

Working with Refugee Families in Early Childhood Services

'The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) acknowledges that for children to develop a strong sense of identity they need to feel safe, secure and supported and that 'educators' knowledge of individual children is crucial to providing an environment and experiences that will optimise children's learning.'

(EYLF: p.33)

Things to consider

Geographic isolation, loss of family and social support networks, and difficulty building new social networks

The isolation and sense of lost felt by many parents during resettlement can be challenging. Early childhood services can support families by fostering opportunities to strengthen attachment among parents and children and help families to meet and socialise with other families.

Childrearing practices

Don't assume refugee families will know about childrearing practices in Australia or are able to find out about them. Explain clearly what general expectations are, for example '*... by this age we would expect your child to be starting to eat solid food – you could start with mashed banana and move on to...*'

Communication and language barriers

Many refugees don't have the language skills to communicate effectively in English and struggle to communicate issues and concerns. They may not be aware that they can ask services to book an interpreter. When

booking an interpreter you need to consider the gender, ethnicity and language/dialect of the interpreter (refer to **Tip Sheet 4** on *Using Interpreters*).

Lack of knowledge of how the systems work and lack of confidence in approaching services

Service systems operate quite differently in other countries. Many refugees are also unfamiliar with the concept of Children's Services and any other support services that you may be referring to so take the time to assist these families understand what is available to them.

Rights and Responsibilities

Due to the unfamiliarity with the Australian service system many refugee families lack of awareness of their rights and responsibilities. Their rights and responsibilities as parents and services users should be explained to them.

Distrust or fear of professionals

Ensure that family members are welcomed to your service. Involve the family in decision-making regarding their options as this may help them to feel included.

Traumatic experiences can result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD can affect peoples' capacity to retain information or take in instructions, so you may need to repeat things. If you suspect that a family member is showing signs of PTSD you can call the Service for the Treatment & Rehabilitation of Torture & Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) for advice and referral. See contact details overleaf.

Family circumstances and composition

Sensitivity is required when asking about absent partners as families may have been separated by war and dislocation. Children may not all be the biological children of the parents you see. They may be the children of siblings or of their husbands other wives or the children may have lived part of their lives separated from their parents.

Program planning

Be aware when planning activities that some refugee children may be sensitive to loud noises or music if they have come from a war torn country or may be disturbed by pirate play if they have arrived by sea. To assist these children to feel safe provide predictable routines and name what is coming up next as an activity.

Tip Sheet 6

Things to remember



A sensitive approach to people from refugee backgrounds can help to rebuild trust in people in authority that may have been damaged through previous mistreatment by others. It can also provide reassurance to those who experience fear of the system and authority figures. As a result of establishing a trusting relationship, the family may ask you to help them with all sorts of issues that you can't help them with. It is important to know your services' boundaries, have knowledge of local support services, and have an external referral process in place. You may be able to assist the family by first asking them if they would like you to refer them and how you can support the family through the referral process (refer to **Tip Sheet 7** on *Referral*).

What is the difference between a refugee and a migrant?

Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their countries because they have been persecuted while migrants make a conscious choice to come to Australia. One of the most significant differences is that migrants can go home at any time if things do not work out as they had hoped or if they get homesick. Most refugees cannot. Humanitarian entrants are refugees who have been selected by Australia from overseas for resettlement and asylum seekers are refugees who are having their application for protection assessed.

How do I know if a family is from a refugee background?

Refugees do not necessarily want to identify as such so you will need to be aware of which countries refugees are arriving from, for example, in 2010/2011 in the Nepean area, refugees were mainly from Sudan, Burma, Iraq, and Bhutan. Once you have found out which country the family is from you will be able to find out more information online or ask the family directly in a sensitive way.

Tips on how to ask sensitive questions

- ▶ Explain clearly and simply why you need the information.
- ▶ Remember to use a relaxed and informal manner.
- ▶ Ensure quiet and uninterrupted space.
- ▶ Do not pursue questions that cause unease or discomfort.
- ▶ Only ask questions relevant to the information that you need.

Support Services

NSW Refugee Health Service

Provides free clinical assessment advice and referral for recently arrived refugees. Refugee health fact sheets, community profiles, guide books for working with refugees and multilingual resources are available.

Phone: 02 8778 0770 or go to www.refugeehealth.org.au

NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)

Provides a range of professional services to facilitate the healing process for refugees who have been exposed to torture and trauma. Resources and publications available include group program training kits for newly arrived refugee and migrant families *Families in Cultural Transition* and for children and young people, and *Settling In*.

Phone: 02 9794 1900 or go to www.startts.org.au

Refer to **Tip Sheet 7** on *Services and Resources Guide* for more information.

Quick Tips

- ▶ **Form filling** - adopt a sensitive and gradual approach to collecting information. Questioning especially when the family member doesn't understand the need for the information you are gathering may be reminiscent of interrogation.
- ▶ **DO bear in mind that asking refugees to repeat their traumatic stories may have a re-traumatizing effect on the individual.** Although you may be curious about their past, they might not be comfortable about divulging too much. Let people tell their stories in their own time.
- ▶ **Be aware of different cultural practices and beliefs,** particularly in relation to childbirth and parenting. It is important to ask the family if they have particular cultural practices or beliefs that they would like to be acknowledged (don't assume all people from a particular country and/or culture do things in the same way).
- ▶ **Financial resources** - many families have limited resources to access available services and resources as they are often supporting family members still in refugee camps or in other difficult living situations.
- ▶ **Literacy** - parents may not be literate in English or in their own language. Whilst translated material is helpful it is also important to ask whether the person can read, or has someone who they can go to who will read it for them.