Barriers to formal and informal supports for refugee families in Australia

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Recent research highlights the importance of formal support services and informal social supports for refugee families resettling in Australia.

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Refugee families often experience a range of challenges prior to and during their resettlement in Australia. These challenges may be underpinned by the experience of traumatic, violent or life-threatening situations prior to or during their resettlement journey. Upon resettlement, families find themselves in a new culture with unfamiliar social systems and changing family roles and dynamics, which may lead to parenting difficulties and family conflict (Saunders & McArthur, 2012). Alongside trauma and mental health issues, concerns may include language barriers, access to employment, meeting medical and health needs, and accessing education and housing.

[A study conducted in 2013-14](#) by the Institute of Child Protection Studies and the Australian Centre for Child Protection aimed to provide in-depth and contextualised data about how services may better support refugee parents to care for their children. Funded by the Department of Social Services, the study used a mixed-methods approach. This included 50 semi-structured interviews with 25 families from a refugee background who had resided in Australia for between one and ten years, and were living in South Australia or the ACT. Additionally, a national online survey was conducted with 98 service providers working with refugee families. These included specialist services funded under the Settlement Grants, Humanitarian Settlement Services and Complex Case Support program; as well as mainstream services funded by the DSS Communities for Children initiative.

The study found that while most families are resilient, and feel positive and grateful to be living in Australia, they also experience challenges relating to the amount, type and quality of informal and formal parenting support they receive. Informal supports include extended family, neighbours and strong social networks; while formal supports include mainstream services and specialist migrant and refugee services.

Families discussed barriers to building social networks, including incidents of racial discrimination, and young people spoke about difficulties with peers and teachers at school. Some children and young people also identified that parents need to adopt new parenting practices, if their behaviours are not in line with mainstream community practices. Female participants found that cultural and religious values limited their capacity to access informal social supports within their community, to learn English and gain employment.

Most families reported using multiple formal services when they first arrived, which decreased over time. Some parents who had been in Australia for longer periods still felt socially isolated, and continued to rely on the relationships they had built with the specialist migrant and refugee services they were linked with upon arrival, even where they were no longer officially eligible to use these services. These services were familiar to families and often employed people from local communities, who they were comfortable seeking assistance from. Interview findings with families suggested that mainstream services often did not refer on or assist refugee families to access other services, which was problematic if families were not also well-engaged with a specialist service. Parents identified that barriers to formal services included a lack of knowledge about what services are available, particularly for parenting support and family assistance; and language difficulties, particularly when interpreters are not available. Some felt stressed and confused by the unfamiliarity of complex service systems.

This study highlighted how critical both informal and formal supports are to refugee families resettling in Australia. It found that strong extended social networks reduce social isolation and allow families to share resources, such as knowledge and practical support, with the quality of the connection being more important than the size of the social network. Collective approaches to parenting and family life were helpful for families entering into existing ethnic communities, and for those with extended family already in Australia. Families also rely on formal services for income support, legal assistance, health and medical services, housing, and education for both children and parents.

Access the full report on the Institute of Child Protection Studies website: *Refugee Communities Intercultural Dialogue: Building relationships, building communities*

Further reading and resources

- Settlement and Multicultural Affairs, Department of Social Services:

    - Humanitarian Settlement Services Locator hosts a list of all Complex Case Support and Humanitarian Settlement Services providers available across Australia

    - A range of related publications is available on the Settlement and Multicultural Affairs website

- Supporting refugee families in Australia. Research to Practice Series: Issue 15 (PDF) This report explores the challenges experienced by refugee families resettling in Australia, including the formal and informal supports they access and barriers to these supports, the characteristics of supportive services, and implications for policy and practice.

- [The Working with Refugee Families Project](#) (PDF)
  This report outlines the findings of a research study that aimed to examine why recently arrived families from refugee backgrounds present to the child protection system and to identify culturally appropriate strategies and models for intervention.

- [Refugee Council of Australia](#)
  The Refugee Council of Australia is the national umbrella body for refugees and the organisations and individuals that support them.

- [Centre for Multicultural Youth](#)
  The Centre for Multicultural Youth is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

- [Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (Australia)](#)
  MYAN Australia is the national voice representing the needs and interests of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

- Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants

  - [BNLA study website](#)

  - [BNLA participants' website](#)

- [Working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) adolescents](#)
  This CFCA resource explores the issues that are commonly experienced by adolescents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia.

References

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