

MULTICULTURAL YOUTH CONNECTIONS

Strengthening Capacity and Resilience in Refugee Youth at Risk and their Communities

Working with Young Refugees at Risk Workshop Facilitator Notes

Definitions

- The term “at risk youth”
 - Traditionally used to refer to a range of different population groups including young offenders, homeless youth, adolescents with social and behavioural problems, and teenage mothers
 - Here the term is used to refer to refugee youth who may or may not have social, behavioural and mental health problems, but who are experiencing certain negative conditions which may place them at high risk of such problems

Background

- Australia has accepted over 645,000 refugees since the end of the Second World War
- Provisions are in place for 13,000 more to be added to this number each year
- In the past 15 years, most refugees have come from the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, South West Asia, and more recently, Africa
- Children, adolescents and young people account for approximately 50% of all refugee arrivals at any given point in time

Pre-migration experiences

- Loss of everything familiar and treasured (country, home, culture, family, friends, familiar support networks)
- May have witnessed or experienced torture and trauma
- May have lost or become separated from parents and other family members
- May have served as child soldiers (mostly young people from Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone)
- May have spent years in refugee camps
- May have limited or disrupted education prior to arrival in Australia

Post-migration experiences

- Grief and loss
- Concern about loved ones left behind
- Resettlement difficulties (learning a new language, adapting to Australian culture and systems)
- Education difficulties, often in a context of high pressure to adjust quickly
- Financial difficulties (living on Centrelink payments but facing pressure to support family here and overseas)
- Changes in family structure and roles resulting in serious disruption to child-parent relations

- Despair and aimlessness as a result of losing or becoming separated from one or both parents
- Intergenerational conflict
- Parents no longer able to rely on former parenting styles and practices (e.g., the physical discipline of children)
- Young people use new-found freedom to resist parental (and usually maternal) authority
- Young people acculturate to Australian culture and society faster than parents, resulting in parental fear that children will lose their own culture
- Young people are required to think and behave independently to succeed in Western society but then get into trouble when they try this at home or in the community
- Females subject to significantly more parental and community surveillance and control
- Social, emotional, behavioural and mental health problems associated with pre and post migration experiences of loss, trauma, and disruption
- Young people are often not supported at home
- Identity issues associated with living between cultures
- Rise in family breakdown and youth homelessness
- Racism, discrimination, social exclusion
- Youth-police relations:
 - Many young people from African backgrounds report very negative experiences with the police
 - Young people believe the police are racist, ageist, reactionary, unfair, unhelpful (males and females)
 - Young Africans appear the worst affected
 - The police occasionally consult community elders and leaders about problems but not the young people themselves

Service delivery issues

- Youth at risk do not access services at the same rate as other young refugees
- Key barriers to services:
 - Distrust of people outside their close informal networks
 - Social isolation
 - Lack of familiarity with the welfare state generally and services particularly
 - No comparable services in home country
 - Cultural barriers e.g., reluctance to seek outside help
 - Concerns about confidentiality
 - Reservations about the usefulness of services
 - Lack of cultural awareness and competence among mainstream services

What should an agency expect when working with youth at risk?

- Distrust
- Socially unacceptable behaviour (not aware or don't care)
- Anger and frustration
- Aggressive questioning of workers and their intentions
- Telling lies and half-truths, leaving information out
- Disrespect (talking back, rolling eyes, mocking in own language)
- Loud, boisterous behaviour, lack of awareness of others

- Withdrawn behaviour (refusing to engage or communicate)
- Refusing to listen
- Standing over and/or swearing at workers
- Not attending appointments at all, or attending late, intoxicated, or under the influence of other drugs
- Stealing from the agency

Program and service development

- One size does not fit all - youth at risk will be more difficult to reach than other young refugees so it is important to be creative and develop an individualised promotion strategy that is specifically targeted towards their needs
- Even when youth at risk do access a service, they will take longer than their Anglo-Australian peers to understand how it works due to unfamiliarity with mainstream Australian culture and systems
- Outreach - trust needs to be established with youth at risk *before* they will access a service. This can only be achieved by engaging in planned, regular outreach (these young people are generally living on the margins and are not accessing information that is available to the broader refugee youth population)
- Peer-to-peer outreach programs - consider using young people who have already overcome difficult life issues and are willing to be involved in outreach to other youth at risk
- Accessing young people through partnerships:
 - Develop links with schools with a high refugee student population as they will be able to identify young people with social, behavioural and mental health problems
 - Build connections and linkages with the Magill and Cavan Training Centres and the Family Conferencing Team
 - Consult with the South Australian Police (SAPOL) about where youth at risk are hanging out and visit these locations regularly to promote your service
 - Consider partnering with other agencies on programs that are already reaching youth at risk
- An agency generally has one window of opportunity to make an impact on the young person and if this opportunity is missed, he/she is unlikely to ever return
- An agency needs to ensure that the service it is offering directly interests or affects the lives of young people or they will be impossible to engage (young people generally want practical rather than psychological support)
- It is vital to ensure that all workers and volunteers who will be working with youth at risk possess the necessary skills, knowledge and personal attributes to effectively engage and develop rapport with them
- Engaging young people through group work:
 - Group work is effective for engaging young people who do not exhibit the level of trust needed to move on to individual work
 - Re: group composition, ensure the most appropriate mix of young people by considering age, ethnicity, emotional maturity, confidence, and political sensitivities (e.g., not mixing young people who come from communities with a history of conflict)
 - Re: group size, ensure that the group is large enough to allow emotional privacy but small enough to manage and foster trust and openness (as a general rule, 8-10 people)

- Re: group norms (rules), it is very important to set limits on behaviour and ensure these are consistently enforced through sanctions and rewards. Rules should be set with the full participation of young people – let them set the rules
- Engaging young people through recreation:
 - Recreational activities (e.g., basketball, soccer, go-carting and pool) are effective for engaging those who do not exhibit the level of trust needed to move on to individual work
 - If the agency is able to participate in the activity, it also gives workers an opportunity to engage young people in a way that is less confronting than in an office
 - Providing recreational activities also enables the agency to see how the young person engages with others, which can assist in identifying potential leaders in the group
- Service flexibility:
 - Most young refugees are very relaxed about time, punctuality and keeping appointments so it is important to be flexible with service delivery, for example, providing a drop-in service
 - Allow more time than usual for appointments because they are likely to start late and go on for much longer than planned
 - Programs should be arranged for times when young people are likely to participate (in the late afternoon, in the evenings and on weekends)

Working with the young person (one-on-one)

- Most youth at risk are uncomfortable seeking or accepting help from people they do not know or trust so it can take time for the worker to develop rapport – listening to the young person is the most important skill to have
- Workers need to do a thorough assessment – a young person's needs will vary according to whether he/she is living alone, with one or both parents, with older siblings, with extended family or with distant relatives; his/her age at the time of migration and his/her current age; his/her social support networks, level of acculturation to Western society; and where he/she is situated in the resettlement process
- The young person should have one worker and this worker should be retained throughout the intervention process. Being passed on to another worker after going through a difficult trust-building process is likely to be met with resistance and may even result in premature termination of service
- Be patient - it can take up to six months for young people to develop sufficient trust to properly engage and make full use of a service. It takes time and patience to get meaningful outcomes
- Most youth at risk are not interested in sitting around and talking about their issues, or participating in programs that are primarily educational in focus. They want concrete, tangible outcomes that are directly related to an immediate need or want
- Allow time - given their complex and multifaceted needs, young people require more time than both their same-culture counterparts who are not at risk and the broader mainstream youth population. Working with one at-risk young person can be the same as working with two or three young people who are not at risk
- It may take a number of sessions before a young person will open up and he/she may watch or test workers to see whether they can be trusted before opening up

- The most important message you can send a young person at risk is “I care about you” as many lack supportive adults and positive role models who believe in them and are willing to invest in them
- Workers can express their care by spending time with young people and listening to them; showing a genuine interest in their lives; maintaining regular contact with them; believing in and persevering with them, even when they are exhibiting challenging behaviours; being reliable and dependable; admitting when they have made a mistake or do not have the answers; maintaining a non-judgemental attitude; and demonstrating empathy, honesty and humility
- Confidentiality:
 - While confidentiality is enormously important to most young people, it is particularly important to youth at risk
 - Many are so concerned about breaches of confidentiality that they refuse to access any services, including those that have been expressly established for them
 - Carefully explain the limits of confidentiality to young people, not only during the initial engagement process but throughout the entire intervention process
 - Most youth at risk will not access a service if it is offered by a same-culture worker who is potentially known to their families and broader communities due to concerns about breaches of confidentiality
- Work from the young person’s perspective - the focus should be on how they see their situation, what they see to be their needs, and what they want to see change
- It is very important to be clear about what you can and cannot provide and avoid making promises unless you are certain you can keep them. Broken promises, no matter how well intended, cause frustration and disappointment and can ultimately result in a breakdown in trust
- Communication:
 - If language is an issue, speak a little more slowly and clearly but do not raise your voice or patronise young people
 - Avoid colloquialism and slang and be sensitive with the use of humour
 - Clearly explain unfamiliar or complex terms. Keep in mind that nodding and smiling do not always convey understanding
 - Watch out for non-verbal cues that could suggest people do not understand (e.g., loss of concentration, blank stares, fidgeting, talking in their own languages to friends and keeping quiet)
- Managing challenging behaviour:
 - Youth at risk can exhibit attitudes and behaviours that are challenging, offensive, worrying and potentially harmful to both themselves and others
 - Establish clear boundaries - make rules for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour but do not make too many rules and ensure the ones you do make are consistently enforced
 - Consequences need to be expected, immediate and consistent with the behaviour
 - Understand that the young person’s behaviour is not the sum of who he/she is; he/she has skills, knowledge, strengths, talents and achievements which can be harnessed to support him/her to identify his/her own solutions to problems
 - Be aware that the behaviour is generally linked to broader environmental issues (e.g., the refugee experience, difficulties at school or at home, and feelings of isolation and exclusion)

- Be attentive and listen to the young person – he/she wants to be heard
- Even if you disagree with their assessment of what is causing the behaviour, listen to them. Feeling unheard is a key source of much frustration and can cause young people to behave in ways that place them at further risk
- There should be consequences for unacceptable behaviour and these should be explained to the young person ahead of time
- Look for opportunities to build the young person up - tell them what is good about them, focus on their strengths and capacities
- When faced with an angry young person, keep in mind that the heat of the moment and their emotions can make it very difficult for them to hear what you have to say, regardless of how important it is. Consider the most appropriate time to share your concerns - you may need to wait for another time when they are more open
- Encourage the young person to share his/her interests, goals and aspirations and provide concrete and tangible opportunities for them to pursue them
- Assist the young person to make links and connections in his/her areas of interest so he/she can find a sense of belonging and fit in with the wider community
- For serious and persistent anger management or behavioural problems, consider seeking advice from a mental health professional as behavioural problems often mask mental health issues
- Recognise that extra time, commitment and patience is required to work effectively with at risk youth and that you will need to arrange opportunities to debrief with your supervisor or manager



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