

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Workers: Engaging CLD Families

What issues do you need to consider when engaging culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families? Remember, workers should only engage with families of young people when:

1. They have the young persons consent to do so.
2. Doing so will not place the young person in any physical or emotional danger.
3. It is perceived that the young person would benefit from increased family contact and/or improved family relationships.
4. That resolution of family tensions or increased understanding of each other's perspective will assist the young person to develop and move on.

### Preparing for your first family interview

Before contacting a young person's family, take the time to learn a little about the family culture and background. Talk to the young person, do some reading and seek advice from other workers. Try to gather both general and specific information on:

- family structure
- family hierarchy
- gender roles
- language
- religion
- communication patterns
- approaches to discipline

Having some knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and customs of the cultural group that your client belongs to, may help you to engage with their family more effectively. But remember each family is individual. Don't assume that standard cultural norms always apply – **every family is different** (see Developing Cultural Competency - Worker help sheet).

When you meet the young person's parents or carers, ask about the family history in a manner that shows interest and respect. Take the opportunity to find out what you can about the customs and beliefs that this particular family adheres to.

Counselling that encourages families to adopt western values does not demonstrate interest in and respect for their cultural background. So be careful not to rush in and try to impose your values on the family. Take time to reflect on your approach and decision-making.

### Family structure

Things to consider in relation to family structure include:

**Hierarchy** – All families differ in relation to family hierarchy; some families are internally matriarchal, others are patriarchal and in some families older siblings and grandparents play a very important role in caring for younger siblings. Take into consideration the hierarchical structure of the family when you are deciding which family member to contact first.

**Family roles** – Every member of a family unit plays a specific role in that family. It is helpful to know who makes the decisions in the family and who attends most to the emotional wellbeing of family members. This will help you direct information to the most appropriate family member.

Some families may not all be living in the same household. Be careful not to assume that because some family members are living in alternative housing or are still living in the home country, they are not significant. They may still play an important role in the young person's life in terms of decision-making.

### Language

It is essential before meeting with the family that you are aware of any language barriers that you may need to prepare for. Are the family members able to speak English to an extent that will allow them to discuss complex topics? If not you will probably need an interpreter. Check with the young person on the language and dialect spoken by the family. Ask the family before your interview how they feel about an interpreter being present in interviews.

Be wary of relying on non-professional interpreters when working with CLD families. Relatives or friends may have an emotional involvement and their language ability is untested. Family members may not be as willing to respond openly to questions from you as they might if a professional interpreter is being used.

### Assessment tools

Consider using eco-maps and genograms in your work with CLD young people and their families. They are useful tools to assist you to assess family, social and community relationships and the quality of these connections.

Eco-maps can help you to map areas of isolation or disconnection that may need to be addressed and also

areas of service duplication (see: A Simple Guide to Eco-Maps - Worker help sheet).

### Attitudes towards professional intervention

In many CLD cultures parents rely on extended family and community members, including elders or religious leaders, for advice and help with problems in relation to their children. The practice of seeking assistance from a professional counsellor or social worker is not common.

Some families have concerns about their problems becoming common knowledge and are worried that if they seek professional help for a problem this might bring shame on the family.

Some may have had negative experiences with authority figures in their country of origin and feel quite threatened by people employed in government or welfare positions. When you first meet a new family, be sure to explain your role carefully and your professional obligation to maintain confidentiality.

For others, counselling is simply not their way of resolving problems.

### Understanding of the welfare system

Try to assess the extent of the families understanding of the welfare system in Australia. Consider:

- What is their attitude towards professional intervention?
- How will contact from you be received - as support or intrusion?
- Will your gender and cultural background be issues of concern for the family?

### Intervention strategies

Remember that the way a person perceives experiences and resolves issues will be influenced by their cultural background and ties. Don't dismiss beliefs in prayer, alternative medicine, consulting with elders etc when these ideas clash with your own values and beliefs.

It is important to respect and validate the client's beliefs, customs and values. At the same time you can share your knowledge about effective approaches to solving problems experienced by adolescents with complex needs. But remember, families are most invested in solutions that they arrive at themselves and with which they feel comfortable.<sup>1</sup>

### Decision-making

Show sensitivity to the way decisions are made in the family. Otherwise you may not succeed in helping them to find and implement solutions to their problems.

For example, if you suggest a negotiation model for family decision-making to address the problem of an adolescent wanting more independence in a closed traditional family system, you are likely to meet resistance.<sup>2</sup> Approach the decision-maker in the family with respect and try to negotiate solutions with them.

Consider asking the young person's parents or caregivers the following questions:

- Is there a particular way that people in your culture deal with the problems your child is experiencing? What is usually done when a young person is having these problems?
- What have you tried doing already to help your child with their problems?
- Have there been times when this strategy has worked?
- What else do you think might be effective?
- How do you think I can help?

### A Strengths perspective

Be careful not to adopt a deficit view of CLD families in your work with them. Don't assume that because people are migrants or refugees that they have greater problems and fewer coping capacities. This will only result in the family feeling powerless and incompetent.

Always adopt a strengths based approach in your work with CLD families.

### Cultural Interpretations of problems

Listen carefully to how a family understands the problems their young person is experiencing. Some CLD families have different understandings of physical health and mental health problems.

For example, some come from cultures where:

- mental illness is not a recognised issue
- there are no mental health services
- or where psychiatry has been used as a form of social control

Some people from CLD backgrounds who are experiencing mental health problems will present more often to their doctor or health worker with somatic rather than psychological symptoms. For example, they might complain of problems such as: insomnia, headaches, lethargy, abdominal, muscular, back and joint pains, rather than low mood or negative thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of refugees it may not always be helpful to them to have their distress articulated through conventional Western definitions of psychological ill health.<sup>4</sup> This may only add to their anxiety. They may perceive that their problems are mainly practical or structural – a lack of access to affordable housing, employment, training and support services.

Careful listening, sensitivity, respect and a focus on enhancing strengths are integral to working effectively with CLD families.

<sup>1</sup> Mo Yee Lee, 2003, 'A Solution Focussed Approach to Cross-Cultural Clinical Social Work Practice: Utilizing Cultural Strengths', Families in Society

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Kiroopoulos, L et al (2005), Managing Mental Illness in patients from CALD backgrounds, Australian Family Physician, Vol.34, No.4.

<sup>4</sup> Benson, J(2007), A Culturally Sensitive Consultation Model, Multicultural Mental Health Australia Fact Sheet, accessed August, 2009.



### Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Workers should only engage with families of young people when they have the young persons consent and contact will not place the young person in any physical or emotional danger.
- Prepare for your first interview with the young person's family by finding out about their family background and culture. But remember that each family is individual and cultural norms will not always apply.
- Don't assume that because people are migrants or refugees that they have greater problems and fewer coping capacities.
- Families are most invested in solutions that they arrive at themselves. Don't dismiss beliefs in prayer, alternative medicine, consulting with elders etc because these ideas may clash with your own values and beliefs.



### Related Help Sheets

#### Worker Help Sheets

- Impact of Migration
- Family Dynamics
- A Simple Guide to Eco-Maps
- Developing Cultural Competency

#### Parent Help Sheets

- Settling into a new country



### Suggested Reading

- Mo Yee Lee, (2003) 'A Solution Focussed Approach to Cross-Cultural Clinical Social Work Practice: Utilizing Cultural Strengths', Families in Society, U.S.A.
- Benson, J(2007), A Culturally Sensitive Consultation Model, Multicultural Mental Health Australia Fact Sheet, <http://www.mmha.org.au/>



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