

The Immigrant Family Engagement Template

For Agencies Working with Newcomer and Immigrant Families

By Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe

A step-by-step script and resource guide for intake, ongoing work, and case closure with immigrant and newcomer families. This template is designed to be adapted, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed.

1. Opening and Welcome (First Contact / First Meeting)

Worker Script

"Thank you for meeting with me today. My name is [Name], and I work with [Agency]. My role is to support children's safety and well-being and to work alongside families, especially those who are new to Canada, as they navigate services and expectations here.

Before we begin, I want you to know that you are the experts on your child and your culture. I will ask questions to understand your story, and you can ask me questions at any time. If anything I say is unclear or does not feel right, please tell me so we can slow down and clarify together."

Interpreter and Language Check

Ask the family:

- "Which language are you most comfortable using for important conversations like this?"
- "Would you like an interpreter today or for future meetings?"

- "Is there any written information you would like translated or explained?"

Agency documentation checklist:

- Family's preferred language noted
 - Interpreter needs identified and arranged
 - Literacy level assessed
 - Preferred communication channel confirmed (phone/text/email/WhatsApp)
 - Contact information verified with family
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2. Exploring Migration Story and Context

Worker Script

"To understand how best to support you, it helps me to know a little about your journey here. You can share only what you feel comfortable sharing. There is no judgment. This information helps me understand your family's strengths and challenges."

Suggested Questions

- "When did you and your family arrive in Canada? Who came first, and who came later?"

- "What were some of the hopes you had for your children when you decided to come?"
- "What have been some of the hardest parts of this move—for you and for them?"
- "Do you still have family or important people in your home country? Are you in contact with them?"
- "What do you miss most about your home? What do you like about Canada?"

Key Stressors to Note

Worker should be alert to and document:

- Separation from family members (extended family, older/younger children)
- Previous exposure to war, violence, or persecution
- Time spent in refugee camps, shelters, or immigration detention
- Current immigration status concerns or uncertainty
- Financial strain or poverty
- Experiences of discrimination or racism
- Housing instability or unsafe conditions
- Loss of professional status or downward social mobility
- Grief and adjustment challenges

Strengths to Highlight

- Resilience and courage it took to migrate
 - Family bonds despite distance
 - Cultural and spiritual resources
 - Problem-solving and adaptive skills
 - Commitment to children's future
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3. Understanding Family Structure and Cultural Practices

Worker Script

"I'd like to understand how your family works—who lives in your home, who helps with parenting, and what is important in your culture when it comes to raising children. This helps me support your family in ways that make sense for you."

Guiding Questions

Family structure and roles:

- "Who are the important adults in your child's life (in Canada and back home)?"
- "Who makes decisions in your family? How do you and your partner (if applicable) share parenting?"

- "Are there extended family members or community members who help care for your children?"
- "What is expected of older children? Do they help with younger siblings, translation, or other responsibilities?"

Values and cultural practices:

- "What are some values you are trying to teach your children? For example, respect, faith, education, responsibility, family loyalty, hard work?"
- "Back home, what did 'being a good parent' look like? What did families do when children misbehaved?"
- "Are there parenting practices or traditions from your culture that you really want to keep here in Canada?"
- "Are there ways you celebrate important days or mark holidays together as a family?"
- "How do you want your children to understand their heritage and identity?"

Adaptation and change:

- "What parenting practices from back home do you think work well here? Which ones feel different or harder?"
- "What have you learned from Canadian families or schools about how to parent here?"

Worker Documentation Notes

Capture in file:

- Family composition and structure
 - Role of extended family in child-rearing
 - Who has decision-making authority
 - Community and religious/spiritual supports
 - Cultural values and parenting beliefs
 - Traditional discipline approaches
 - Gender role expectations
 - Expectations for children's responsibilities
 - Educational aspirations for children
 - Cultural practices they want to maintain
 - Areas of cultural negotiation or conflict
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4. Identifying Current Stressors and Safety Concerns

Worker Script

"Many families who are new to Canada are carrying a lot at once—finding housing, learning a new

language, working, and helping children adjust. These stresses can affect family life. I'd like to ask about things that may be making life harder right now. This helps me understand not just the challenges, but also what kind of support might help."

Topics to Explore

Housing and stability:

- "How do you feel about your current housing? Is anything about it unsafe or very stressful?"
- "How stable is your housing? Are you worried about losing it?"
- "How many people live in your home? Do you have a quiet space for children to study or sleep?"
- "Are there health or safety problems—mold, pests, no heat, broken locks?"

Finances and employment:

- "Are you able to meet your basic needs for food, bills, and transportation?"
- "Is work affecting your ability to be with your children or help them with school?"
- "Who is caring for your children while you work?"
- "Are you receiving any government supports? Do you understand them?"

Health and mental health:

- "How has your physical health been recently? Any injuries, chronic illness, or disabilities we should know about?"
- "How has your emotional health been? Have you felt sad, hopeless, angry, or overwhelmed?"
- "Are you using any substances to help with stress (alcohol, drugs, prescription medication)?"
- "Is there anyone in your family struggling with mental health or substance use?"
- "Do you have access to health care? Is there a language or cultural barrier?"

Children's adjustment and well-being:

- "How are your children doing at school? Are they attending regularly?"
- "How are they doing with friends? Do they have people they trust?"
- "Have you noticed any changes in their behavior or mood since coming to Canada?"
- "Are there any concerns about their physical or mental health?"
- "How are they adjusting to school expectations, cultural differences, or language?"

Relationships and support:

- "Do you have people you can talk to when things are hard? Who supports you?"

- "How are things with your partner (if applicable)?"
- "Is there conflict or violence in your home?"
- "Do you feel isolated or alone in Canada?"

Safety Screening Checklist

Immediate safety concerns (if present, follow agency protocol for reporting/intervention):

- Child abuse or neglect (physical, emotional, sexual)
- Domestic violence or intimate partner violence
- Substance abuse affecting parenting capacity
- Active suicidality or self-harm by parent or child
- Child or parent trafficking concerns
- Child sexual exploitation

Ongoing safety factors to monitor:

- Chronic supervision gaps or young children left alone
- Untreated medical or mental health issues in child
- School absenteeism patterns
- Parental mental health or substance use impacting capacity
- Housing instability or unsafe conditions

- [] Domestic violence exposure
- [] Cultural or discipline practices that may result in injury

Worker Notes

Document:

- Current stressors and their severity
 - Impact on parenting and child well-being
 - Family's coping strategies and resilience
 - Safety concerns identified and follow-up actions
 - Connection between stressors and any behavioral or developmental changes in children
 - Cultural factors that may be misunderstood as risk
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5. Clarifying System Role and Expectations

Worker Script

"I know that many families are afraid of 'the system,' especially if they've heard stories or had difficult experiences with authorities in the past. In some countries, government involvement with families feels very dangerous. I want to be clear about my

role, what I can and cannot do, and what to expect when we work together."

Key Points to Communicate

Role and responsibility:

- "My main responsibility is to help keep children safe and support families so they can care for their children safely."
- "I am not here to judge or punish your family. I am here to listen and to help."
- "When concerns come to our attention, my job is to understand the situation and to work with you on making things safer and better."

What happens if there are concerns:

- "If there are concerns about a child's safety, we are required by law to look into it. I will explain the concerns clearly and listen to your perspective."
- "Sometimes that means we have to meet together and make a plan for change. You are part of that planning. Your ideas matter."
- "Most of the time, families can stay together. Our goal is to support families, not to separate them."

Family rights and involvement:

- "You have the right to ask questions, to have information explained in a way you understand, and to bring a support person or interpreter to any meeting."

- "You have the right to know what we are concerned about and to tell your side of the story."
- "You have the right to participate in planning and to have your culture and values respected."
- "Everything we discuss is confidential, except if there is a serious safety issue."

Cultural responsiveness:

- "I may not understand all the ways your culture does things. Please help me. If something does not feel right to you, or if you think I am misunderstanding your culture, please tell me."
- "Parenting practices that are normal and good in your culture may be different from Canadian practices. We will work to find ways that keep your children safe while respecting who you are."

Addressing Fears

Invite the family to share concerns:

"What have you heard about child welfare / this agency? What worries you most about our involvement?"

Listen without defensiveness. Acknowledge legitimate concerns and explain clearly:

- "I understand why that would worry you. Here is what actually happens..."

- "That is a real fear that many families have. Let me explain how we work..."
 - "You have the right to [specific right]. That is how we protect families."
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6. Co-Creating Goals With the Family

Worker Script

"Rather than me deciding what needs to change, I'd like us to work together to set goals. These goals should help your children be safe and well and also help your family feel more stable and supported. You know your family best. I know about systems and services. Together, we can make a plan that works."

Goal-Setting Questions

- "If things were better six months from now, what would look different at home, at school, or in your life?"
- "What is one change you would like to see for your child? For yourself?"
- "What is already working well in your family that we can build on?"
- "What kind of support or help would make a difference?"
- "What feels most urgent or important to address first?"

Translating Into Specific Goals

Take the family's hopes and translate them into 2–4 specific, measurable, time-bound goals. Examples:

Goal 1: School engagement

- "Child attends school at least 4 days per week by [date]."
- "Parent communicates with school about any absences on the same day."
- "Parent attends parent-teacher meeting at [frequency]."

Goal 2: Supervision and safety

- "Family develops and implements a clear supervision plan for children after school."
- "Parent or trusted adult is responsible for children at all times."
- "Plan is written down and reviewed monthly."

Goal 3: Discipline and emotional safety

- "Parent uses non-physical discipline strategies (time-outs, loss of privileges, talking) at least 80% of the time."
- "Parent takes a break if angry before disciplining."
- "Parent practices calm discipline with [support person] twice weekly."

Goal 4: Connection to support

- "Family is connected with a settlement worker by [date]."
- "Family attends [parenting program/mental health service/community program] [frequency]."
- "Family identifies at least 2 trusted community supports."

Goal 5: Family well-being

- "Parent seeks help for mental health/substance use/health issue by [date]."
- "Family has regular family meals together [frequency]."
- "Parent and child have one-on-one time together [frequency]."

Confirming Agreement

- "Do these goals make sense to you? Can you explain back to me what you heard?"
- "Is there anything you would change or add?"
- "Do you think these are things you can work on? Is there anything that would make it easier?"
- "What support do you need to reach these goals?"

7. Mapping Supports and Referrals

Worker Script

"Family challenges are often not only about parenting. Many times, it is housing, work, language, isolation, or lack of knowledge about Canadian systems that makes everything harder. Let's think about what supports might help you and your family."

Discussing Existing Supports

Ask:

- "Who in your life helps you? Family, friends, neighbors, community members?"
- "Do you have a faith community or cultural association you connect with?"
- "Are there services you are already using that help?"

Validate and build on existing supports.

Identifying Needed Services

Discuss potential referrals:

- **Settlement services:** Language classes, orientation to Canada, employment support, housing help

- **Financial support:** Income assistance, child tax benefits, food bank, emergency funds
- **Parenting support:** Parenting classes, coaching, parent circles
- **Mental health:** Counseling, therapy, crisis support (available in family's language when possible)
- **Child support:** School counselor, speech/language therapy, educational assessment, after-school programs
- **Health:** Family doctor, pediatrician, dental care, reproductive health
- **Housing:** Subsidized housing, emergency shelter, landlord advocacy, repairs support
- **Legal:** Immigration lawyer, family law, tenant rights
- **Community:** Cultural associations, faith communities, recreation programs, volunteer opportunities

Making Referrals

Worker script:

"Here are some services I think could be helpful. I can explain what each one does, and we can decide together which ones you want to try. We can also talk about what might get in the way—transportation, child care, fear, or language—and how to reduce those barriers."

For each referral:

- Explain what the service does and how it helps
- Ask if the family is interested
- Identify barriers (transportation, language, hours, cost, childcare, cultural fit, trust)
- Problem-solve how to reduce barriers
- Discuss how the referral will happen (warm handoff, joint phone call, written information, family self-refers)
- Get explicit consent and preferred contact method

Documentation

Document:

- Referrals discussed
 - Referrals accepted and which ones
 - Consent obtained and preferred contact method noted
 - Barriers identified and solutions planned
 - Follow-up date to check on services
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8. Communication Plan

Worker Script

"To avoid misunderstandings and to make sure we are working well together, it helps to be clear on how we will communicate."

Establishing Communication Preferences

Ask the family:

- "What is the best way to reach you—phone call, text, WhatsApp, email?"
- "What time of day is usually good for you?"
- "Is there a safe number or email to use, or should I call/text a different person?"
- "If I cannot reach you, is there another safe person I can contact?"
- "Are there people you do not want me to contact?"

Setting Expectations

Explain to the family:

"Here is how we will communicate:

- **Meeting schedule:** We will meet [frequency] at [day/time]. If that does not work, we will find another time.
- **If you cannot make a meeting:** Please let me know as soon as you can. I will do the same if I need to change something.

- **Between meetings:** I may send you information or check in by [preferred method].
- **After important meetings:** I will send you a short summary so you have something to look back on.
- **Emergency or urgent concerns:** If something urgent comes up, you can call [emergency number] or reach out to [backup contact].
- **Confidentiality:** What we discuss is confidential, except if there is a safety concern that requires reporting."

Creating a Communication Document

Give the family a written document with:

- Worker name and phone number
- Agency name and address
- Meeting schedule and location
- Preferred communication method and best time to reach family
- Backup contact information for family
- Emergency contact information
- Interpreter or translation arrangements
- Family's preferred language
- Any accessibility needs

Agency documentation:

- Communication preferences documented
 - Family contact information verified
 - Backup contacts identified
 - Emergency procedures explained
 - Written summary provided to family
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9. Ongoing Review and Feedback

Worker Script

"As we work together, I want to check in regularly to see what is helping and what is not. Your feedback helps me do my job better."

At Each Review Meeting

Ask:

- "What has been most helpful about our work together so far?"
- "What has been frustrating or confusing?"
- "Do you feel your culture and values are being respected?"
- "Are there new stresses or changes we need to consider?"

- "How are you feeling about progress toward our goals?"
- "Is there anything you want to change about how we work together?"

Adjusting the Plan

Based on feedback:

- Modify goals if they are unrealistic or no longer relevant
- Add or change supports if something is not working
- Adjust meeting schedule or communication method if needed
- Acknowledge progress and celebrate wins
- Problem-solve barriers together

Cultural Responsiveness Check

Periodically ask:

- "Are we respecting the way you want to raise your children?"
- "Have we misunderstood anything about your culture or how your family works?"
- "Is there anything we are asking you to do that does not feel right for your family?"
- "How can I better support you?"

Documentation

Record:

- [] Family's feedback on progress and engagement
 - [] Changes made to goals or plan based on feedback
 - [] Cultural responsiveness observations
 - [] Progress toward goals
 - [] Adjustments to services or supports
 - [] Family strengths and progress noted
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10. Case Closure / Transition

Worker Script

"We are getting close to the end of our formal work together. I'd like to look back at what has changed and plan for how you will keep things going. This does not mean I don't care—it means you and your family are ready to move forward on your own, and you have support in place to do that."

Reflection Questions

- "What are you most proud of in your family's progress?"

- "What feels stronger or safer now compared to when we first met?"
- "What are the main changes you have made?"
- "What helped you make those changes—people, services, your own effort?"

Planning for Sustainability

- "What situations might be difficult in the future, and what is your plan if they come up?"
- "Who will you reach out to if you need help? Can you name specific people and services?"
- "What have you learned about yourself and your family that will help you in the future?"
- "What will you keep doing after our file closes?"

Identifying Ongoing Supports

Ensure the family has:

- Connection to at least one ongoing service or support
- Names and numbers of key contacts
- Knowledge of how to re-access services if needed
- Community connections and relationships

- Clear understanding that they can return if they need support

Affirmation and Closure

"I want to acknowledge the effort you have made under very difficult circumstances. You have shown real courage and commitment to your family. Our formal work will end on [date], but that does not erase your progress. If you need help again in the future, you can contact [agency/phone]."

Offer:

- Written summary of work done and progress made
- Resource list for ongoing support
- Letter of completion if appropriate for immigration or other purposes
- Feedback form if the agency uses them

Final Documentation

Document in file:

- Goals met and progress made
- Family's self-assessment of change
- Ongoing supports identified and confirmed
- Key learning points for family
- Affirmations and strengths highlighted
- Follow-up contact information provided

- Referrals or safety plans in place for future concerns
 - Date of closure and reason for closure
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Agency Implementation Guide

Using This Template

This template can be adapted for different contexts:

As an intake form:

- Convert questions into checkboxes and response spaces
- Create separate sections for intake, ongoing work, and closure
- Add agency-specific assessment tools or risk screening
- Include consent forms and mandatory reporting information

As a supervision and quality review tool:

- Use to review cultural responsiveness and engagement quality
- Check that workers are asking the right questions and truly listening

- Ensure trauma-informed and strength-based approaches
- Assess whether goals are co-created and realistic

As a training resource:

- Use scripted language to train new staff on working with newcomer families
- Discuss how to adapt language for different literacy levels, languages, and contexts
- Role-play scenarios common with immigrant families
- Emphasize cultural humility and the role of the worker as a learner

As a client document:

- Provide families with simplified version of template in their language
- Help families prepare for meetings by sharing the questions in advance
- Create a client-centered record that families can keep and refer to
- Use as basis for transparency and partnership

Flexibility and Adaptation

This template is intentionally flexible. Sections can be:

- **Shortened or expanded** depending on context (child welfare investigation,

voluntary family support, school-based program, settlement agency, early intervention)

- **Translated** into multiple languages
- **Simplified or enhanced** based on literacy level and communication needs
- **Adapted** for specific populations (refugee families, Indigenous families, LGBTQ+ families, families with disabilities)
- **Modified** to include agency-specific protocols, risk assessments, or documentation requirements

Key Principles to Maintain

Regardless of adaptation, keep these principles central:

1. **Partnership:** Work with families, not to families
2. **Cultural humility:** Learn from families; do not impose
3. **Transparency:** Explain your role and expectations clearly
4. **Strength-based:** See and build on what families are doing well
5. **Trauma-informed:** Recognize the impact of migration stress and trauma
6. **Language-accessible:** Use interpreters; do not rely on children
7. **Practical support:** Help reduce barriers, not just identify problems

8. **Respect:** Honor families' values, culture, and decision-making

Staff Training Topics

Agencies implementing this template should provide training on:

- Migration and trauma: Understanding the impact of migration stress and trauma on families and children
- Cultural competence and humility: How to learn from families, avoid stereotyping, respect cultural practices while maintaining child safety standards
- Interpretation of discipline and parenting practices: How to distinguish between cultural differences and genuine safety concerns
- Communication across language and culture: Using interpreters effectively, avoiding miscommunication, checking for understanding
- Bias and discrimination: Examining personal biases and how they affect assessment and engagement
- Building trust with families: Creating safety and partnership despite power imbalances
- Strengths-based and solution-focused approaches: Focusing on what families are doing well and what they can do, not just problems

- Mandatory reporting and legal obligations: Understanding when to report, how to report responsibly, and how to communicate about this with families
- Self-care: Supporting worker well-being to prevent burnout and secondary trauma

Evaluation and Feedback

Agencies using this template should:

- Collect feedback from families on their experience with engagement and support
- Evaluate outcomes: Do families feel more supported? Do children's situations improve? Are families engaged with services?
- Supervise workers using this approach to ensure fidelity to principles
- Regularly review and update the template based on learning and feedback
- Document and share case examples (anonymously and with consent) of successful engagement and outcomes
- Monitor for cultural biases or systemic barriers that emerge in practice

Closing Note for Agencies and Workers

This template is built on the understanding that newcomer and immigrant families are often the most vulnerable yet least likely to be engaged with services and support. Fear, language barriers, cultural differences, and past trauma with authorities create distance that prevents families from accessing help.

When agencies take time to understand families' migration journeys, listen to their values and practices, be transparent about their role, and build genuine partnership, something shifts. Families become less afraid. They ask for help earlier. They trust the process. And most importantly, children are safer and families are stronger.

This template is an invitation to agencies to do that work, to slow down, to listen deeply, to respect culture, and to build trust.

Your willingness to engage families this way is how change happens.

This template is based on best practices in culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strength-based family engagement. It is designed to be adapted for different agencies, contexts, and populations. For questions or to share how you are using this template, please reach out (charistouch.worldwide@gmail.com).

Last updated: January 2026

About the Author

Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe, MSW, is a Child Welfare Advocate specializing in the immigrant and refugee experience. With deep expertise in the Canadian legal system and West African communal values, she bridges the gap between clinical requirements and cultural heritage.

Deborah empowers professionals to move beyond "system shock" to build genuine equity. She provides the strategic tools and "Dual-Lens" perspective necessary to protect family unity while ensuring newcomers thrive within Western frameworks.

Part of her mandate is to transform how agencies engage with the diaspora by replacing cultural misunderstanding with clinical strategy, ensuring every newcomer family has the tools to remain whole and 'system-proof' in a new land."



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