

# Institute of Child Protection Studies



## 15 Research to Practice Series Supporting Refugee Families in Australia

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies Research to Practice Series links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

### About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

### Supporting Refugee Families in Australia

Issue 15 of the ICPS Research to Practice series explores the challenges experienced by refugee families resettling in Australia; the informal and formal supports they access and barriers to these supports; the characteristics of supportive services and implications for policy and practice.

This issue is based on a study undertaken by ICPS in 2013-2014, in partnership with the University of South Australia, which aimed to provide in-depth and contextualised data about how services could better support refugee parents to care for their children in Australia. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

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## Section 1

### Challenges experienced by refugee families resettling in Australia

Families with a refugee background often experience a range of challenges both prior to and during their resettlement in Australia. Refugee children, young people and their parents have often experienced frightening, traumatic, violent and life-threatening situations in their home countries prior to commencing their journey to safety; and may have spent years in refugee camps or time in immigration detention, prior to resettlement in Australia. These experiences, which can lead to significant psychological and emotional stress for families, underpin the complexity of their resettlement in Australia.

Upon resettlement, concerns about language, employment, medical and health needs, education and housing; alongside the impacts of trauma and mental health issues, can make parenting a challenging task. As families adapt to a new and unfamiliar culture, new social systems and changing family roles and dynamics, some families experience difficulties managing family conflict and developing culturally appropriate parenting practices.



## Section 2

### Informal and formal supports for refugee families

The majority of families that participated in the study were remarkably resilient and positive, and spoke with gratitude about living in Australia and the opportunities that provided. However, parents also described challenges relating to the amount and type of support they received within the home to care for their children, especially where they had left behind other family members, neighbours and friendships.

## Informal Supports

Interviews with families explored the use of informal supports and how they could be used as a means of providing information and support.

The parents who felt the most supported to care for their children described the support they received when they arrived from family members already here who connected them to other types of supports and networks that would support their parenting. Children also reported that having family or neighbours to care for them made life easier and less stressful.

Strong extended social networks reduce social isolation. Many families maintained networks within their own cultural community or with other migrant families, who provided parenting advice, new friendships and practice information that contributed to families' independence and autonomy. They also shared resources – such as knowledge about Australian life, culture and service systems; transport; finances; access to employment; offers of employment and childcare. Children and young people identified school as being an important part of their lives, in which they strongly engaged and built friendships. Families also described that churches and religious groups facilitated practical support for families; and many families identified that their faith provided guidance and support.

***“I also get help here... giving me a lot of suggestions, or something like that, to raise my children and to look after my children, whether they are in good position or not, and also my [friends] who are living near my house, they are also helping me in many ways like verbal support or support to go to Centrelink or to go to the hospital to get an appointment, something like that.” (Mother)***

### Barriers to informal supports

While not common to all families' experiences, one barrier to building valuable social networks were incidents of racial discrimination, such as verbally abusive neighbours, prospective employers, medical professionals or school staff. Young people spoke about difficulties they had experienced with their peers and teachers in school.

Children and young people reported that some parents needed to adopt new practices in order to resettle successfully, highlighting that these parents' behaviours were not always in line with mainstream community practices. Traditional cultural and religious values also influenced the capacity of some female participants to access informal social supports within their community, to learn English and gain employment.

***“Well 'cause parents they try to like, I think, that parents do try to keep their culture that they have in their own country, but children when they came here, they have the culture that they live with here, so it's very different for them 'cause they, the children who are from different cultures, they try to be like Aussies, but their parents doesn't like this, so yeah.”  
(16 year old female)***



## Formal Supports

While informal supports are critical, they do not reduce the necessity of effective formal services, including both mainstream and specialist migrant and refugee services.

The majority of families reported that when they first arrived in Australia, they had used multiple services. This was largely dependent on facilitation by case managers and case workers from specialist services. Their use of formal services peaked on arrival and decreased over time.

Some parents, who had been in Australia for longer periods of time, still reported feeling socially isolated. They relied on the relationships they had built with the specialist migrant and refugee services they were initially linked with upon arrival in Australia, even where they were officially no longer eligible to use these services. These organisations were familiar to families and often employed people from local communities, who they were comfortable seeking assistance from.

The types of support prioritised by specialist services included income support, legal assistance, health and medical services, housing, and education for both children and parents. Although parents recalled attending a training course about parenting prior to their arrival in Australia, they reported that there was little formal support available for parenting upon arriving in Australia, and they had not been referred to mainstream services for this type of support. Where there was formal parenting assistance, it was often school-based, through teachers or bilingual support workers whom parents had developed relationships with.

### Barriers to accessing services

Service access was facilitated either by specialist migrant and refugee services, or through families' community networks. Interview findings suggested that aside from specialist services, mainstream services did not assist refugee families to access other services or refer on. This was problematic if the family was not well engaged with a specialist service, or if their patronage had ceased.

Parents identified two possible reasons for the difficulties that some families experienced in accessing and using services: a poor knowledge of what mainstream and specialist services might be available, and language difficulties which made accessing these services difficult. There was an absence of knowledge about services specifically related to parenting or family assistance amongst families. Language barriers could be compounded when services were unable to offer interpreters, with some services asking parents to bring their children in to act as interpreter.

*Q: What do services in Australia need to know about people who are newly arriving into Australia?*

*A: There are many things, many services. People need to know many services, even I have - right now I have been here for four years, so we still haven't understood most of the services. So I am eager to know more about it. I'm learning and learning still. (Father)*

***“One reason is language barrier, one thing. Very, very, first number one, language barrier, so they have to call a friend who knows about the service, so if I know how to talk I can go and just use the service. But if the person is not knowing how to talk then he will face a problem.” (Father)***

Some participants found the mainstream service system difficult to understand, and therefore difficult to engage with meaningfully. The unfamiliarity of complex service systems left some participants feeling stressed and confused.

### Characteristics of supportive services and valuable forms of assistance

Parents identified that effective and helpful services:

**1** Met diverse needs: Flexible and pragmatic services that could assist families in a timely manner, with the diverse range of difficulties they presented. Parents also appreciated when assistance was highly accessible (such as being geographically close or able to provide outreach).

**2** Provided culturally sensitive relationships and support: A respectful and warm approach was highly appreciated, and service staff that had connections with communities and other forms of assistance was seen as helpful.

*“Yes, I do feel happy when I get help from them, especially like they have an interpreter, I can talk with them, I can face my problem with them and the interpreter can translate. If I do get that help, I do feel happy.” (Mother)*



Specialist migrant and refugee services in the study identified that valued characteristics of services include:

- Trusting and respectful relationships between workers and clients
- Regular contact and follow up
- Having bilingual workers available
- Allowing time for clients
- Thorough assessment of need
- Providing unconditional positive regard and warm regard
- Free of charge
- Translation of written materials

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The study findings inform how service systems could improve the experiences of families with a refugee background. These implications overlap and are interdependent.

#### **Connecting children and young people:**

Although children and young people reported strong bonds between them and other family members, they indicated that their parents' own lack of resources could also impact their own access to social connections, networks and resources. This highlights the importance of education and support services developing opportunities for children and young people in their own right.

#### **Informal community support:**

Informal community support provides parenting advice, social supports, employment opportunities and practical information about settlement in Australia. For a number of families, particularly those experiencing multiple and complex issues, this type of support was lacking. There is a need to build on and strengthen informal networks for families that will lead to an increased level of social capital for refugee families.

#### **Better usage of mainstream and universal services:**

Many families, and specialist migrant and refugee services, described challenges when trying to access mainstream services, particularly for family support. There is a need to better link early settlement services to mainstream services. Widely used mainstream settings, such as Centrelink, health and housing services, should also routinely provide information and support, and actively link refugee families with state and federally funded services.

#### **Building culturally safe and appropriate services:**

The ability of mainstream universal services to reach and engage refugee families is variable, highlighting the need for mainstream services to work toward more inclusive service provision that incorporates features such as interpreting and translation services, and culturally appropriate family support.

#### **The importance of relationships:**

Many families highlighted the importance of the relationships they had with workers within specialist migrant and refugee services. Numerous factors contributed to making the interaction between a client and worker a positive service experience, including families feeling culturally connected, being understood, and able to easily communicate.

#### **Discrimination, racism and lack of understanding:**

Some families identified that discrimination had a serious impact on them, and a number of children described experiences where they were bullied at school and within their community, based on race. These are issues that require constant and considered attention through public awareness campaigns, specific programs and ongoing training of professionals and other staff.

### **Complex needs:**

Families experiencing complex issues, compounded by cultural and language barriers can experience additional barriers to services, or receive multiple interventions that are uncoordinated. A critical challenge for policy makers and service providers is to develop and sustain a more joined-up service system.

### **Working across service sectors:**

Communication and networking between service sectors, as well as cultural communities and community leaders, will help to develop better working relationships, sharing of information about the needs of the population, and facilitate or lead to improved outcomes.

### **Structural barriers:**

Structural barriers including employment, low income and affordable housing, can put stress on families and individuals and increase the likelihood of family conflict and breakdown. Findings of this study show that mainstream and specialist services are restricted in their capacity to provide the kind of service response needed by some refugee families.

### **English language and interpreters:**

For families to be better connected to mainstream services and community, two challenges must be addressed: mainstream services need to better access and work with interpreters, in order to assist families to access and stay engaged with services; and the provision of language education also needs to be reconsidered, particularly for sole parents who experience time constraints and child-rearing responsibilities. Language education services must acknowledge the role of gender and context on parents' capacity to engage.



### About the Study

ICPS and the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia were awarded a research grant in 2013, under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 Research Agenda, to implement a two-year study. The study provided in-depth and contextualised data about how services may better support refugee parents to care for their children, in an attempt to reduce the numbers of children of refugee parents entering the statutory care and protection system. 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 families with a refugee background in the ACT and South Australia, along with a national online survey of 98 Commonwealth funded service providers that support refugee families. A final report was submitted to the Department of Social Services in 2016.

More information about the project, along with links to associated publications, is available at [www.acu.edu.au/icps](http://www.acu.edu.au/icps).

### References

Saunders, V., Roche, S., McArthur, M, Arney, F., & Ziaian, T. (2016). *Refugee Communities Intercultural Dialogue: Building Relationships, Building Communities*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU

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