



YOUTH WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM REFUGEE AND MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS

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* explores themes relevant to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and discusses strategies for supporting good practice when working with this group of young people.

This guide may best be read in conjunction with *CMY Information Sheet: Young People from Refugee and Migrant Backgrounds: Some Definitions* and *Good Practice Guides: Culturally Competent Youth Work* and *Youth Work in the Family Context*

Introduction

All young people are entitled to the support they require to achieve their full potential. Rights-based youth work recognises young people's strengths and capacities and facilitates opportunities for them to determine their goals and how they engage with a service.

Background

Adolescence as a Particular Life Stage

Adolescence is the period of life for young people aged 12 to 20, or in some definitions, up to 25, and is understood as a time where young people experience significant physical, psychological and intellectual growth. These changes inform the development of a sense of identity, including sexual identity. Recent research has also stressed that this is a period where the brain undertakes significant growth.

Western theorists understand this period as a time where young people explore what kind of adults they want to be, for example: what roles they wish to take in society, what work they may wish to do, what relationships they wish to form, what kind of friendships they wish to have with peers, and how they wish to present themselves to others. In Western industrialised societies such as Australia this is often a prolonged period. This is not necessarily always the case in other cultures, which may not even see adolescence as a significant stage or individualist aspirations as a marker of maturity.

Young people from migrant or refugee backgrounds will face the extra challenge of developing a bi-cultural or multicultural identity, and may find that the general expectations of Western society, where young people move to independence to pursue individual goals, is not always appropriate for them.

Young people who have experienced trauma or loss may find their capacity to achieve what are considered normal development goals (e.g. developing a positive sense of self, developing good relationships with others or developing mastery in their chosen areas) is diminished by their trauma experiences.

Developing identity in a multicultural context

Juggling cultures and expectations

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds often have to juggle the expectations of family and their cultural community with those of mainstream Australian society, which places high value on individual choice in terms of study, career and relationships. Young people from refugee and newly arrived backgrounds may have grown up in a cultural context where the wellbeing of the whole family and community is prioritised above individual aspirations. As such, refugee and newly arrived young people are often juggling a range of pressures and complex relationships, negotiating family and cultural obligations and responsibilities while finding their own place in Australian society.

Many young people can feel stimulated and capable as they negotiate multiple cultures, but in the context of having experienced trauma and facing systemic barriers, it can also feel like an enormous pressure. Some young people may experience this as rejection and for others, it may be re-traumatising.

It is important to be aware of the pressures that young people face and to affirm the skills and agility they demonstrate as multicultural young people.

Impact of the Refugee Experience

Young people who arrive in Australia as refugees or with refugee-like experiences are likely to have experienced all or some of the following:

- A dangerous escape from their country of origin, travelling long distances, often on foot.
- Living in unsafe and insecure environments for extended periods of time (e.g. refugee camps, immigration detention or sometimes multiple transition countries) with limited or no access to health care, education, housing, income, social connection and sometimes food.
- Extreme human loss (often unexplained), including the death or disappearance of family, friends, community members and loss of home, country and security.
- Subjected to traumatic experiences including being victims of, or witnessing: torture, death, sexual assault, severe deprivation, and extended periods of fear and uncertainty.
- Arbitrary and authoritarian treatment in relation to rights to food, water, mobility, safety, income, education and employment.
- Disrupted family roles and relationships.
- Disrupted or very limited schooling.

Understanding the profound impact of trauma on the wellbeing of young people and their families is critical to good practice with young people from refugee backgrounds. Trauma can result in anxiety; sadness; a sense of having no control over your life; fear and lack of trust (amongst other responses).

Settlement Challenges for Young People

While resettlement is a challenge for all new arrivals to Australia, the resettlement needs of young people are different to those of adults because of the particular life stage of adolescence. Like all young people, those who arrive in Australia between the ages of 12 and 25 years have hopes and aspirations for their future; are defining their personal identity and forming relationships outside their family and; are laying the foundations for the lives they will live as adults. These developmental tasks are compounded by cultural dislocation, loss of established social networks and the practical demands of resettlement process, and, for young people from refugee backgrounds, the traumatic nature of the refugee experience. (Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council, 2002:4).

Some specific challenges they may face include:

- Learning a new language.
- Attending a mainstream school that does not respond to their particular needs.
- Lack of recognition of prior qualifications.
- Limited social capital to assist in accessing economic, educational and social resources, such as referees, networks for employment opportunities etc.
- System issues, including confusion over birthdates, lost paperwork, or an inability to disclose information relating to family configurations and history.
- Significant responsibilities in their family and community
 - young people are often the ‘front line’ in the settlement process, having to act as brokers (including interpreters) between services and systems and their parents and community members.
- Surviving and challenging racism.
- Disillusionment and frustration (they had hoped for so much more).

Practice Response

Refugee and migrant young people benefit from a service response that incorporates the following approaches:

- Building trust and connection
- Applying a strengths-based approach
- Working in the family context (See also Good Practice Guide: Working in the Family Context)
- Group work
- Advocacy to address systemic barriers.

Services also need to be aware of the recovery goals for young people who are refugees or who have had ‘refugee-like’ experiences. These include restoring a sense of safety, enhancing control, restoring attachment and connections to those who can offer support and care, and restoring identity, meaning, dignity and value (Aristotle, P.:1999:2). The way you deliver your service can begin to address some of these goals.

Build Trust and Connection

That trusting relationships are fundamental to good youth work practice is not new. Martin suggests that: *“It is the place of relationships which defines youth work”* and Rodd and Stewart put it like this:

“It could be argued that the relationships youth workers offer young people are just as valuable as the practical outcomes that youth workers seek...(and) establishing good rapport is not only useful, but often essential, and produces better results for the young people.” (Rodd and Stewart:2009)

Building trusting relationships and connection is particularly important for young people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced trauma prior to arrival in Australia.

The following may be useful strategies for developing a trusting relationship with clients from refugee and migrant backgrounds:

1. Take time to spend with the young person and be flexible and responsive about where you meet. When meeting a young person for the first time, try to arrange for the person who made the referral to also be present. Give a young person the choice about where to meet and meet where they feel comfortable and safe. Whenever desired by the young person or a family member, use interpreters.
2. Work to understand each individual’s unique experience through careful and respectful listening. Learn about the young person’s culture, be curious and take direction from the client. If they wish and in their time, listen to their story, hear about who they are and bear witness to their extraordinary experiences. Don’t expect to get all the answers straight away. Be prepared to take time to build relationships - be patient, and listen rather than focussing on completing forms. Confirm their right to live free of violence and oppression and to enjoy a safe and secure life in Australia.
3. Work in a transparent and accountable manner. Provide the client with details about your role - communicate simply about what you do and don’t have the capacity or power to do, and explain why you gather information and what you do with it. Also, provide information about who they can make complaints to and how they can source alternate services.
4. Explain that you are not a government service. This reduces fears of power and authority.
5. Use informal face-to-face contact with young people by, for example, accompanying clients to appointments. These can be valuable opportunities for informal conversations and relationship building.
6. Wherever possible, work to assist the young person to build connections with their family, friends and communities. This may involve support with communication, practical problem solving and linking with other services. It also often means attending community functions, seeking information about a particular ethnic community and supporting young people to design, develop and participate in social and recreational events.
7. Respect difference and sit with the discomfort of not always understanding. Whenever possible, give the time the client indicates they need.
8. Offer practical support. Young people and their families may need assistance with immediate issues like income support or school meetings before they are able to address other issues (e.g., family conflict). Practical assistance can help you demonstrate your role and build trust with a new client.
9. When the young person, or their family, directs you to do so, advocate with them and on their behalf in relation to: education, housing, employment, police and a other factors that impact on their lives. Work to empower them to advocate for change and achieve their goals, by attending appointments with them, assisting them to fill in forms and providing them with information about systems and services.
10. Remember that most young people are not interested in one-to-one traditional counselling models. Often ‘counselling’ takes place informally at impromptu moments, such as in the car, at Centrelink, etc. and after you have built a trusting relationship and demonstrated what you can offer.
11. Accept gestures of hospitality. Sharing food, a cup of tea or attending a community celebration are often culturally very important and fundamental to building trust.

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Strengths-Based Approach

Strengths-based approaches can be particularly significant in providing support to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Good practice involves looking for and reflecting back strengths that emerge from the young person's story and experiences. Being curious about strengths within the young person's family can also be important in re-connecting the young person with family members. Finding and supporting the interests of the young person, such as recreational activities, can also be part of strengths-based support and can be a key factor in building trust.

With a strengths-based approach in mind, effective youth work with this client group should therefore include the following components:

1. Develop a case plan in collaboration with the young person.
2. Identify and prioritise goals together, highlight their strengths or achievements.
3. Give young people the opportunity to build connection with other young people and have fun, to relax and build relationships with other young people. Affirm the skill and strength they exhibit in these life skills.
4. Wherever possible, work to assist the young person to build connections with their family, friends and communities, identifying the strengths and capacities their families and communities have exhibited.

Seek means for young people to gain skills and access resources they have identified they need. This may range from resume writing, using the internet, career guidance, to parenting skills. Affirm and celebrate young people's hopes and ambitions, while supporting them to make decisions that will give them the opportunity to succeed. A stepping stone approach may be a useful analogy.

Work in the Family Context

Ideally, family relationships provide young people with a sense of belonging, support in negotiating difficult challenges and transitions, and connections to shared values, culture and history. Outcomes for young people can be optimized by recognising, legitimising and facilitating ongoing family connections (*Strong Bonds Fact Sheet, 2006*). Working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the context of family relationships is fundamental to effective service provision with this client group. For more information see *Good Practice Guide: Working in the Family Context*.

Group work

As with all youth work, group work can be a key engagement and trust-building tool in working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their communities. It provides a safe space for young people to get to know each other and those who are working with them. Successful group work is client-centred and acknowledges the needs of the individual while being mindful of group dynamics. As such, it may be gender-specific in order to meet the (cultural, religious or other) needs of young people – e.g. a young mum's group, young women's sporting group, etc.

Group work outcomes can include:

- Building trust as a basis for ongoing individual support;
- Increasing the connection between young people and their peers, support workers, family or community (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2003);
- Building specific skills and knowledge – e.g. in relation to the arts, recreation, health, education and employment; and having fun, build self-confidence and improving wellbeing.

Advocacy to address systemic barriers

Young people and their families face a range of barriers in accessing Australian systems, including education, training and employment pathways, mainstream support services and the broader community (*CMY And Sellen: 2004*).

Given these barriers, youth work with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds requires engaging in 'multi-level' advocacy. This advocacy can support young people/family members to access and remain engaged in services, and ensure that barriers or gaps in service provision are addressed. Youth workers can assist young people to navigate services, as well as provide support to other agencies to improve accessibility. This means being actively involved in local worker networks, resourcing other services or workers to understand and effectively respond to the needs of this client group, and providing policy advice at the local, state and national levels.

REFERENCES/OTHER RESOURCES

Aristotle, P. (1999). *Developing Cultural Responsiveness in the Delivery of Services to Refugees and Survivors of Torture and Trauma*. Restoration for Victims of Crime Conference, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Criminology.

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Jesuit Social Services, (2006) *Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Professional Issues: Family-Aware Youth Work Practice*.

Rodd, H. and Stewart, H, (2009) *The glue that holds our work together: The role and nature of relationships in youth work*, in *Youth Studies Australia* vol.28, no.4.
