

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Workers: Impact of Migration

Migration can be a mixed experience for families. It can bring with it a sense of hope and anticipation, but these feelings may also be mixed with a deep sense of grief and loss.

It is important for workers dealing with young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds to develop an understanding of the impact of migration on family members and how this may be influencing family dynamics and adolescent behaviour.

The issues that can impact on migrant families and refugees include:

- Grief and loss
- Post-traumatic stress
- Isolation and lack of social connectedness
- Language barriers
- Heightened intergenerational conflict due to a clash of values and customs
- Settlement problems – including access to welfare and financial support, employment, affordable housing, education and training.
- Difficulties adjusting to the education system.
- Racism.

Explore each family member's response to migration

When working with CLD young people and their families, workers should explore the family's response to leaving their country of origin and moving to a new country as part of an overall assessment of the family situation. Asking the following questions may help to highlight areas of strength, stress or difficulty related to the family's experience of migration:

- What were your reasons for leaving your home country?
- Did you want to move to a new country or did you have little choice?
- Are you looking forward to your new life or back to your old life?
- What things are better for you and your family here?
- What things are most difficult?
- How have the many changes you have experienced affected you and your family?

Remember that each family member will have a different response to these questions. Try to assess the impact of migration on each individual family member's physical, psychological and social development over time (see *Settling into a New Country - Parent help sheet*).

Community support

Consider also broader issues that may be impacting on the family's settlement experiences:

- Are there well - established communities living here from this family's country of origin? Is the community well-resourced in terms of support services?
- Or has the family and/or young person migrated from a country from where the intake of migrants or refugees is minor and consequently there are few support services here?
- If support groups or advocacy organisations are established is the young person or their family engaged with them already? Or would a referral be helpful?

There are many services and programs established in Australia to support migrants and refugees including migrant resource centres and refugee support services.

Focus on strengths

The experience of migration often strengthens family ties and can lead to family members feeling more connected and protective of each other.¹

Whilst western society is very individualistic, many newly arrived families come from cultures that are much more community oriented and where extended family are still very much involved in decision-making and child-rearing. Be careful to appreciate the strengths of different cultures and diversity in the way families function (see *Developing Cultural Competency - Worker help sheet*).

There can be enormous variation in cultural values and norms regarding the central tasks of adolescence. For example: in Australia the achievement of independence and an individual identity are highly valued outcomes of adolescent development. This may conflict with the values of some cultures where a competent adolescent is primarily defined as someone who meets his/her obligations to their family.²

Young person's attitude to cultural heritage

¹ Young, S Working with CALD families: Learning from the experience, Synergy, The Importance of Family, Multicultural Mental Health Australia, Edition No.2 2005

² NSW Dept of Education and Training, Focusing on young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/pdhp/prolearn/reading>. (Accessed August, 2009)

It is useful to explore with the young person you are working with how they feel about their cultural background? Are they proud of their cultural heritage or are they struggling with their cultural identity? Do they feel lost between two cultures - each one making different demands?

Multiculturalism recognises the right of all Australians to enjoy their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, including language and religion, and the right to equal treatment and opportunities regardless of their backgrounds.³ Yet there are extraordinary pressures on young people to conform to western cultural norms and this can create internal conflict in young people and conflict within families.

Worker approach to issues of cultural identity

Workers need to be careful how they approach these issues in their dealings with adolescents and their families:

- They should demonstrate interest in and respect for the cultural heritage of the family, whilst at the same time showing empathy and understanding of any cultural conflict being experienced by the young person.
- Workers should not undermine the attempts of families to raise their children strong in their culture. A strong sense of belonging to the culture of one's family can be a major protective factor that promotes health and wellbeing.
- Young people, who retain the most important elements of their ethnic culture, while developing the skills to adapt to the culture of their new country, appear to cope best in their psychosocial adjustment.⁴

³Dept of Immigration and Citizenship, National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/agenda/agenda89/whydownen.htm>. (Accessed August, 2009).

⁴Bashir, M. Immigrant and refugee young people: Challenges in Mental Health, in M. Bashir and D. Bennett (eds.) (2000) Deeper Dimensions – Culture, Youth and Mental Health. Transcultural Mental Health Centre. Sydney.



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- It is important for workers helping young people from CLD backgrounds to develop an understanding of the impact of migration on family members and how this may be influencing family dynamics and adolescent behaviour.
- Explore the family's response to leaving their country of origin and moving to a new country as part of an overall assessment of the family situation.
- There are extraordinary pressures on young people to conform to western cultural norms and this can create internal conflict in young people and conflict within families.
- Workers should not undermine the attempts of families to raise their children strong in their culture. A strong sense of belonging to the culture of one's family can be a major protective factor that promotes health and wellbeing.



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Engaging with CLD Families
- Developing Cultural Competency
- Refugees – Trauma, Grief and Loss

Parent Help Sheets

- Settling into a New Country
- Adolescent Development



Suggested Reading

- Youth Action & Policy Association NSW, (2004) Issues for Young Refugees, <http://www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/facts/Issuesyoungrefugees.pdf>
- Multicultural Mental Health Australia, Synergy, The Importance of Family, Edition No.2 2005
- St Joseph's Women's Health Centre, Attachment Across Cultures website, Impact of Migration pages, Canada, <http://www.attachmentacrosscultures.org/eindex.html>



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