HELEN BAMBER FOUNDATION
strength to fly

30-month futures: Growing up under temporary refugee protection and the potential implications for children in refugee families

November 2026

Introduction

Being granted refugee protection has historically provided a secure basis for families to rebuild their lives in the UK. Yet, the UK has recently moved from five-year grants of refugee protection towards shorter-term grants of leave. For asylum claims made by adults and children in families from 2 March 2026, protection will generally be granted for 30 months, with continued protection subject to review and renewal after each 30-month period.[1] The government has recently announced its intention to extend the route to settlement for some refugee groups to between 10 and 20 years and, for other refugee groups, to up to 30 years.[2]

For families who have already had to flee their homes, survived extremely traumatic experiences, persecution, torture or war and navigated the extended limbo of the asylum process, the transition to refugee status will no longer provide the same sense of safety and stability it previously did. Instead, families will face continuing uncertainty about whether they will be allowed to stay in the UK and whether they will still be protected after 30 months, fundamentally shifting the conditions in which refugees raise their families.

The importance of protecting children from adversity and harm is widely enshrined in UK policy and reflected in the current Labour government's commitment to ensuring that every child has the "best start in life" and the opportunity to grow, learn and thrive.[3] Yet, existing international and UK empirical evidence raises credible concern about the potential consequences of short-term, 30-month refugee leave and prolonged structural uncertainty on children's wellbeing, mental health, sense of belonging and prospects.

Refugee families face intersecting challenges before, during and after migration. Refugee-background children are disproportionately exposed to adverse childhood experiences, which may affect their health and wellbeing across the course of their lives.[4] Following resettlement, families may continue to experience acculturation stress, social isolation, discrimination, and anxiety about

[1] Home Office. (2026, March 2). Refugee protection to be reviewed every 30 months.
[2] Home Office. (2026, November 2). Home Secretary unveils new rules for migrants settling in the UK.
[3] Department for Education. (2025). Giving every child the best start in life
[4] Bager, L., Laursen, T. M., Palic, S., Nordin, L., & Thøgersen, M. H. (2022). Adverse childhood experiences among children of parents who are refugees affected by trauma in Denmark: a register-based cohort study. *The Lancet Public Health*, *7*(10), e825-e833.

relatives left behind.[5] These pressures, alongside the effects of trauma and uprootedness, can affect family functioning and place additional demands on parents supporting their children in unfamiliar social and institutional environments.[6] This context is important when considering whether temporary protection may compound the challenges that refugee children already face.

The changes to refugee protection will extend to a substantial population of children who experience the UK refugee protection system alongside their families. In the UK, 13,112 accompanied children claimed asylum in 2025.[7] At the end of 2025 there were just over 22,000 children in families living in asylum support while waiting for a decision on their asylum claims.[8] Although only a proportion of these children and families will have been granted refugee status, this number illustrates the scale of the child population for whom the transition from asylum to short-term refugee protection is potentially significant.

This literature review outlines and synthesises existing international and UK evidence on the potential implications of temporary protection and prolonged immigration uncertainty for refugee children and young people. It considers how findings can inform an assessment of the potential risks associated with reducing the duration of refugee leave in the UK.

Parental wellbeing, family functioning and child mental health

Children's wellbeing and development are closely linked to how well their parents are coping. Parental stress is consistently associated with emotional and behavioural problems in school-aged children, which are in turn associated with longer-term adverse outcomes and mental health difficulties into adulthood.[9] This is particularly pertinent for refugee families, given evidence that refugee adults experience substantially higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health difficulties, compared to the general population.[10] Consistent with this, parental post-traumatic stress has been associated with poorer child mental health within refugee families.[11]

---

[5] Trotter, E. F., & Woodcock, K. A. (2025). First-hand experiences of belonging among child refugees and asylum seekers, post-migration: a meta-synthesis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1603733; and Omata, N., & Habash, D. (2025). Parenting dilemmas: Syrian refugee families resettled in the UK. *Human Organization*, *84*(3), 316-327

[6] Benchekroun, R. (2023). Strategic mothering in a hostile environment: how hostile immigration policies shape mothering, belonging and citizenship in the UK. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *46*, 3316–3337; and Rousou, E., Apostolara, P., Velonaki, VS., Papadopoulos, I., Kalokairinou, A., Sakellaraki, O., Dudau, V., Kuckert, A., Lazzarino, R., Mauceri, M., Pzzella, A., Kouta, C., Tsitsi, T. (2025). Lived experiences of migrant and refugee parents: Challenges encountered during their journey and settlement in Europe. *Journal of Migration and Health*, *11*

[7] Home Office. (2026, February 26). How many people claim asylum in the UK?

[8] Home Office. (2026, July 16). *Response to Freedom of Information request FOI2026/09327.*

[9] Ribas, L. H., Montezano, B. B., Nieves, M., Kampmann, L. B., & Jansen, K. (2024). The role of parental stress on emotional and behavioral problems in offspring: A systematic review with meta-analysis. *Jornal de pediatria*, *100*(6), 565-585.

[10] Henkelmann, J. R., de Best, S., Deckers, C., Jensen, K., Shahab, M., Elzinga, B., & Molendijk, M. (2020). Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in refugees resettling in high-income countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. BJPsych open, 6(4).

[11] Bryant, R., Edwards, B., Creamer, M., O'Donnell, M., Forbes, D., Felmingham, K., Silove, D., Steel, Z., Nickerson, A., McFarlane, A., Hooff, M. V., & Hadzi-Pavlovic, D. (2018). The effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on refugees' parenting and their children's mental health: a cohort study. *The Lancet. Public Health*, *3 5*, e249–e258; Nielsen, M. B.,

Flanagan et al.'s (2020)[12] systematic review identifies several plausible indirect pathways for the intergenerational transmission of trauma in refugee families, including reduced parental emotional availability, increased family conflict and the accumulation of post-migration stressors. This demonstrates that children's wellbeing is not only shaped directly by the trauma experienced by themselves or their parents, but also by the legal, material, and institutional conditions families experience in their host country.

For refugee families, the length and security of protection is an important post-migration factor, influencing parental wellbeing and family functioning and in turn, children's mental health. Evidence from Australia provides the most direct quantitative evidence on the relationship between temporary refugee protection and mental health. From 2014, Australia granted temporary protection visas, typically for three years, to certain groups of refugees. Over the subsequent period, there was growing evidence on the mental health harms associated with temporary protection.[13]

Longitudinal evidence provides an important insight into the relationship between protection status and mental health. One research study followed 1,201 adult refugees and asylum-seekers in Australia and found that obtaining permanent protection was associated with significant improvements in mental health and social functioning.[14] By contrast, temporary protection was associated primarily with reductions in fears of deportation, without corresponding improvements in depression or social functioning.

Australian evidence suggests that these effects extend to children.[15] Ratnamohan et al (2023)[16] compared 361 children aged 10-18 and 242 mothers across families with secure permanent refugee protection and those holding temporary protection visas. Temporary protection was associated with poorer mental health among children, with the relationship partly explained by increased family stress and higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among mothers. Together, these findings suggest that the effects of temporary protection may extend beyond

---

Carlsson, J., Rimvall, M. K., Petersen, J., & Norredam, M. (2019). Risk of childhood psychiatric disorders in children of refugee parents with post-traumatic stress disorder: a nationwide, register-based, cohort study. *The Lancet. Public Health*, *4 7*, e353–e359.

[12] Flanagan, N., Travers, Á., Vallières, F., Hansen, M., Halpin, R., Sheaf, G., Rottmann, N., & Johnsen, A. T. (2020). Crossing borders: a systematic review identifying potential mechanisms of intergenerational trauma transmission in asylum-seeking and refugee families. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *11*.

[13] Nickerson, A., Byrow, Y., O'Donnell, M., Mau, V., McMahon, T., Pajak, R., … Liddell, B. J. (2019). The association between visa insecurity and mental health, disability and social engagement in refugees living in Australia. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *10*(1).

[14] Nickerson, A., Byrow, Y., O'Donnell, M., Bryant, R. A., Mau, V., McMahon, T., … & Liddell, B. J. (2023) The mental health effects of changing from insecure to secure visas for refugees. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *57*(11), 1486-1495.

[15] Rostami, R., Wells, R., Solaimani, J., Berle, D., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., Silove, D., Nickerson, A., O'Donnell, M., Bryant, R., McFarlane, A., & Steel, Z. (2022). The mental health of Farsi-Dari speaking asylum-seeking children and parents facing insecure residency in Australia. *The Lancet Regional Health: Western Pacific*, *27*.

[16] Ratnamohan, L., Silove, D., Mares, S., Krishna, Y., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., & Steel, Z. (2023). Breaching the family walls: Modelling the impact of prolonged visa insecurity on asylum-seeking children. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *57*, 1130–1139.

parents to children, at least in part through parental wellbeing and family functioning, consistent with the developmental literature outlined above.

Evidence from the US also indicates that parental legal protection can directly affect children's mental health. Hainmueller et al. (2017) used a regression-discontinuity model to explore the effect on children of having parents at risk of deportation.[17] They found that children whose mothers were protected from deportation due to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program had over 50% fewer diagnoses of adjustment and anxiety disorder, compared to children whose mothers remained at risk of deportation. This quasi-experimental evidence suggests that changes in parents' legal security can have measurable implications for children's mental health.

Qualitative evidence from Denmark shows how short-term protection is experienced day-to-day. Denmark offers a useful case for examining these experiences given its shift towards temporary protection, increased emphasis on returns for refugees and a more restrictive approach to permanent residence, which represents a model of inspiration for the UK's policy change.[1]

Shapiro et al. (2024) drew on eleven months of fieldwork and interviews with 30 refugees within families in Denmark.[18] They found that temporary and conditional status creates ongoing uncertainty and profound anxiety about whether families will be able to stay together, while also fostering family tension. Parents experienced permit renewal as an enduring source of dread. One Kurdish father said he thought about removal "*twenty-four hours a day,*" including when eating and sleeping. An Afghan mother described her daughters sharing the worry that renewal might be refused and how the family repeatedly returned to the question of "*what if we don't get it?*". These accounts illustrate how immigration uncertainty can permeate everyday family life, with children themselves aware of and affected by the possibility of separation or removal. These findings provide qualitative insight into the family-level stress and anxiety identified in the quantitative evidence above.

UK qualitative evidence provides a particularly important basis for considering how short-term 30-month periods of leave may affect families with children. Tatham (2025) interviewed parents from 11 asylum-seeking and refugee families with young children in England.[19] Parents described how the prolonged uncertainty of the asylum system created an all-encompassing sense of insecurity, contributing to sustained psychological stress and affecting their ability to support their children. One mother described this in relation to her ability to function:

---

[17] Hainmueller, J., Lawrence, D., Martén, L., Black, B. S., Figueroa, L., Hotard, M., Jiménez, T. R., Mendoza, F., Rodriguez, M. I., Swartz, J. J., & Laitin, D. (2017). Protecting unauthorized immigrant mothers improves their children's mental health. *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, *357*, 1041–1044.

[18] Shapiro, D., Kohl, K., Jørgensen, R. E., & Sandberg, M. (2024). Out of sync: temporal governance and agency in refugee families with temporary protection status in Denmark. *Journal of Refugee Studies*.

[19] Tatham, C. (2025). Parent's reflections on the impacts of the UK's "hostile environment" policies on young asylum-seeking and refugee children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *24*, 363–379.

"sometime…I stop everything when I am stressed I can't focus…I just try for my kids, but it is so difficult."

For those who finally have their asylum claims recognised, being granted short-term renewable periods of leave may extend the experience of uncertainty beyond the asylum determination and embed it as a permanent feature of life, requiring families to repeatedly anticipate whether their family's safety is guaranteed for longer than 30 months. Under the proposed rules, this will have to happen over a period of 10 to 30 years before families will be eligible for long-term protection and Indefinite Leave to Remain.

A provisional future: education, future orientation, belonging and the transition to adulthood

All children and young people, particularly those who have experienced adversity, require not only safety in the present moment but also a credible sense of a real and possible future. Childhood and adolescence are formative periods in which young people develop identities, relationships, communities, skills and aspirations, while beginning to imagine who they might become. Children in refugee families have to navigate these transitions alongside challenges of learning a new language, negotiating cultural differences, establishing a sense of belonging in the UK and encountering increasingly hostile public rhetoric towards refugees. Where a family's long-term future remains uncertain because of periodic reviews of protection status, young people's capacity to plan and aspire may be constrained.

Qualitative research in the UK with young people seeking asylum provides evidence for the importance of future orientation to wellbeing. Chase (2013), drawing on qualitative interviews with 54 unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in the UK, found that wellbeing was closely connected to predictability, routine, belonging and the ability to visualise a place for oneself in the future.[20] For many participants, temporary immigration status and prolonged uncertainty contributed to a sense of living in limbo, with some describing an inability to envisage what lay ahead. One young person, who had been granted two years' status, described this narrowing sense of the future starkly,

"I don't see a future. If I had to go home it'd be horrible. To be here – I can't hope for too much … I need to know if they accept me in this country."

Another explained,

"I don't enjoy thinking about the future at the moment. I just want to take it step by step."

Chase argues that security should therefore be understood not only as protection from immediate harm, but also as the ability to develop a stable sense of self and a "projected self" within a coherent future trajectory.

[20] Chase, E. (2013). Security and subjective wellbeing: the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *35 6*, 858–872.

Chase's (2017) *Becoming Adult*[21] research further illustrates how temporary protection may disrupt the connections and sense of belonging that young people establish over time. One participant shared;

> *"You have spent all that time here studying and making the connections with community... like basically adapting and then all of a sudden you have to think about going back now. So it was so stressful."*

More recent UK qualitative research provides particularly relevant evidence on the significance of the length of temporary leave. Casalotti et al. (2026) interviewed eight young adults who had arrived in the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and subsequently experienced successive grants of leave of 30 months or less.[22] Participants described short-term leave as limiting their ability to develop the futures they had imagined, particularly in terms of education and employment. One participant explained that he was "*not confident enough to continue with [his] education"* because of the short period of leave, while another described the difficulty of establishing employment and accommodation within a 30-month period. Participants also contrasted this with five-year grants, which they perceived as providing sufficient stability to return to education, pursue employment and begin building a longer-term life in the UK.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the significance of temporary status may extend beyond anxiety about renewal: the duration and conditionality of leave may affect whether young people perceive education, employment and other long-term goals as realistic investments in a future they can dare to dream up for themselves.

Although these studies were focused on unaccompanied young people, their findings are relevant for considering children growing up in families granted refugee protection after March 2026. Where a family's right to remain is conditional, their long-term future remains contingent. A real concern is whether this will narrow children's horizons and create unstable foundations that are harder to lay roots into and develop a stable sense of belonging.[23]

---

[21] Chase, E. (2017) 'Health and wellbeing', Becoming Adult Research Brief no. 5, London: UCL www.becomingadult.net

[22] Casalotti, S., Yim, S. H., Midgley, N., Katona, C., & Melzak, S. (2026). The experiences of temporary grants of leave to remain among former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK: a qualitative study. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 1-18.

[23] McIntyre, J. (2024). Conceptualising the art of belonging for young refugees and asylum-seekers: reflections from England and Sweden. *Research Papers in Education*, *40*, 236–258.

Conclusion

Children in refugee families face complex and multifaceted challenges that impact their development and wellbeing, regardless of whether they directly experienced displacement or were born after resettlement. Having had their asylum claims assessed and protection needs recognised by the Home Office, families should be able to move beyond limbo and access the stability needed to recover and rebuild their lives.

Quantitative evidence from Australia demonstrates the potential harms to children's mental health of temporary protection policies, raising serious concerns about the implications of the UK asylum reforms. Qualitative research in Denmark and the UK further highlights the acute stress associated with short-term protection, particularly for older children and adolescents, whose ability to thrive and reach their potential is undermined by ongoing uncertainty about their future.

The existing evidence provides sufficient grounds for concern about the effects of 30-month, reviewable refugee leave on children in the UK. For children, 30-month periods of protection represent key developmental stages of childhood experienced against a backdrop of insecurity. This insecurity only worsens if the route to settlement extends from five years to up to 20 or even 30 years. Probation and uncertainty will become a defining feature of childhood and adolescence, potentially affecting thousands of children at critical stages of their life.

If the government is committed to giving every child the best start in life and the opportunity to thrive, the implications for children of reducing refugee leave to 30-month grants must be urgently considered.

This literature review was written by Ella Weldon. It utilised Undermind, an AI-powered research assistant and search engine, to help with the initial stage of gathering and identifying relevant global research.