

Issues for young refugees

Young refugees are a diverse group with many different experiences and cultural backgrounds. However, there are some common issues that face many young refugees.

Education

Young refugees often require extra assistance with schooling and homework because their previous education may have been disrupted or even non-existent.

Many of these young people have missed out on education because they spent a significant part of their childhood in refugee camps.

Some young people may not be able to read or write in their own language.

On arrival in Australia, young refugees are placed in an Intensive English Centre for 3-4 school terms. IECs provide English and school education as well as additional support such as counselling for students.

A number of youth services have developed outreach and support programs to IEC students in partnership with school staff. (More information about working with the school system is available in YAPA's factsheet Working with schools).

After completing time at IEC, students are then placed in a mainstream high school.

School in Australia can be very challenging for refugee young people because it is often in a different language, is in a different system and offers a different way of learning. Some support is provided to students by the Department of Education and varies between schools.

Young refugees are placed in a grade reflecting their age, rather than their level of schooling. It can be very difficult for young people to catch up on many years of schooling with limited support and as a result they may drop out of the school system altogether.

Refugee families are often not able to help their children with their homework because of language and education differences. Many parents

and grandparents have no educational experience at all.

Some community based services are able to offer after school homework help. The most effective of these services use staff and volunteers who have experience in teaching and are familiar with the school curriculum.

Employment

The pressure to leave school and take up work, or to work part time is very high. Young people often feel responsible for helping to pay family debt and may also send money home to support family and friends, and to assist further family members to migrate.

There are many barriers to refugee young people finding work such as lack of recognisable experience and training, language barriers, health (physical and mental) and racism.

Torture and trauma

It is common for young refugees to have experienced torture and trauma or have family members who have experienced torture and trauma.

In Sierra Leone there is widespread use of machetes - young people have often witnessed a lot of amputation of limbs by militia. Many in the Ethiopian community have witnessed extreme torture by methods which are very barbaric.

Other trauma experiences include rape and other forms of sexual abuse, illegal arrests and unexplained disappearances of loved ones and senseless destruction of property.

Many refugees have been traumatised by their own torture experiences, the torture of loved ones or the death of loved ones in military fighting.

These experiences will have a profound impact on young people's sense of safety and identity, and their ability to trust and develop relationships.

Transgenerational trauma refers to how the impact of trauma on parents may affect the way

children interact.

Some common effects of trauma on young people include anxiety, difficulties in establishing trust and friendships, low self esteem, depression, survivor guilt, aggressive outbursts or emotional numbness, sadness and withdrawal, sleeping problems, and intrusive and recurring thoughts.

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) provides a holistic range of professional services to facilitate the healing process for refugees who have been exposed to torture and trauma. The service also provides early health assessment and intervention services to newly arrived people from refugee like backgrounds.

STARTTS also provides training to youth workers about working with refugee young people. STARTTS can be contacted at Carramar on (02) 9794 1900 or at Auburn on (02) 9646 6666.

As a result of their past experiences with torture and trauma, young refugees may have a fear or distrust of authority figures, particularly police and security officers. For example the grey uniforms worn by CityRail Transit Officers are similar to some of the uniforms worn by militia who carry out torture practices. Understandably, young refugees can be fearful of authority figures and have a limited knowledge of the role of security and police in Australia. Young refugees may also not be aware of their rights in Australia.

Health

Young refugees face many barriers to accessing health services such as a lack of knowledge and information about available services, and language and cultural barriers.

Young refugees may not have experienced adequate health care in their country of origin and may have long term health issues or injuries that have not been adequately treated.

The NSW Refugee Health Service provides assistance to refugees and advice to professionals working with refugee communities. Phone (02) 8778 0770

In addition to physical health issues, young refugees may have mental health and wellbeing issues.

There are a range of factors that impact on any young person's mental health such as family conflict, pressure to perform well at school, financial hardship and ability to find work.

However young refugees face additional pressures such as a high number of life transitions, new

country, new school and new culture, the frustration of not being able to communicate in English to peers or teachers, lack of social support and networks, feelings of isolation, community response to their religious or ethnic background and a lack of awareness and access to the health system. Young refugees are therefore at a higher risk of mental health problems.

Post traumatic stress disorder or PTSD is a condition that can develop after traumatic or life threatening events. Symptoms may not appear until months or years after the stressful event happened. People, places or things associated with the trauma may trigger reactions.

When young people suffer from PTSD they can experience nightmares or flashbacks where the traumatic events are re-lived. They may try to avoid anything which reminds them of the trauma or they may experience hyperarousal where they may be easily startled by noises or an unexpected touch. Other symptoms may be physical such as stomach aches or headaches, or a withdrawal from family and friends.

Even if a young refugee does not face PTSD they may still face other mental health issues such as depression, grief and loss, or high levels of fear or anxiety.

The Transcultural Mental Health Centre can provide further advice on mental health issues. The Centre also works with the public, carers, health professionals and the community to encourage positive attitudes to mental health. Phone: (02) 9840 3899

Family issues

Settling in Australia can place a great deal of stress on families. Parents are struggling to settle into a new country and meet their family's basic needs.

Young people are often required to interpret or translate important information relating to housing, employment, and education, for example, and accompany their parents to appointments, shopping and services. This new role that some young people are required to adopt leaves little time for them to participate in social activities and concentrate on their own education.

This results in role-reversal in that young people play the role of parents. This can add stress to the family and to young people, as parents become more dependent on their children.

Families can experience much guilt and concern for members who have been left behind. For example many African families are quite large and some family members may have been lost or left behind.

Many families experience intergenerational conflict as parents expect their children to adopt traditional values and roles while young people feel pressure directly from friends and indirectly from the general cultural context (like TV, popular entertainment, and social environment) to adopt "western" or "Australian" values and roles.

In order for young refugees to feel settled in Australia it is important that they learn the new language and culture, however this may clash with the parents' traditional culture. Parents fear they may lose values and tradition in this country and as a result there is a clash between parental goals and the young people's need to grow.

Sometimes parents want children to learn English and gain an education - but may not want them to adopt western values. Young people may lead two lives.

Young refugees are often caught between two groups, where they are not able to connect with either their community or the mainstream. They may end up being much more vulnerable to criminal associations to gain a sense of belonging and family. When there are no role models in the family, young people will turn elsewhere for success, power and influence, which they may find in criminal circles. This is of particular concern to those unaccompanied minors, such as the Hazara men, who have no familial role-models in Australia.

Some young people stay fixed on their parents' way of life, others rebel, while some want to remain in the middle.

When working with young refugees it is important to work closely with families to ensure that they are comfortable with their children attending the service. Traditionally youth work has emphasised the young person as an individual and has sometimes had little contact with parents. Refugee parents may not allow their children to attend such a service.

For example a youth group sent notices via mail directly to young people and not via parents. This led to concern and suspicion from parents and an increase in tension between the young people and their parents only adding to the intergenerational conflict that was present.

Many parents are suspicious of mainstream services, particularly in relation to the culture and values that will be instilled in young people.

It is important for parents to understand what your service provides and to meet some of your staff, for example through an open day for parents

or by making the time to chat with them if they come to the centre. Some services have held mother and daughter functions to introduce families to their service.

Parents may not understand what a youth service is because such services are not available in their country of origin. Translated information about the role of a youth service and youth workers can be very helpful. YAPA has produced a parents kit "What is a Youth Service" which is available in English and 14 community languages.

Some young refugees, such as many young Afghans, are unaccompanied minors and arrive in Australia without their parents. These young people are in particular need of support.

A number of services have collaboratively organised an Afghan soccer group for young boys on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). This activity combines recreation and therapy.

Gender

Young Muslim women often miss out on youth services because of cultural barriers and because activities are not gender specific.

Workers need to be sensitive with Afghan women for example, as they come from a country where they were required to cover themselves completely and were not allowed to leave the house alone. For these young women merely arriving in Australia is a real culture shock.

Some families would never allow their daughters to attend an overnight camp which caters to both young women and men. Some services hold specific activities and camps for young women and find that refugee young women do attend these activities.

While some refugee communities have established groups such as soccer groups, these generally do not cater to the needs of young women.

Many young refugees do want opportunities to speak about gender-specific issues such as sexual health, relationships, and expectations in Australia. Services can provide opportunities to discuss these issues if elders are consulted first and if health professionals are involved. It is important to involve health professionals in these discussions because issues such as Female Genital Mutilation may be raised. Female Genital Mutilation is practised in some parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Role of service providers

As a youth service operating under a framework of social justice, we have a responsibility to provide services to those young people most in need, including refugee young people.

As youth workers it is our role to find out about barriers that exist to young people accessing our services, and to take active steps in removing these barriers.

Often young refugees don't access mainstream youth services due to lack of awareness of what is available and a lack of self-confidence. Language skills often create a barrier which affects young people's confidence as well as not knowing what to expect and whether they would be understood. There is also a fear that they won't be able to integrate into mainstream culture.

Racism exists and impacts on young refugees every day. It is our role as youth workers to make sure our service is a racism free zone. Take steps to promote and value multiculturalism at your service, eg. workshops, art competitions etc.

Some steps youth workers can take to make their service more accessible:

1. Attend training in working with young refugees.
2. Liaise with your local Migrant Resource Centre. Talk to the staff there about strategies you could adopt for your service. You may also be able to develop partnerships for joint service delivery.
3. Find out about the young people in your community. You can find demographic information from your Council Social Planner, the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Department of Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs.
4. Keep data on the young people who access your service to see if the demographics from your service are reflective of the local community.
5. Talk to your local youth network about refugee youth issues and what has been happening across your area. There is a NESB Youth Issues Network (NYIN) which meets every second month and also communicates

via email (contact YAPA for more information).

6. Develop an Access & Equity policy for your organisation. Having an accessible organisation doesn't always mean that you have to do extra activities. It does mean you look at the existing activities and what needs to change to make your service more accessible. YAPA has produced an Access & Equity Guide with more information. This Guide is on our website.
7. Involve family and community groups with your service, where appropriate, such as Community Harmony Days or women's events.
8. Actively consult refugee young people in the development of programs.

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- Ethiopian community
- Ethnic Communities Council
- Friends of Sierra Leone
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- Sierra Leone Association
- STARTTS
- Transcultural Mental Health
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Youth Action & Policy Association NSW
 146 Devonshire Street
 Surry Hills NSW 2010
 Phone: 02 9319 1100 or 1800 627 323
 Fax: 02 9319 1144

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