



CULTURALLY-COMPETENT INTAKE AND ASSESSMENT

CMY's APPROACH

We work with young people and their families within a human rights framework that values diversity and promotes participation. We use a strengths-based approach alongside community development practices.

Purpose

This *Good Practice Guide* is designed to provide workers with guidance on how to undertake respectful and responsive intake and assessment with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Introduction

Conducting intake and assessment with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds requires a culturally competent approach. It is essential that your service model is flexible and individually tailored, building on clients' strengths and enabling clients to be active participants in case management. The complex nature of refugee experiences and their consequences means that assessment needs to occur over time as trust builds and new issues emerge.

Also essential is achieving a balance between acknowledging trauma associated with the refugee experience, and employing a strengths-based approach to support. As the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, a US-based agency, notes:

"(A) pathologising perspective may increase access to needed services or benefits by bringing attention to the plight of refugees, but can detrimentally downplay child refugees' resilience and innate strengths... Assessment must avoid the narrow view of refugees as traumatised victims." (NCTS, 2003:6)

Prior to Intake or Assessment

It is important to:

- If taking a referral from a service or worker, ascertain what they understand to be the needs and issues facing the young person/family and why they are making the referral ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2004](#)).
- Ensure the referring agency employs appropriate supported referral practices – i.e. request that the referring person attend the first meeting and introduce you to the young person (this can go a long way in reducing any anxiety a young person may feel); be clear about the purpose of the referral with the young person; and clearly state your role. While you may need to re-confirm at follow-up contacts, being clear at the first meeting can minimise any future confusion that may arise with other services or workers.

- Organise a professional interpreter where appropriate ([see Good Practice Guide: Working with Interpreters](#)).
- If making a referral to another agency, seek the client's permission to make contact and consent to disclose information.

Initial Meeting

At initial meetings with a young person or family:

- Conduct your intake and assessment in an informal and friendly way with minimal use of official or detailed forms.
- Be transparent and predictable and give young people choices and options whenever possible (e.g. where to meet, whether or not to close the door).
- Explain your job and what you can offer by giving examples. Ask if there is an equivalent role or service in their country or community.
- Use clear, simple language and avoid any jargon or acronyms. Some words and concepts may not have a direct equivalent in other cultures or languages.
- Explain the purpose of intake and assessment to your client and why you need to ask some questions. A young person may feel nervous or uncomfortable disclosing personal information, or they may feel under pressure to say the 'right' thing. The concept of strangers asking personal questions (and not revealing anything about themselves) may be completely foreign to them.
- Explain the concept of confidentiality in clear, simple terms as well as the limitations of confidentiality in relation to your duty of care. This may be a new concept to your clients.
- Ask the young person if you can take notes and write simply, and in a way that they can see what you are saying or provide a copy of what you have written. Aim to maintain their control and reduce any anxiety about people in authority accessing their information.
- Explain the purpose of forms, why you need to document information, what will be documented, where it will be kept, who will have access to it and how it may be used.

CONTINUED OVER 

Information to Collect

Information should be sought in the following areas (in order of importance):

- Current circumstances and needs.
- Cultural identity.
- Languages spoken and preferred language.
- Family composition (both here and overseas).
- Length of time in Australia.
- Educational background (including years of disrupted learning).
- Pre- and post- settlement in Australia (including migration experiences, time spent in refugee camps).

Remember, depending on your role, this information does not need to be collected in the first, second or even third meeting, but may be important to gather over time to ensure you have the information you need to provide appropriate support and/or further referral.

Culturally Competent Information Collection and Informed Consent

A culturally competent approach to collecting information is essential when working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and includes the following strategies:

- Explain the reasons for seeking information and be clear about these yourself. You may need to reflect on whether the information your service requires you to collect is appropriate in this context.
- Be mindful of putting pressure on a young person to tell their story. Many young people will not wish to disclose their pre-settlement experiences for some time and certainly not until they have developed a trusting relationship with you.
- Ensure questions are simple yet not too direct. In some cultures, asking direct questions is not appropriate.
- Indicate you know a little about their country or about other young people and families in a similar position to prompt their response. You can then ask if their experience is similar and elicit their unique experience in a supportive way.
- Ensure that you listen sensitively and provide your client with the space to tell their story in their own way, rather than offering advice.
- Be mindful that family members may have been lost or killed in the journey to Australia and asking about their whereabouts or past events may trigger grief and trauma experiences. Give your client the option of not answering questions and let them know that they can pause the process at any point. It is important for them to establish safety and control and you can collect more specific information as your relationship develops.
- Normalise experiences and feelings. State that their experiences and challenges are common for many refugee and migrant young people and their families. Reassure them that their feelings are a normal response to loss and cultural dislocation.

- Consider suggesting that the young person draw a family tree or diagram of family relationships (sometimes called a genogram).
- This can be a useful tool as a basis for discussion of roles, responsibilities and locations of family members, however be very cautious. This can be a very sensitive area for many young people as it can highlight the scale of their loss and grief (and possibly diminish any trust you have developed) - ensure you have strategies to support a young person in this and/or, if unsure, avoid this approach.
- Establish what other services are supporting the young person and/or their family.
- Ask a young person or family if they have any questions of you.
- Recognise that consent is an ongoing process and check in with the person about their understanding of, and confidence in, the agency's respect for their privacy and confidentiality.

Case Planning

When planning your support with a young person or family:

- Identify and prioritise goals together, highlight their strengths or achievements.
- Give them the opportunity to write or draw what they would like to achieve (or find pictures of photos to represent their goals). If they are not comfortable or confident reading and writing in English, they may wish to write in their own language, while you write in English. Or, you can write while they talk, taking time to explain what you have written.
- Discuss what needs to happen to achieve these goals, what you will work on next and who needs to do what.
- Review the case plan regularly, being mindful of providing a flexible and responsive support service.
- Seek support for yourself to manage your own responses to working with this client group (e.g. supervision or debriefing).

Confidentiality and Working in the Family Context

When working with young people and their families, it is important to recognise that the young person may have different needs, in addition to or perhaps different from, those needs identified by the family. Ideally case workers will seek to build a shared understanding of all the views in the family unit, including those of young people.

The case worker needs to keep an individual young person's case work plan separate from their family's support plan, to respect the young person's right to confidentiality. This will alleviate the risk of a family member accessing a young person's case notes and other personal information unnecessarily.

REFERENCES/OTHER RESOURCES

- Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2004). *CMYI Information Sheet: Making Successful Referrals with Refugee Young People and their Families*. Melbourne, CMYI.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network Refugee Trauma Taskforce, *Review of Child and Adolescent Refugee Mental Health*, available at www.nctsnct.org
- Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (1996). *A Guide to Working with Young People Who are Refugees*. Melbourne, VFST.