

Refugee minors build up muscle

Key words: minors, refugees, gym, inclusion

Background

The Cultural Partnerships for Harmony project (which CMY is a part of) was funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) to identify and address issues of racism and intolerance that are experienced by newly-arrived refugees in the eastern region. In order to better understand their perspective, a reference group of fifteen newly-arrived young people living in the area was recruited through the local Migrant Information Centre networks.

One of the issues raised by the reference group was their experience of racism at and around Ringwood Skate Park and Ringwood train station. The reference group members specifically referred to being spat on, having beer cans thrown at them, and verbal abuse. They believed that the young people that socialise at the Skate Park were the same young people who are at the train station. The reference group members suggested running a skating program with the young people at the Skate Park to create an opportunity to develop relationships between people using the space and young people from refugee backgrounds.

A six-week program was developed involving young people using the Skate Park and young refugees.

The program

The refugee minors involved are Afghani, Karen, Iraqi, Sierra Leonean and Sudanese and are aged 15 – 18, both male and female.

With the support of YMCA Victoria and sports apparel brand *New Balance* the following program was developed:

- All refugee minors living within the City of Greater Dandenong are offered a three month Health Club membership. This gives them access to gym-based activities such as weights, treadmill, and the use of other exercise machines.
- Each month, interested young people are invited to attend a gym induction session that has been developed specifically for this purpose. DHS and *Youthworks Victoria* also attend the session to ensure the young people feel supported throughout the process. *Youthworks Victoria* also provides transportation to the sports centre.
- After the induction session the young participants are given shoes, T-shirt and shorts as part of the *New Balance* partnership, as disadvantaged young people often struggle to afford the basic equipment required to take part in sport.

Benefits of the program

The program has brought an unprecedented number of refugee young people to the recreation centre. Through this initiative, the process of engaging these young people in other activities run by agencies, local council or Dandenong Oasis has been greatly facilitated. The young people have expressed a desire to now make use of the aquatic facilities; as a result CMY, *Youthworks Victoria* and Dandenong Oasis have organised a ten-week aquatic education and water safety program.

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By welcoming these young people, Dandenong Oasis has positively influenced their settlement process.

Challenges

The centre experienced a challenge when conducting the induction days upon the young people's first visit to the centre. The participants were taken around the facility to be shown where things were located, different programs that were offered etc. As most young people are still very recent arrivals, their language skills are still limited in some areas. They found that staff at the centre spoke too quickly through elements of the induction, but were too embarrassed to admit they did not understand the explanations: they simply nodded and agreed to everything.

Once this had been identified, Oasis contacted CMY to request cross-cultural training for its staff.

Next steps

In the first three months of the program, 30 refugee minors joined and obtained an Oasis membership. Once they have completed the initial three month period, they may apply for an additional three months. However a 20% contribution to the cost of the membership is then required as well as evidence of regular attendance during the first three months.

Following this second term they may continue on a direct debit membership but will not be charged a joining fee.

