



WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS

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 strategies that promote good practice when working with interpreters.

Introduction

Engaging an interpreter can be fundamental to culturally-competent work with refugee and newly arrived young people. Young people have a right to communicate in the language of their choice. Engaging an interpreter isn't just about you as a worker communicating your message, but can facilitate a more genuine dialogue.

Young people are often put in the position of interpreting for family or community members. This can place them in stressful and inappropriate situations, as they carry the burden of responsibility for conveying information. Sometimes their language skills are over-estimated, and as a consequence they do not gain access to accurate and comprehensive information or support.

It is critical to identify if an interpreter is required, and utilise their services accordingly.

Role of an Interpreter

The role of a language interpreter is to restate spoken communication from one language to another. A professional interpreter should be engaged when you or your client identify that language is a barrier to communicating effectively.

It is important not to make assumptions about a young person's capacity to understand and communicate in English. Many newly arrived young people and their families may appear to get by with a few words of English but will not necessarily understand everything you need to communicate, nor will they necessarily be able to communicate freely with you ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003](#)). A client's limited vocabulary can work against their ability to receive appropriate support.

When to Engage an Interpreter

Occasions where engaging a professional interpreter is necessary include:

- Where your client speaks **limited or no English**.
- Where your client speaks basic English but is **under stress**.
- When conveying important or **sensitive information** about physical or mental health issues, entitlements, rights and responsibilities or seeking informed consent.
- When your **client requests** an interpreter.

Professional interpreters should always be used in preference to friends, relatives and unqualified bilingual staff as interpreters. Interpreters are trained, possess linguistic competence and proficiency, are skilled in cross-cultural communication, are impartial and operate within confidentiality guidelines. Children should never be used as interpreters due to the inappropriate responsibility they carry as interpreter and the shift in power dynamic away from the adult ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2003](#)). Using a child as an interpreter does not grant the adult the recognition and authority they should receive and can contribute to conflict between children and parents/family members.

Types of Interpreters

In most states and territories, workers can access interpreters via the telephone or in person. These are often called 'on-site' interpreters. There are advantages for using either a telephone or on-site interpreter, depending on your circumstances and needs of your client.

Telephone Interpreters:

- can be called immediately
- offer more language possibilities because interstate interpreters can be used
- can offer anonymity for the client (as they may be located in a different state/territory and may not be known to your client's community)
- offer the possibility of communicating with a client who isn't with you.

A telephone interpreter requires access to a speaker-phone if you are with the client.

CONTINUED OVER 

On Site Interpreters:

- offer more assistance with longer, more detailed or complex conversations
- are often used with group meetings (e.g. meeting with a young person and their family)
- are best used where there is time to book ahead (allow at least a week). (*Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service 2005*).

Planning

When planning to engage an interpreter key considerations include:

- Allowing extra time for the interpreting process (e.g. double the usual interview time).
- Considering a client's request for strict confidentiality when using an interpreter.
- Avoiding assumptions about the language your client speaks. Always ask your client which language interpreter they prefer.

Client Reluctance

Some clients may be reluctant to utilise a professional interpreter, even if they are embarrassed about not understanding something or about being misunderstood. If your client is reluctant to use a professional interpreter, try to explore with them their reasons and concerns. It may be because they:

- do not understand the concept of professional confidentiality and impartiality
- have had a previous negative experience with a particular interpreter
- feel embarrassed or disappointed that you think they need a professional interpreter and perceive this as a judgment about their English language proficiency.

Negotiation Strategies

If your client feels reluctant, try to address their concerns. Consider the following negotiation strategies:

- Explain that you are aware that many people are concerned about trust and confidentiality.
- Reassure your client that interpreters are bound by confidentiality and impartiality rules.
- Explain the benefits of using a neutral, trained interpreter who is not a family member.
- Explain why you need an interpreter in your role even if they don't feel the need.
- Explain that an interpreter can allow them to speak freely in their own language and convey some things they may not be able to in English.
- If a young person or child is suggested, explain your organisation does not allow you to use them as interpreters.
- Let the client know they can use an interpreter that they do not know and is not well known to their community (and that you will check in with them to locate someone).

- Suggest using a telephone interpreter from another state or using a name other than the client's real name (this can be decided with the client) for greater anonymity.
- Ask the client for any other suggestion to address their concerns (*Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003*).

Preparation with Client Prior to the Interview

It is important to do some preparation with your client prior to using an interpreter in order to ensure you get the best results. Consider the following:

- Identify language and/or dialect of language if required before booking an interpreter—if organising a meeting with a family, check this with all parties.
- If this is a smaller language group, you may need to ask for any other languages the client may feel comfortable to use in case an interpreter is not available.
- Ask your client if they prefer a male or female interpreter, your client may be bound by cultural or religious practice, or feel more comfortable with a particular gender.
- Ask your client if they prefer a male or female interpreter; your client may be bound by cultural or religious practice, or feel more comfortable with an interpreter of a particular gender.
- Make a booking for an on-site interpreter or call a telephone interpreter using your organisation's preferred interpreting service, procedure and client code (note that you will need to arrange this with your organisation). (*Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003*).

Preparation with Interpreter Prior to the Interview

Whether conducting the interview via telephone or in person, brief the interpreter prior to the interview, including:

- the purpose of the meeting or conversation.
- how you would like the meeting to be conducted, e.g. that you would like them to convey all aspects of the conversations between the parties (even casual or incidental comments).
- that it is your intention to speak directly to the young person/family throughout the interview.

During the Interview

- Introduce everyone in the meeting and make sure they are aware of the role of the interpreter and highlight that they are impartial and confidential.
- Talk about how you would like the conversation to be conducted. Ask everyone to keep statements short, breaking every few sentences, to allow for interpreting before a new point is introduced.
- Take control of the meeting. You have engaged the services of an interpreter and their role is to help with communication, not conduct the interview.

CONTINUED OVER 

- Always talk to the client in the first person. For example, use “Can you tell me...” rather than “interpreter, can you ask the client to tell me...” or “Can he/she tell me...”.
- Use simple language and avoid any jargon or acronyms (or explain them if you need to use them). Some words and concepts may not have a direct equivalent in the other language.
- Do not ask the interpreter to edit the information you give to make it culturally appropriate or provide you with information about the client’s background. You need to ask the client for this information.
- Take note of the interpreter’s method of signalling or request a signal when they need to interpret, before the conversation moves on.
- When an interpreter is used for either party, ensure they are not seen or used as that party’s advocate (a problem that may arise due to language/cultural affinity).
- Ask for feedback during the meeting to ensure that all parties can understand and are satisfied with the process—in particular, your client.
- Ensure the interpreter is still present if you need to talk about what action needs to be taken at the end of a conversation, e.g. they may need to interpret telephone numbers.
- Intervene or cease the conversation if you are not satisfied with the interpreter or if you are detecting any discomfort from the young person with the interpreter ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003](#)).

Using and On-site Interpreter

When using an on-site interpreter, it is particularly important to:

- Ensure that you and your client arrive before the interpreter as this may assist the client in understanding that the interpreter is an independent party.
- Ensure that you are sitting facing the client rather than the interpreter and that the interpreter is equidistant (e.g. 3 points of a triangle).

After the Interview

After the interview you may wish to:

- Ask the interpreter how they found the meeting or conversation and provide them with feedback.
- Thank the interpreter if you have been satisfied with their services.
- Once the interpreter has left the room, ask your client how they felt about the interpreter—if they have very limited English, you may be able to ascertain how they felt when you suggest the same interpreter for your next meeting ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003](#)).

Other Issues

Some further issues to remember when working with interpreters:

- It may feel awkward at first and may take a few sessions to get used to working with an interpreter. Consider accompanying a more experienced worker to a meeting to build confidence. Working with interpreters will get easier with practice and can improve with training. A number of organisations offer training in this area (e.g. Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health).
- When working with a professional interpreter in a family meeting, you will need to ensure that all parties take turns to speak and have their statements or questions interpreted.
- If you have worked well with a particular interpreter you can request them again but remember to check that this is ok with the client.
- Remember that the conversation is between you and the client and that the interpreter has been engaged as a professional communication tool that enables this.
- Interpreters sign a code of ethics and have a responsibility to work in a professional manner and within professional boundaries. Given you have employed them to provide a service, if you have any concerns about the practice of an interpreter, feed this back to the interpreting company.
- Working with an interpreter is a dynamic process and should enhance the effective communication for both you as a worker and your client. This will hinge on the skills and professionalism of your interpreter and on your capacity to accommodate this fundamental aspect of culturally responsive work practice ([Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003](#); [Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service 2005](#)).

REFERENCES/OTHER RESOURCES

- [Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues \(2003\). *CMYI Information Sheet: A Guide to Working with Interpreters*. Melbourne, CMYI.](#)
- [Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service \(2005\). *We Speak Your Language: A Guide to Cross-Cultural Communication*. Melbourne, VITS.](#)