



## 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 practice 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, nor 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 (for example developing a positive sense of self, developing good relationships with others, 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.

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## 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.

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