

Improving formal service responses for refugee families in Australia

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Recent research with refugee families and specialist service providers highlights areas where service systems can be improved.

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Effective formal services, including both mainstream and specialist migrant and refugee services, are critical to supporting the resettlement of refugee families in Australia. [In a study with refugee families and specialist service providers](#), most families reported that they used multiple services when they first arrived in Australia, largely dependent on facilitation by case managers and case workers from humanitarian settlement services, as well as other specialist services. Families' use of formal services peaked on arrival and decreased over time.

While [barriers to accessing formal services were identified](#), families also talked about the characteristics of supportive services and the assistance they found valuable. Parents said that helpful services met diverse needs, and provided flexible and practical services to families in a timely manner. Staff provided culturally sensitive relationships with respectful and warm approaches, and had strong connections with communities and other forms of assistance. Specialist migrant and refugee services also highlighted the importance of trusting relationships, thorough assessment, regular contact and allowing ample time with clients, bilingual workers and translation of materials, and free services.

Several areas were identified where service systems could improve the experiences of families with a refugee background:

- **Connecting children and young people**
Children and young people reported that their parents' lack of resources could impact their own access to social connections, networks and resources; highlighting the importance of education and support services to develop opportunities for children and young people.
- **Informal community support**
Informal networks for families need to be strengthened, to increase social capital for refugee families. Services should work alongside informal networks to facilitate access to formal services, and to link families to community.
- **Better use of mainstream and universal services**
With many families describing challenges to accessing mainstream services, particularly for family support, early settlement services need to be better linked to mainstream services. Widely used mainstream services (such as income support, health and housing) should provide information, support and link families with other services.
- **Culturally safe and appropriate services**
Mainstream services need to work towards more inclusive service provision, incorporating features such as interpretation and translation services, and culturally appropriate family support.
- **Importance of relationships**
Factors contributing to positive service experiences include families feeling culturally connected, being understood, and able to easily communicate.
- **Discrimination and racism**
Require constant attention through public awareness campaigns, specific programs and ongoing training of professionals, within schools and the broader community.
- **Complex needs**
Developing and sustaining a more joined-up service system is a critical challenge for policy-makers and service providers.
- **Working across service sectors**
Communication and networking between sectors, including cultural communities, will develop better working relationships, and improve information-sharing about population needs.
- **Structural barriers**
Policy-makers and service providers should seek to reduce structural barriers such as employment, low income and housing affordability; which can increase stress on families and the likelihood of family conflict.
- **English language and interpreters**
Mainstream services need to provide better access to interpreters; and the delivery of flexible language education services needs to be considered, particularly for parents with time constraints and child-rearing responsibilities.

Access the full report on the Institute of Child Protection Studies website: [Refugee Communities Intercultural Dialogue: Building relationships, building communities \(link is external\)](#)

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

Saunders, V., Roche, S., McArthur, M., Arney, F., Ziaian, T. (2015). *Refugee Communities Intercultural Dialogue: Building Relationships, Building Communities*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University. Available at: <http://www.acu.edu.au/565916>

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