

Youth work in the family context: Good Practice Guide

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Purpose

This Good Practice Guide is designed to present an overview of the factors that impact on family relationships for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and present key considerations for workers in supporting family connection.

Introduction

Ideally, family relationships provide young people with a sense of belonging, support in negotiating challenges and difficult transitions, and connection to shared values, culture and history. CMY recognises that supporting refugee and migrant young people in the context of family and community is fundamental to good youth work practice. This 'family-aware' approach:

"highlights the need for comprehensive consideration of the role of family in a young person's life. The young person remains the central client in a family-aware approach, and it is not suggested that a youth worker become a family work expert... This approach recognises how workers can optimise outcomes for young people by recognising, legitimising and facilitating ongoing family connections."

- Jesuit Social Services (2006)

Background

IMPACT OF REFUGEE EXPERIENCE AND MIGRATION ON FAMILY STRUCTURES

For many families from refugee backgrounds, the trauma and dislocation of the refugee experience, combined with the practical and emotional demands of settlement, can be highly stressful. While resettlement in Australia brings safety, new opportunities and hopes for the future, the pressures of building a new life (learning a new language, finding stable, affordable housing, understanding new systems, and adjusting to a new culture) are often further complicated by changes to the family unit and relationships. Many families need to build new relationships, rebuild existing ones and form new households.

FAMILY STRUCTURES ARE OFTEN ALTERED IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

- Young people may have been required to **adopt adult roles** and responsibilities, either in their home country, on their journey to Australia or during the resettlement

process. Young people may carry the burden of communication with institutions and services in Australia or care for younger siblings. This can undermine parental roles and responsibilities;

- Some young people may have fled their country of origin and arrive in Australia under the **care of distant relatives** (perhaps an 'aunty' or 'uncle'), having left behind significant others including one or both 'parents'; and
- One or both parents may have **remarried** or formed a new relationship;
- Families may have been **separated for many years** and only recently reunified in Australia. For example, a father may arrive as a refugee in Australia first, with his family arriving several years later. Having spent years separately, families often reunify with unmet (and differing) expectations of life together and how the family 'unit' will interact. Each person who is part of the family group will need to adjust to changes that have occurred during separation.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FAMILY CONFLICT

In addition to changes in family relationships and structures, other factors that contribute to stress and possibly conflict within families from migrant and refugee backgrounds include:

For Parents:

- Perceived loss of control over their adolescent. This may be due to a shift in roles and responsibilities, differences in English language proficiency, changes in cultural expectations around parenting, or young people adapting quicker to the new culture.
- Fear of cultural differences. Cultural norms, values and expectations in Australia are often unfamiliar and different to those in their home country, and young people often engage more confidently in or adopt aspects of the new culture.
- Fears regarding their children's physical safety. This may be due to pre-settlement trauma (e.g. loss of a child, protracted periods living in unsafe and insecure circumstances) or lack of trust in a new culture and society.
- High hopes and expectations for their children's future.

For Young People:

- Young people feeling guilty that other family members have been 'left behind' and/or are resentful towards the family unit who are safe in Australia.
- Difficulties studying in the home environment due to overcrowding and/or household responsibilities.

- Feeling pressure from parents in relation to academic achievement or family/cultural responsibilities.
- Physical, emotional and sexual abuse prior to arrival in Australia may render the young person vulnerable to further abusive situations as well as impacting on their ability to have positive relationships with family and others.

For Families:

- Financial pressures, including sending remittances to relatives overseas.
- Differing expectations within the family about relationships outside marriage, including rejection by family members of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships;
- Often limited access to established social capital – e.g. networks to find jobs, solve problems or gain support.
- Differing rates of acculturation among family members, where young people often adjust more quickly than parents.
- Impact of past trauma on individuals and the family.

Practice

SUPPORTING FAMILY CONNECTION

The following are key strategies for strengthening families and supporting young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the family context:

- Take time to build open and trusting relationships with key family members—be patient, spend time listening and use a variety of (flexible) engagement strategies. These include home visits and (where appropriate) accepting offers of hospitality from family; providing practical support and assistance; capitalising on incidental encounters like car trips to appointments, and speaking with family members before/after activities.
- Use interpreters and attempt to overcome concerns where young people or family members may not wish to engage an interpreter. (See Good Practice Guide: Working with Interpreters)
- Reflect on your own culture and actively learn about/celebrate a young person's and their families' cultural background—be open to difference and let young people and/or their families be your 'cultural teachers'.
- Use a strengths-based approach, (respect and compassion for the families experience, strengths, and potential), as well as identifying (and seeking to address) risk factors and, promoting protective factors.
- Use a flexible, outreach model of service delivery

- (e.g. meeting where young people and families feel comfortable and meeting outside regular work hours.
- Look for opportunities to raise and discuss common difficulties for newly arrived families (i.e. normalising and validating some of the challenges they are facing), as well as reducing shame about discussing family problems with others.
- Learn about family—ask young people about family meanings and configurations. 'Family' can take diverse forms – it may be a relative or close friend, or someone with whom they have spent extended time with in a refugee camp or on their journey to Australia. Support young people to develop and maintain connections with family (wherever they are located) and community – e.g. financial assistance to facilitate phone contact or participating in community activities.
- Identify, encourage and support positive family time (e.g. providing brokerage funding for family outings).
- Assist parents/family members to develop strong connections with schools to ensure ongoing communication and reduce misunderstandings or confusion about the education system, e.g. support parents/family members to attend meetings with school staff and ensure interpreters are engaged where necessary.
- Support adults to take an active role with services rather than rely on their children for language support – this can often be significant in empowering parents and shifting a changed power dynamic between parents and children.
- Provide practical support (e.g. assistance with accessing material goods).
- Mediate with and advocate for young people in the context of family hopes and pressures—particularly when families have been reconfigured and/or spent long periods separated, hold volatile secrets, and include members who have experienced extreme trauma.
- Sit with the discomfort of not always having clarity about a young person's family situation. It may take a long time to build trust with a young person in order to have a clear picture of their family circumstances and the various pressures they are negotiating.
- Seek the support you need (e.g. supervision and training). This can be complex work and it is important to reflect on your own practice and responses.

CONFIDENTIALITY

If a young person is uneasy about and/or will not consent to you contacting their family:

- Explain the benefits of your work with family members, describing good outcomes from family contact in the past. It may be only one family member that the young person is comfortable for you to contact initially.
- Reassure your client that you will support them in this process and that they are in control of what is discussed, with whom, and where.
- Support your client to maintain connections with their family in a variety of ways (social outings, phone contact, remembering important occasions).
- Ask about relationships and decision-making processes at home and the roles and wishes of family members.

RESPONDING TO FAMILY CONFLICT

Where conflict has arisen in a family, there are a number of approaches you might explore to identify solutions. These include:

- Support parent/carers' role in the family while maintaining a human rights framework with the young person as the primary client. You can affirm the parents/carers' hopes for their children, share observations of the young person's strengths and try to help parents/carers understand the resettlement pressures faced by the young person.
- Assist the young person to develop communication strategies that will better convey their hopes and frustrations to family members.
- Show respect for the role of parents and family members and their beliefs while advocating and identifying what is important for the young person.
- Take time to understand everyone's perspective—ask questions, observe, and validate feelings and experiences of all family members.
- Explore cultural values and religious perspectives. Ask how the family would deal with the situation in their home country and support them to access culturally appropriate services or support.
- Explore strengths the family have drawn on previously to get through difficult times together, particularly prior to arrival in Australia.
- Encourage family members to listen to one another's perspective and discuss emergent issues—reflecting on patterns of interaction, eliminating blame and shifting the focus to the behaviour rather than the person.
- Acknowledge parent's fears for their children and consider their motivations in a positive light (e.g. seeking protection from harm).
- Where appropriate, identify how a young person is maintaining their cultural identity.

- Provide practical support and advocacy for the family or seek support services for individual family members – often conflict cannot be addressed if there are outstanding practical issues that need attention.
- Explore 'shuttle' mediation—being the 'link' between family members and the young person.
- Seek assistance of community leaders in promoting and building trust in your service, as many families may feel a sense of shame about discussing family conflict with someone outside their community (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2004).
- Consider referral options. Explore opportunities for joint casework with an appropriate specialist service or ethnospecific worker.
- If your client is unsafe at home or there is no resolution to protracted conflict, seek alternative accommodation within extended family, friendship or community networks first, and then culturally appropriate independent youth housing.

WORKING WITH OTHER AGENCIES AND JOINT CASE MANAGEMENT

Often it will be very valuable to work with other agencies in supporting young people and families. This works best when workers are:

- Clear about their role/s and responsibilities.
- One agency has a focus on the young person the other/s for family members.
- Workers maintain regular communication about actions and case plans.

References / Other Resources

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