra help.

When to Refer for Counselling	Tips for Schools
	Refer when you have a “gut sense” that something serious is happening. Often our own “gut response” give us information that is beyond our conscious awareness. Dr. Bruce Perry explains this “gut” sensation as a stress response that indicates that something, outside of our conscious awareness, is not right, is inconsistent, demands attention, etc.)

	Refer when there is a marked change for the worse (e.g., crying, hitting, clinging)
	Refer when there is a clear indication of harm to self (e.g., threat to harm self, cutting, suicide, purposefully running into traffic, jumping from great heights). See NASP Communiqué - Recognizing the Signs: What School Mental Health Professionals Can Do About Suicide and Self-Injury
	Refer when there is harm to others (e.g., violence, threat of violence and will to carry through)
	Refer when there are gang-related activities
	Refer when there is no progress, despite intense interventions and supports
	When there has been a history of suicidal attempts and there is a sudden shift in mood, friendship groups, and activities. Be aware of the warning signs of youth suicide. See Times of Tragedy: Preventing Suicide in Troubled Children and Youth
	Refer when you observe an inability to concentrate, think rationally,
	Refer when the student evidences emotional swings to extremes that cannot be easily shifted (e.g., too giddy, too sad, numb / no feeling at all, etc.)
	Refer when there is evidence that the student is “self-soothing” in unhealthy ways (e.g., alcohol, drugs, sexual risk-taking behaviours, etc.)
	Refer when the student has pains in the body that are not based on medical issues (e.g., head aches, stomach aches, etc.)
	Refer when there is preoccupation with a traumatic event (e.g., drawing of murder). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because expressive activities (e.g., drawing) will likely expose difficult material, it can be a challenge to distinguish between normal processing of difficult material or the need for referral for mental health services. • Consider consulting with your school psychologist or counsellor or the Extended Student Learning Support Team to “flag” the student for possible referral. • You can gain clarity on making an immediate referral, suggestions for in-class supports, for parent supports and communication, for monitoring over the short term, etc.

[Refugee] learners respond positively when they are offered social support (e.g., counselling or child care) as well as academic support (Leong, & Collins 2007)