

Session 3 BACKGROUND READINGS

The Challenges of Resettlement

Section a LOSS AND GRIEF

“Soon after arrival I was so stressed and I cried every single day. Everything was so stupid. I missed my home, house, my friends. I wanted to go back immediately”
(17 year-old girl from the Former Yugoslavia)

One of the biggest traumas refugee families face when they arrive in their resettlement country is the grief they feel for all that they have left behind. Often members of their family have been killed, and in resettlement refugees are again separated from their extended families. They have lost their homes, communities, schools, friends – everything they knew and loved. Unlike migrants, refugees don't choose to come to live in a country like Australia. They would prefer not to have to live in a resettlement country. What they really want is to go home to their own country and live in peace there. They come to countries like Australia because they fear for their safety elsewhere.

Refugees also fear for the safety of the family members they have left behind. Unlike migrants, they can't go home to visit them whenever they feel like it, and they have a lot of difficulties in sponsoring members of their families to come to Australia. Each year there are 200 000 applications for the 6000 visas available. Many resettlement countries don't recognise the importance of extended family in their family sponsorship policies. In Australia, refugees who are granted 3 year Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) are not able to sponsor family members to join them here. The inability of refugees to successfully bring extended family members to the safety of Australia can cause extreme grief, anxiety and guilt.

Section a CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

“The problem of identity crisis, a sense of belonging. Difficult to tell which group I belonged to, local Australian or people from Chinese community.”
(19 year-old girl from Hong Kong)

Another resettlement hurdle is cultural adjustment. Refugees come from very different and varying cultural backgrounds. Their culture dictates the way they behave and dress, their gender roles and roles within the family, their religion and the way they raise their children. When they arrive in Australia, they are suddenly expected to fit in with a very different way of doing things.

Refugee children and adolescents often find themselves torn between two cultures. Due to peer pressure at school, coupled with their ability to pick up English quickly, children and teenagers usually adapt to Australian culture

faster than their parents. They often find that they behave one way and speak English when at school or with their friends, while at home they are expected to behave very differently and they speak their first language with their parents. Parents often cling even more strongly to traditional roles and customs when faced with the anxieties and unfamiliarity of the resettlement environment. There are clashes between parental and school systems of discipline and issues of teenage independence. Many refugee parents are unfamiliar with Australian law and do not understand the child protection legislation and the financial support available to young people from Government. Children sometimes trade on this and “threaten” their parents that they will report them to the police. The availability of alcohol, drugs and different social standards about relationships between boys and girls all can cause problems. The fact that many families have been in camps for years means that they are unfamiliar with Western standards on issues such as this. Refugee camps do not provide young people with any freedoms and little opportunity to socialise . The freedom and availability of so many things in Australia is very hard for them to handle when they first arrive While we are quick to condemn young people who flout Australian laws and traditions, we do not offer education about these things , expecting families to do so. But many of these families are as overwhelmed and lost as their children. This can lead to great tension, conflict and even violence between parents and children. It also confuses adolescents’ sense of identity .

Section b

LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE

*“When I came, I was 10 year old. I could not understand and speak English well. It was very stressful for me. No one understood me and I understood no one. People laughed at me.”
(17 year-old Chinese refugee girl)*

A great barrier to successful resettlement is the difficulty of learning a new language. For adult refugees - women and the elderly in particular - this difficulty often persists for years, due to factors that limit access to appropriate English classes. Although refugee students tend to pick up English quite quickly, they may initially experience some problems fitting in with their peers and keeping up with schoolwork when they don’t understand the language.

Children and adolescents also suffer the consequences of their parents’ lack of English. This can prevent adult refugees from helping their children with homework. It also restricts employment opportunities. Lack of English creates difficulties in everyday life, such as using the telephone and internet, going to the bank or going to the doctor. Sometimes parents come to rely on their children to interpret for them to help them get by. This creates a role reversal, where the parent becomes dependent on the child. For children who are already traumatised from the refugee journey and are in need of a lot of support, this situation is very unhealthy, and limits their psychological development.

Section c

ADJUSTING TO SCHOOL

“The depression that I had is because how I feel about the gap in my education. I started my schooling in English in Southern Sudan but due to war, I fled to Northern Sudan where I found the education there in Arabic language. I found it difficult to cope with that and it affected my educational progress. Then, I left for Cairo. I thought the situation would change but I found the same problem. Most of the government schools is in the Arabic language.”

(18 year-old Sudanese refugee)

Refugee children have often experienced a disruption to their education as a result of war in their home countries or because they were unable to attend school during the refugee journey or in refugee camps. In addition, many of them don't speak any English when they first arrive. Dealing with a new language, a new school system, and having to catch up to other children of their age group can be a very stressful experience for refugee students.

Refugee students may also have trouble fitting in and making friends at school when they are new. Partly this is because of their lack of English, but also because of the cultural differences between them and Australian-born students. Refugee students often have to take on more responsibilities at home than their classmates, and they often don't have much leisure time. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and exclusion from their peer groups.

Section d

LACK OF COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Refugees often come from cultures which emphasise strong community networks and the importance of extended family. One of the traumas of the refugee experience is witnessing the social disintegration and family breakdown that occurs in times of conflict. When refugees arrive in a resettlement country, they are completely cut off from their former networks of support. This can lead to a strong sense of isolation which impacts negatively on parents and children, making children more at risk. Often refugees from opposing sides of particular conflicts have come to Australia. These refugees do not want to mix together and are often afraid to be settled near previous enemies.

Building community in Australia, both with other refugees from their home countries and with the wider community, is very important for refugee families and children.

Section e

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND RACISM

Recent debates in Australia regarding border protection have had detrimental effects on the way in which refugees are regarded in the community.

Refugees have been variously linked with terrorism, crime and violence and viewed as threats to Australians' jobs. The colour of their skin, their dress, language and religions are often treated suspiciously and refugees increasingly find themselves marginalised by the Australian community. Attempts by refugees to recreate the extended family and community support structures that are so important for them are seen as evidence that they don't want to integrate. While these views are by no means universal, refugees quite commonly encounter prejudice and discrimination, increasing their marginalisation. This racism can have a devastating effect on children's self-esteem and on a family's ability to cope with the challenges of resettlement.

The newly arrived African communities and those who are from identifiable Muslim communities are those most often targeted for racist behaviours. This ranges from racism at a personal level, such as name calling, through to institutionalised racism in areas such as house rental and employment.

Section f TRAUMA OF PARENTS AND FAMILY

*The major problem I had (and still have) is living and dealing with my mother's disorder [post-traumatic stress disorder] ... This makes it difficult to cope, because I attend school, trying to get things done around the house to make it easier for her. However it is not that easy; it is very stressful to see her almost destroy herself (she eats only once a day), and also trying to help her through her nervous episodes and her not giving us (my brother and me) any support.
(Young woman from the Former Yugoslavia)*

Not only are many refugee children traumatised when they arrive in Australia, but their whole family is often coping with trauma. In addition, they no longer have their traditional family and community networks to rely on for support. Refugee families have a lot to cope with when they arrive in a resettlement country. Parents have to deal with learning a new language, settling their children into school, finding a job, and providing for the family. This can be a time of family breakdown, because sometimes the pressures on parents are too great. They sometimes suffer from mental health problems such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the experiences they have lived through. Some refugee men report feeling that they've lost control of their lives and there is a high level of domestic violence in refugee families.

Refugee children suffer greatly from the effects of trauma on their parents and carers. At the time when they need them most, their parents are least able to be there for them emotionally. Due to the trauma they have experienced, it is common for refugee parents to be unable to meet their children's developmental needs, at least when they first arrive.

Section g

REFUGEE GIRLS

Refugee girls have different experiences and needs to boys in resettlement. They often experience more of a clash between the traditional roles expected of them by their parents, and Australian culture. They may also have specific psychological, sexual and reproductive health needs which need to be approached sensitively and in a culturally appropriate manner. They might not want to talk to men about these problems. (See Session 4 for more details)

Section h

THE COMPOUNDING OF TRAUMA

The challenges to settlement in an alien country can be difficult even for migrants who are not refugees who chose to leave their home countries. When these challenges are coupled with the experiences that refugees have suffered during the refugee journey, they can themselves become very traumatic and increase the effects of the trauma that refugees already feel. Fear and mistrust of authority figures and government officials, based on years of abuse, and sometimes torture, come with refugees as part of their “baggage”. For some refugees, difficulties in resettlement can be the final straw that makes them feel completely unable to cope.

Section i

CHILDREN IN DETENTION

People seeking asylum who arrive in Australia without travel documents are detained until their refugee status is either confirmed, in which case they are granted a temporary protection visa, or denied, in which case they are removed from Australia. According to international law, they have a right to claim asylum and Australia has a responsibility to protect them while their claims are assessed. Over 80% of “boat people” turn out to be genuine refugees.

Since July 2005 asylum seeking families with children have been detained within the community rather than in detention centres, and the young members of the family have been able to attend school. However, there remain in Australian schools refugee students who have memories of traumatic experiences in detention centres. One study found that 50% of children who had been in detention had PTSD, and more than half regularly expressed suicidal ideation (HREOC, 2002).

Instead of the freedom and safety for which they had hoped, these children and young people found themselves placed in detention. There, they may have witnessed and/or experienced assault and sexual abuse, and seen adults, including their own parents, committing self-harm and suicide. They were denied access to proper education, medical care and opportunities to play. They were interrogated and threatened by guards and unaccompanied

minors were sometimes isolated from anyone who spoke their language (HREOC, 2002; NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2003).

These children and young people can exhibit extreme mental health disorders: major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, mutism, refusal to eat or drink, suicidal thoughts. Adolescents often display extremely dysfunctional anti-social behaviour, while younger children experience severe developmental delays. They may require psychological and psychiatric support, as well as other forms of encouragement and intensive assistance in order to integrate into the community.

School staff need to be aware of the possibility of mental health disorders in refugee students who have had these experiences and be ready to make appropriate referrals to mental health professionals who can assist the students.

CONCLUSION

Difficulties that would be a minor challenge for most children may provoke extreme reactions in refugee students when they compound the trauma experienced during the refugee journey. It is very important that people working with refugee students understand this phenomenon so that they can make more sense of some behaviours which may often seem illogical or without cause. Once school staff recognise that a refugee student might be experiencing a traumatic reaction and difficulties in settlement and integration, we can be confident that they will receive appropriate and empathetic support and the assistance they require.