



research bulletin



Working with refugee families

This project was funded by DFC and conducted by the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia.

Increasing numbers of families arriving in Australia through humanitarian settlement schemes are coming into contact with the child protection system. Many of these families come from African and Middle Eastern countries and have common experiences of trauma, dislocation and loss. Many are also victims of genocide, war and torture. Pre-migration experiences, together with the considerable challenges of settling into a vastly different new country, can significantly affect family well-being and parenting practices. For many of these families, parenting styles that were normative in their countries of origin are not endorsed in Australia, leading to additional stress. Service providers must be well informed about how best to support these families using culturally competent, family intervention and community development practices.

This study was designed to examine why recently arrived refugee families are presenting to the child protection system and to identify culturally appropriate strategies and models for intervention. The project was funded by the Department for Families and Communities and was conducted by the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia.

The study

The study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and was conducted in three stages: (1) analysis of administrative data from Families SA¹; (2) surveys and focus groups with practitioners in Families SA; and (3) community focus groups with seven refugee communities across Adelaide.

Findings

The analysis of Families SA administrative data (Stage One) was designed to provide a snapshot of refugee families' involvement with the child protection system and inform the second and third stages of the research project. The following information regarding family cultural background and structure and child protection notifications is based on these findings.

¹ Families SA is the statutory child protection agency in South Australia



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“We have a collective culture back home where we depend on each other... the kids are surrounded by older sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles and aunties.”

“But my heart is being broken more than in the warzone - where we bring up children to respect us, grownups. Parents have power. In Australia it is a different story.”

Families SA data analysis

- Data relating to 81 families originating from Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia and South America was analysed. Seventy percent (70%) of families were from African countries with the majority being Sudanese. This roughly aligns with the settlement figures provided by the Department for Immigration and Citizenship for the period 2004-2005 and reflects the fact that since 2002 the majority of humanitarian entrants have come from Sudan.
- Approximately 60% of the families were headed by a father and a mother and around 25% were sole parent families, predominantly headed by a mother.
- One hundred and forty-five (145) notifications of child abuse and neglect were received in the 12 month period from October 2005 to October 2006 in relation to the 81 families.
- Forty-five percent (45%) of the notifications received were rated as a “Notifier Concern”². Neglect was the most common form of abuse notified, followed by physical abuse and emotional abuse.
- Only 8% of the notifications resulted in a substantiation of child abuse or neglect.
- The predominant incidents leading to families’ involvement with the child protection system were physical abuse, domestic violence and leaving children alone without adult supervision.
- Only one case resulted in a child being placed in short term alternative care.

Factors contributing to child protection notifications

Findings in the following sections are based on stages two and three of the study and include the views and perspectives of Families SA workers across South Australia and members of refugee communities in metropolitan Adelaide.

According to practitioner surveys and focus groups the factors contributing to statutory child protection involvement of refugee families included:

- communication and language barriers which impact on parents’ awareness of acceptable parenting practices
- pre-migration experiences including trauma and separation from extended family
- issues associated with domestic violence such as alcohol abuse, mental illness and in some families, acceptance of physical violence toward women

2 Notifier Concern: These are reports made to Families SA from both mandated and non-mandated notifiers which Child Abuse Report Line Workers consider do not constitute reasonable suspicion of child abuse or neglect as defined by the legislation. However, where a mandated notifier insists that the concerns constitute a child protection matter, or if there are concerns but the information received is not enough to warrant an investigation, the information will be recorded on CIS as a ‘Notifier Concern’. In these cases, the notifier will be informed that the matter will not be referred for Families SA intervention. However, the intake worker will forward the information through to the District Centre for their information, and where appropriate, the notifier will be given information which may assist the child and family. No further Families SA action will be taken. *Child Protection Manual of Practice v.1*

“Because I have a problem with my kids doesn’t mean I have a mental health issue... In Iraq this wouldn’t be attributed to a mental health problem. Everything [here] is mental health.”

“When I first came to Australia, I was shouting at my son. I realised when I came here, I was not communicating with my children. I needed to sit down and explain with them and communicate. He comes home and talks to me. At the moment, he is still young. When he becomes older, he will talk less.”

- cultural differences in parenting styles including the acceptance by some refugee families of the use of physical punishment to discipline children
- a cultural background of collective parenting and a lack of current family support, particularly for women who are sole parents or families where there are large numbers of children
- traditional patriarchal family structures where the roles of men, women and children are clearly defined
- lack of information about acceptable parenting practices in Australia.

Facilitating work with refugee families

Factors identified as critical to culturally competent child protection practices include:

- personal characteristics of workers including respect, humour and adaptability
- professional characteristics including the ability to build trusting relationships with families and improve families’ social supports, negotiation and participation skills
- gathering accurate information about the cultural and religious backgrounds of families
- being aware of families’ pre-migration and post-migration experiences
- understanding that concepts of ‘mental health’ and ‘counselling’ may be unfamiliar
- engaging community and religious leaders as supports
- using appropriate interpreters and cultural consultants
- identifying and addressing community perceptions of child protection agencies
- recognising that domestic violence may remain hidden in some families and providing ways to facilitate its disclosure
- collaboration with refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) services
- organisational support which enables practitioners to be culturally competent.

Parenting in a new culture

Refugee focus group participants agreed that their traditional expectations regarding the role of children in the family and society have been severely challenged by Australian culture. In particular, parents spoke of their children’s growing independence and the factors perceived to support this including children’s rights, government financial support for children, the perceived role of schools and police in encouraging children to challenge their parents’ authority and the rapid acculturation of their children to Australian societal norms. Participants suggested a range of strategies to help address some of the challenges to parenting in a new culture, including:

- improving relationships between parents and children by encouraging parents and children to talk to each other
- encouraging communication and collaboration between refugee families, communities, schools and the police

“Back home there is family support - brother, sister, friend, neighbour - when they see a problem, they will talk to the child and the family straight away. People don’t have support here... It is bad to ask for support, bad for their reputation.”

- ensuring support is available for newly arrived parents in the form of:
 - parenting information
 - preventative, educational and early intervention programs
 - culturally responsive child care
 - access to social gathering places.

Service development

A range of innovative approaches are currently being developed and utilised in South Australia to address the needs of refugee families. Other strategies identified in the research include:

- providing information to people from refugee backgrounds around child protection laws and parenting in Australia, including preventative, educational and early intervention programs and parenting groups
- further developing links with communities through a range of community engagement activities
- employing specialist staff to liaise between potential services and families
- enhancing the child protection knowledge of interpreters and translators
- providing up-to-date and ongoing education, training and information to frontline staff about the diverse refugee communities arriving in Australia
- developing and formalising relationships between external and internal refugee support and settlement agencies
- identifying and transplanting successful and promising strategies (eg the Incredible Years program).

The principal finding from this research is the critical significance of culturally competent child protection practice when working with refugee families. This includes the development of a child protection workforce that is well prepared and confident to address the needs of refugee families who come into contact with the child protection system. Equally important, culturally competent child protection practice requires establishing and maintaining good relationships with refugee communities based on two way communication and collaboration. There is evidence that culturally competent models of practice and strategies are being implemented within Families SA and that refugee community members are keen to develop working relationships with Families SA to help families and communities stay together.

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Printed August 2009

Pub Number: DFC B060

The information in this publication can be provided in an alternative format or another language on request.

Please contact (08) 8207 0218.

This bulletin draws on the findings of *The working with refugee families project* research report by Kerry Lewig, Fiona Arney and Mary Salveron from the Australian Centre for Child Protection. A full copy of the report can be obtained from the Department for Families and Communities Research Unit webpage at www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/