

Refugees and Mental Health

About Refugees

Refugee – a person who has left their country of origin because of a fear that they will be harmed or discriminated against on the basis of their race, religion, political opinion or being a member of a particular social group.

Migrant – a person who chose to leave their country of origin and to live in another country.

Asylum seeker – a person who has left their country and asks to be recognised as a refugee and to be protected. They may stay in an immigration centre while their situation is assessed.

Refugee experiences may include: violence, warfare, imprisonment, torture, dangerous travel conditions and being held in refugee camps or immigration centres. Some refugees have survived trauma and torture. Many will have lost family members through death or separation.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Refugee experiences of trauma, loss and grief may increase the risk of physical and mental health problems in these families, both for the adults and the children. Some refugees may experience mental illness such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Parents, babies and young children who have had difficult experiences of trauma or loss may need professional support from specialist services to help them cope with their feelings.

Many migrants and refugees have lost their usual cultural and social support networks. They may not speak English, may have little money, and may not have access to transport. These issues can make it hard to find out about and access support services available in Australia. It may take some time before they can develop a sense of belonging and social inclusion in their new home. Migrants and refugees may find that cultural differences also make it hard to adjust to life in a new country, creating stress and personal problems. There may be differences in:

- The roles of men, women and children in society
- The roles of government and community agencies
- Theories and practices about raising children
- Beliefs about discipline and guiding children's behaviour
- Spiritual or religious beliefs and practices.

Children born in Australia to refugee parents can still be affected by their family's traumatic experiences. This may be through the impact of the experience on their parents' wellbeing and family relationships, or through hearing about traumatic experiences.

What should I look for?

Children who have been refugees may show some of the following difficulties:

- Development that is out of step with peers at a similar stage; regression in development
- Insecurity, low self-esteem, withdrawn behaviour, fearfulness, anxiety, over-compliance
- Aggression, frustration, anger, defiance, challenging behaviours, distrust of authority
- Difficulties in forming trusting relationships, difficulties in peer interactions
- Poor-quality or restricted play that may seem limited in scope and repetitive
- Physical or emotional problems that need treatment from specialist services.

What should I do?

The resettlement process for refugees can be stressful for parents and children. You can play an important role in supporting these families by considering their particular needs during orientation to your service and your community.

When introducing migrant or refugee families to the service:

- Allow extra time for introducing families to the centre and explaining routines.
- Allow for language differences – you may work with an interpreter or support service.
- Be open to differences in family structure, values, and views of the role of children.
- Ask about the usual routines, caregiving practices and languages used at home.
- Invite family members to stay until the child settles, provide adult spaces and furniture.

While working with migrant or refugee families over time:

- Acknowledge and respect cultural diversity; try to find out more about their culture.
- Build up a trusting relationship and invite the family to ask about the child's day.
- Create opportunities for families to meet and socialise with other families.
- Invite adults to share cultural stories, songs, dance or music with all of the children.
- Be aware of and talk about any different views on the roles and behaviour of children.

When working with babies and young children from migrant or refugee families:

- Where possible, try to use the same practices and routines at childcare and at home.
- Help children develop a sense of safety and trust in their carers – this may take time.
- Respect their culture and help them to maintain their links to their culture and language.
- Use a range of natural and everyday objects as well as toys and books.
- Encourage exploration, movement, communication, social interaction and autonomy.
- Work in partnership with other agencies e.g. early intervention support agencies.
- Build positive attachments through providing a reliable and supportive environment, with a single primary caregiver where possible.

Give families information about services in your area that may be helpful. Your supervisor, coordinator or director might take the lead in this process, or you may do this together, depending on the needs of the family. Relevant services may include:

- Migrant Resource Centres or Migrant Support Agencies.
- Community agencies or groups working with refugees or migrants.
- Interpreter services and organisations that provide information in a range of languages.
- Family counselling and support services, including trauma counselling.
- Early intervention and mental health services if children need additional support.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Chapman, M. (2005). *Healing through play: Inviting spaces to support refugee children*. Oakleigh South, VIC: FKA Children's Services.

Ethnic Childcare, Family and Community Services Co-operative (NSW): www.eccfcsc.org

Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. (2007). *Raising children in Australia: A resource kit for early childhood services working with parents from African backgrounds*. Brunswick, VIC: Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. Retrieved 1 April, 2010 from http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/resources/publications_and_resources.htm