



CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Welcoming refugee children and families into our services

Many refugee families come to Australia each year from different parts of the world and with a vast range of experiences. As Australia awaits the settlement of Syrian refugees over the coming months we, as early childhood leaders and educators, can start preparing to receive these children and families, and ensure that our services are as welcoming and as inclusive as possible.

Australia has a long tradition of assisting some of the world's most vulnerable people through its refugee resettlement program. Working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, officials from the Department of Immigration seek to identify refugees who are unable to return to their country of origin and who are either at risk or have no viable future in the country of first asylum. The only way of ensuring the protection of these refugees and providing them with a solution to their plight is to relocate them to a country such as Australia.

Unlike migrants who make a conscious decision to relocate and, in many instances, have been selected because they have valuable skills to bring to this country, refugees often have little choice in

the matter and know little about what they will be coming to. In addition, refugees have typically been exposed to high levels of trauma and significant periods of severe deprivation prior to their selection for resettlement. Transition to life in Australia therefore presents many challenges.

The top four countries of origin of refugees and humanitarian entrants entering NSW are Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran.

In recent years Australia has also seen significant numbers of entrants from Myanmar (Burma), Bhutan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over 800 000 refugees and displaced persons have settled in Australia since 1945 (Phillips, 2015).

It is important that we, as early childhood professionals, are aware of, sensitive to and are better equipped to tailor our programs, our support and inclusive practices around the unique issues and challenges that have affected the refugee children and families in our community.

The journey of every refugee child and their family is unique.

We need to be conscious of the dangers of stereotyping and labelling our refugee children. There is great value in spending time reflecting on our own definition and perception of 'refugees and the refugee experience'. We should also endeavour to understand the unique experiences of those children and families that become part of our early childhood education and care family. We can best do this by reading about these experiences, having conversations with various agencies that support these families, being prepared and asking sensitive but insightful questions of families.

The following is a list of practical strategies for you to consider:

- Gain a broad understanding of their refugee experience. As educators, put yourself in the shoes of the child and reflect on the journey they have made, prior to turning up at your service.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions about their child's needs, likes, dislikes and what matters to them about the care and education you will be providing to their child.
- Tap into Inclusion Professional Support Programs such as the Bicultural Support Program and Inclusion Support Agencies. Bicultural Support Workers are a human resource that can play a critical role in supporting your refugee children in care. They have received specific training on working with refugee children, and some may be of refugee status themselves. They work on various levels, supporting children with settling in, language support, feeling comfortable and safe, acting as a communication and information bridge between parents and staff, providing strategies to assist with cultural transition and ways to connect with refugee communities.
- Develop inclusive programs for all the children at your service, that structure discussions about refugees, promote empathy, diversity, mutual respect and social justice. Ensure that the voices of your refugee children are heard.
- Design and implement programs that nurture and instil the 'Being, Belonging and Becoming' of refugee children in your care. Create a sense of 'Belonging' by providing and maintaining a safe, nurturing, familiar and predictable care environment and one where the refugee child feels comfortable and safe in their experiences and identity.
- Provide culturally appropriate services for your refugee families (Bicultural Support Workers, bilingual staff, interpreters, translated information) and deliver culturally and linguistically relevant activities that promote the child's home language and cultural self-esteem. Display and use key early childhood education and care survival words in the relevant dialects.
- Offer creative ways to assist children's feelings and anxieties through calm, relaxing experiences and activities such as music, water play, yoga or breathing exercises.
- Access specialist support services, resources and ongoing professional development opportunities that can assist you to become better equipped in working with refugee children and families.
- Develop links with staff from local settlement support services, compile a directory of services available for your refugee families and participate in local child, family and community services interagency meetings.

- Find ways to celebrate, include and encourage your new refugee families to participate at your service.
- Refugee children and their families are additions to the community and bring strengths, abilities and cultural knowledge.

Bicultural Support from Ethnic Community Services Co-operative

There have been countless success stories from early childhood centres that have effectively supported refugee children and families through their access to Bicultural Support.

The Bicultural Support Program has been invaluable for countless reasons. Bicultural Support Workers make our refugee families feel comfortable. They assist them to communicate better in all areas, particularly during the enrolment period, helping complete important paperwork, provide information about centre policy and routines etc. You can almost see the relief in parents' faces when they walk in the door and see someone familiar. Our families relax when they see someone they can communicate with, who understands them. You can imagine what a huge ask it would be for these refugee parents to leave their children in the care of complete strangers—the familiar faces just make it easier for them, the children and us. This has also helped increase access to the service by families from Sudanese and other refugee backgrounds, as they feel the centre is culturally appropriate and sensitive to their children's and families' needs (Tsambouniaris, 2006, p. 1).

There are many ways we can start preparing ourselves, as early childhood professionals and as inclusive early childhood education and care communities, to receive, welcome, support and better connect with our incoming refugee children and families.

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References and resources

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