

Supporting Refugee Children in Outside School Hours

Care

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Before a children's service can provide support to refugee children it is important to understand what the term "refugee" means. Refugees flee their country for their own safety and cannot return unless the situation that forced them to leave improves. Many refugees have been exposed to traumatic experiences including escaping war, torture, trauma, death of family members and spending time in under resourced refugee camps. In some instances there are refugee children who have been born within the refugee camp and know no other life. These children coming into Australian children services will be experiencing what is known as "culture shock".

Culture shock is a term used to describe the feelings that people may have when they move to an unfamiliar culture. There are four stages of culture shock:

- **Euphoric**- new comers are excited about their new lives.
- **Culture Shock** – the differences between the new and the old becomes more apparent and creates great confusion and frustration as they cannot communicate, are exposed to unfamiliar surroundings, unreadable social signs and new and different sounds.
- **Integration** - new comers start to deal with the difference and learn to integrate their own beliefs. Alarm occurs for parents as they watch their children appearing to forget their own culture and solely take on the new.
- **Acceptance** – new comers now enter and often prosper in the mainstream culture.

Effects on Developmental Areas

Social Development

- May have limited skills to interact with other children
- May not be able to understand the social norms
- May be anxious to separate from parents
- May revert back to development of a younger age
- May become aggressive with other children and toys
- May appear angry, sullen or intense while undertaking an activity
- May be reluctant to engage in eye contact
- May appear to lack the desire to share activities with others
- May make many inappropriate attempts to join in, or will watch others with great interest but have no idea how to become involved
- May not know how to go about making friendships and joining peer initiated activities
- May have a lack of understanding of issues from another's point of view – social empathy

- May appear rude because of their inability to understand and use the more subtle aspects of social interaction e.g. by approaching strangers inappropriately; by ignoring another person's attempts to interact
- May be unintentionally aggressive in an attempt to be social
- May lack self-esteem

Language

- May have severe communication difficulties which affect all social aspects
- May not readily understand or use appropriate forms of communication including verbal language, body language, facial expression, tone of voice and gestures
- May be unable to communicate wants, express concerns or fears, or be able to answer questions reliably
- May interpret language only in a literal and concrete form

Cognitive

- May have learning difficulties
- May not stay long at activities due to low concentration span
- May require instructions, directions etc to be repeated 2 or 3 times
- May require some time to process before responding or acting
- May have delays in skills of concentration, memory and ability to generalise
- May have difficulty understanding concepts of turn taking, sharing, how to enter into play situations

Suggested Strategies

The following inclusion strategies are just some examples which may be applied to support the inclusion process. This list is only the start and it is dependant on a variety of factors such as environment, length of time child is in care, child's interest, likes, dislikes and skills already achieved.

- Be open to different notions of "family". Check each family's situation.
- Aim to get to know each child's family. Encourage the significant carers of the child to be involved in programs.
- Collaborate with other agencies who are involved with the family.
- Remain focussed on your role – i.e. providing quality inclusive childcare where a child can grow and develop. Leave other aspects to the specialists in their field.

- Allow adequate time to explain to the parents what your service provides. In some cases refugees may be reluctant to disclose what may appear as basic information e.g. what the service needs to know on the enrolment.
- Provide an area where the parents can sit with staff to assist in building up a relationship and sense of belonging.
- Ask families to assist in providing songs, games that the children may be familiar with.
- Assess your program – Identify aspects of your program that triggers stressful behaviour by the child. Modify and change to decrease these triggers e.g. is arrival time noisy?
- Focus on relationship building through routines – Creating a stable and predictable routine such as arrival time, lets the child know that while lots of changes maybe occurring elsewhere here is a place that remains the same. Arrival time in OSHC can be very noisy and hectic so look at ways to quieten that time.
- Model appropriate social behaviour – Greet the child on arrival and departure, making eye contact and showing that you enjoy having the child in the group.
- Provide calming activities – Create calming environments such as water play, bubble blowing, relaxation CD's, quiet reading, quiet place for the child to retreat.
- Be aware of your body language, level and tone of your voice - When talking to children your body language conveys more of what you really mean than your words.
- Initiate activities that encourages a child's interest – e.g. if a child shows interest in a topic or certain art/craft area provide these activities. Gain the child's involvement by encouraging the child to assist in setting up these activities.
- Provide time to learn about the family's child rearing practices which may assist in identifying what is important and valued by the parents.
- Ask about practical things such as diet, sleep etc and aim to be able to incorporate this into the program.
- Reinforce the idea that the resources will remain in the centre and will be there when the child returns. Talk to the parents about any issue where children are taking things home with them.
- To assist with preventing the children from taking things home, aim to provide "jobs" e.g. packing away toys in a certain place to give responsibilities for the children to care for the equipment at the service.

References:

Victorian Foundation of Survivors of Torture Inc " Raising Children in Australia" 2007

Brooks B

The Scared Child Helping Kids overcome traumatic events 1996 Wiley & Sons

Ethnic Childcare

www.eccfcsc.org

Culture Shock

www.everythingsl.net/inservices/cultureshock

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Inclusion Works! provides information to Children's Services upon request. The information provided is obtained from a number of sources e.g. library, other services, resource books and Internet. The information provided is not intended to, nor does it, constitute medical or other advice. Persons access this information assume full responsibility for its usage. Acknowledgement of source of information is required if passed onto a third person.