

## 2. The refugee experience and its impact on children and young people

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### 2.1 The refugee experience

(25 minutes)

#### Activity 2.1

Ask participants to share their responses to the activity and relate these back to the UN definition of a refugee.

In addition, alert participants to the fact that:

- Of the more than 20 million refugees and displaced persons globally, over half are children and young people.<sup>1</sup>
- Asylum seekers may have had similar experiences to refugees and may face continued uncertainty about their future.
- Some individuals who have arrived in Australia as part of a humanitarian or family migration program may have gone through similar experiences as refugees.
- Australia has an established refugee resettlement program, with up to 6000 refugee children and young people arriving each year from war zones. Soon after arrival in Australia, school-aged children enrol in the education system.
- Refugee children are distinguished by their experiences of violence and other traumatic events prior to their arrival in Australia.
- Many refugees will have lived through years of conflict and persecution before leaving their homelands.
- Many refugees will have spent years in a first country of asylum, either in a refugee camp or in the general community.<sup>2</sup>
- Many recently arrived refugees in Australia come from larger families or from families that have been reconfigured. There are many settlement pressures on families.

Sum up by alerting participants to the key understanding:

- The refugee experience has a profound experience on children and young people because of the violence and uncertainty they have experienced.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Basic Facts*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/basics.html>, accessed 18 December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> VFST (2004), *School's In For Refugees*, VFST, Melbourne, p.11.

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### 2.2. The impact on settlement and learning

(25 minutes)

#### Activity 2.2

The video *Roni* tells the personal story of a refugee background student from Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Roni is in Year 11 at Canterbury Boys High School in Sydney. The video shows Roni both at school and with his family. It focuses on the challenges that Roni faces as well as his aspirations.

Show the beginning section of *Roni*, which describes his refugee experience. (From where the principal introduces him to where she says how she wants him to succeed so he will go from being a victim to being a successful and independent young man.)

Show the section with the scenes of the bombing of Baghdad and Roni's reaction.

Ask participants to share their responses to Roni's story.

Acknowledge participants' personal responses.

Lead the discussion towards the impact that the refugee experience might have had on Roni's settlement, especially at school, and on his learning.

#### Some suggested responses

- Roni has had disruptions to his education of at least three years. This will certainly affect his progress at school.
- He has endured a level of change unprecedented in the lives of most of his Australian-born counterparts. These include changes in his family and family relationships. For instance:
  - some family members have been left behind in Iraq;
  - there are concerns about their safety; and
  - there are changed roles within the family, including Roni's mother's reliance on him for interpreting.
- On arrival in Australia, Roni was required to learn a new language. He has had to adapt to a new set of cultural norms and to a new and unfamiliar school system.<sup>4</sup>
- The culture and structure of the education system in Australia is likely to be very different from Roni's country of origin. In particular, teaching styles are likely to be less formal than those previously experienced.
- Roni has experienced extreme violence and identifies how he is suffering from the after-effects of trauma. For example, he sometimes can't concentrate on his work and his mind flips somewhere else. He also says he is worried, terrified and scared about the bombing in Baghdad.

Invite participants to share any other relevant knowledge and experiences they have had in supporting refugee background students.

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<sup>3</sup> ABC (2003), *Our Boys*- Episode 3- Roni [Video], Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney. '*Roni*' is available from the LMERC library in Carlton (Ph: 03 93491418, email: lmerc.library@edumail.vic.gov.au). If the '*Roni*' DVD is unavailable Appendix B, '*Moses' Story*' can be substituted.

<sup>4</sup> Rutter J (1994), *Refugee Children in the Classroom*, Trentham Books, London.

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### Broadening the discussion

For many refugee background students who have limited or no school experience, adaptation to school may be particularly difficult as they may be facing the intellectual and behavioural requirements of a structured learning environment for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

Although not all refugee students have experienced significant disruption to their schooling, refugees from Africa have usually completed fewer years of schooling than those from Asia or Europe.

In 2004–5, on average, humanitarian entrants from African backgrounds had completed one year of schooling. This compared with four years of schooling for those from Middle Eastern backgrounds and five years for those from Asian backgrounds.<sup>6</sup>

In 2005–6, humanitarian entrants from refugee backgrounds aged 10–19 years from Africa, the Middle East and Europe had completed approximately four years of prior schooling. Asian humanitarian entrants had completed just over six years on average.<sup>7</sup>

While many refugee background students are making successful transitions to schooling in Australia, the following learner profile is typical for recent young refugee arrivals.<sup>8</sup>

They frequently:

- have had no or minimal schooling in their first language;
- have low levels of literacy in English;
- have lived in insecure societies where civil order and services have broken down;
- are suffering the after-effects of trauma and, in some cases, torture;
- have had extended periods of separation from significant caregivers;
- have ongoing uncertainty about loved ones in their country of origin;
- have had disrupted schooling due to movement within and between countries, so that literacy skills are not consolidated in any one language;
- have spent long periods in refugee camps or first country of asylum with minimal or no education;
- come from a language background where writing is a relatively new phenomenon;
- have come from backgrounds where caregivers have also had limited schooling; and
- have expectations of a different education system.

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5 VFST (2004), *School's In for Refugees*, VFST, Melbourne, p. 29.

6 DIMIA, *Profile of People Assisted under the IHSS in 2004-05*, available at: [http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/pdf/07705%20DIMIA\\_BB\\_5-6\\_fa.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/pdf/07705%20DIMIA_BB_5-6_fa.pdf), p. 22, accessed 28 November 2006.

7 REPP (2007), *The Educational Needs of Young Refugees in Victoria*, VFST, Melbourne.

8 DE&T (2004), *Meeting the Needs of Secondary ESL Learners with Disrupted Schooling - Planning Bridging Programs*, available at: [http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/lem/Planning\\_bridging\\_progs.doc](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/lem/Planning_bridging_progs.doc), accessed 28 November 2006.5 VFST (2004), *School's In for Refugees*, VFST, Melbourne, p. 29.

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Transitions, including the transition to adolescence, present many challenges for all students. However, the following key factors have been identified as leading to social disadvantage:

- inadequate levels of family income due to unemployment or a low level of government benefits;
- chronic or severe illness;
- discrimination and/or racism;
- physical isolation;
- living in a family environment that can offer little or low level support due to the impact of the refugee experience; and
- being an unaccompanied minor without family support.

Therefore, young refugee background students make up a particularly vulnerable population in schools and other educational settings.

### **2.3 Refugee background students and OSHLSPs (30 minutes)**

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Alert the participants to the protective factors that can help young people and to the role of OSHLSPs in supporting refugee background students.

#### **Activity 2.3**

Ask participants to share their responses to the activity.

Provide participants with the following table (handout 2.1) and ask them to add their suggestions.

#### **Activity 2.4**

Participants may wish to discuss and share what to do if students disclose any traumatic information.<sup>9</sup>

Invite them to share any experiences they have had of students disclosing information. Encourage them to omit the use of names as a first step towards confidentiality. If they practise this, they are far less likely to breach it when they are delivering programs.

Participants also need to be made aware that it is important they do not discuss the personal issues of students outside the program except with the coordinator and where appropriate. Refer them to table 2.1: Supportive responses to disclosure.

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<sup>9</sup> Suggestions of the support that agencies provide can be found in: VFST (2004), *School's In for Refugees*, VFST, Melbourne.

**Tutor support**

Actions	How can you do this?
Be positive and praise effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Encourage and compliment students' achievements and attempts</li> <li>✓ Focus on what they have done well</li> <li>✓ Be accepting rather than judgmental</li> </ul>
Be reliable and trustworthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Do what you say you will and follow through</li> <li>✓ Meet your commitments</li> <li>✓ Maintain confidentiality unless the student's safety and wellbeing are at risk</li> <li>✓ Provide good role modelling</li> </ul>
Show genuine interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Focus on what students have to say</li> <li>✓ Encourage students to talk through further questions</li> <li>✓ Ask students about their interests and follow up on these</li> <li>✓ Be available</li> </ul>
Communicate respectfully	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Pronounce students' names correctly</li> <li>✓ Listen attentively</li> <li>✓ Model polite forms of language</li> <li>✓ Use inclusive body language</li> </ul>
Ask relevant questions of students, but also respect their privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Judge from your discussion with students whether or not they want to share information with you</li> <li>✓ Recognise that it isn't necessary to discuss students' personal stories unless they want to tell you</li> <li>✓ Acknowledge the students' feelings</li> </ul>

Actions	How can you do this?
Make students feel comfortable and welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Give them personal attention and acknowledgement</li> <li>✓ Make sure they are involved and included</li> </ul>
Make students feel safe and secure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Explain why you are doing things</li> <li>✓ Try to be consistent, calm and clear</li> </ul>
Provide routines but also be flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Make sure students know what to expect</li> <li>✓ Be attuned to changing needs and opportunities</li> </ul>
Explain rules and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Explain the purpose of the rules</li> <li>✓ Be clear and consistent about what you expect</li> </ul>
Understand students' life experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Find out about the students' cultural backgrounds, and circumstances leading to the refugee experiences of people from the students' backgrounds, rather than their personal individual stories</li> </ul>
Help students set achievable goals, leading to a positive sense of the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Know the students' strengths and interests</li> <li>✓ Build on these strengths and interests</li> <li>✓ Find out what opportunities exist</li> <li>✓ Incorporate this into goal setting</li> <li>✓ Model short and long term goal setting</li> <li>✓ Encourage optimism about the future and about making progress</li> </ul>
Acknowledge legitimate problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ If students want to talk about stressful events, listen to them and respond in a supportive way</li> <li>✓ Refer to further specialist support where appropriate</li> </ul>

Actions	How can you do this?
Provide opportunities for appropriate expression of difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Encourage students to tell somebody about their problems and seek advice/help</li> <li>✓ Encourage creative expression through a range of mediums including music, dance, art, role-play and/or drama</li> </ul>
Provide opportunities for fun and sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provide a balance of activities</li> <li>✓ Encourage humour and sharing</li> </ul>
Encourage small group or paired learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Encourage students to work together when they are working on the same topic</li> <li>✓ Provide opportunities to share their knowledge and understandings with others</li> </ul>
Encourage friendships and positive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Encourage sharing and connections with others, especially where there are common interests</li> </ul>
Encourage students to make appropriate choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Provide opportunities for choice whenever it is practical and within the limits of the program. This will empower them</li> </ul>

