

QUEENSLAND PROGRAM OF ASSISTANCE TO
SURVIVORS OF TORTURE & TRAUMA INC.
(QPASTT)



**A teacher's guide to
working with students
from refugee and
displaced backgrounds**



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Published by QPASTT, PO Box 6254, Fairfield, Qld 4103.

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This booklet was funded by Queensland Health, Mental Health Branch

(2001) Updated and re-printed with funds from Education Queensland

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This booklet is one of three resources in a series. The other resources are:

- A school counselling guide to working with students from refugee and displaced backgrounds (booklet)
- Students from refugee and displaced backgrounds – a handbook for schools (comprehensive handbook)



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Acknowledgement

This booklet is based on *Preventing double trouble – a teacher's guide to working with children from refugee and displaced backgrounds*, published by the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW), 1999. QPASTT extends special thanks to ANCORW and Catherine Breen, University of New South Wales, for their kind permission to use their work.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a reference guide for **teachers** to assist their teaching role with students from refugee and displaced backgrounds, particularly in relation to their social and emotional needs. It is one of three resources developed to assist school staff to work with refugee children and young people. There are two booklets and one comprehensive handbook in the series:

- *A school counselling guide to working with students from refugee and displaced backgrounds* (booklet)
- *A teacher's guide to working with students from refugee and displaced backgrounds* (booklet)
- *Students from refugee and displaced backgrounds – a handbook for schools* (this comprehensive handbook expands on many issues in this booklet)

REFUGEE CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Of the 12,000 people who arrive in Australia annually under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program, it is estimated that approximately 40 percent are children and young people. These children have often experienced severe hardship and trauma, with experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse, abandonment, treacherous flights to safety, forced service as child soldiers, the witnessing of atrocities and even torture.

These experiences occurred during the child's process of cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. In some instances, there may be a long-term impact on these developmental processes, increasing the child's vulnerability to ongoing mental, physical and social problems.

Refugee children have often experienced interruption to their schooling. Some may have been without schooling for several years and others may never have experienced a school or class-room environment before.



COMMON RESPONSES TO TRAUMA

Each student's experience and reaction to that experience is different. The following list describes some of the ways children and young people may respond to their trauma:

- Repeatedly thinking about experiences of violence
- Feeling afraid
- Feeling sad
- Physical symptoms including lack of energy, lack of appetite, heart palpitations, headaches and stomach aches
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Lack of concentration and interest
- Getting angry easily
- Restlessness
- Not trusting others
- Lack of self confidence

It should be noted that a lack of *obvious* negative responses does not automatically mean that there has been no negative impact on the student's mental health. The effects of trauma are often delayed until the initial resettlement period has been completed, and can even manifest a number of years later.



■ Global Learning Centre

Ph: (07) 3857 6666

Email: glc@uq.net.au

Web: www.uq.net.au/~zzglcent/

Offers Global Education resources and classroom activities, has a resource library and run professional development workshops for schools.

Written resources:

■ **A guide to working with young people who are refugees**, produced by VFST, 1996, ph (03) 9388 0022. Contains practical strategies for individual work incorporating family and cultural issues.

■ **Settling in – A group program for newly arrived refugee and migrant students** by Pickering, E & Phoumirath, S, produced by Old Guilford Multicultural Resource Centre 1992 and available from STARTTS, ph (02) 9794 1900. Contains a six-session program for school guidance officers and teachers to settle in new students into the classroom and school environment.

■ **The Rainbow Program** — A School based program to support refugee children and their families. Download a copy from www.foundationhouse.org.au or ph (03) 9388 0022

Web: www.townsville-mrc.org

MRC operates as an information and referral service specializing in serving newly arrived migrants. The agency offers support, information and advice on employment, health, cultural activities, legal, education and children's activities.

■ Migrant Settlement Services Cairns

Suite 21, 1st Floor Virginia House,
68 Abbott St

Cairns Qld 4870

Ph: (07) 4041 7699 Fax (07) 4041 7655

Email migrantservices@centacarecairns.org

Can provide settlement support, information, advice and referral on settlement related issues.

■ Amnesty International (Queensland branch)

1st Fl, 150 Edward St

Brisbane Qld 4000

Ph: (07) 3210 5200 Fax: (07) 3221 0598

Email qldaia@amnesty.org.au

Web: www.qld.amnesty.org.au

Can provide information about the human rights situation globally, educational resources suitable for schools and guest speakers.



REFUGEE STUDENTS AT SCHOOL

School is the first contact many refugee children and young people have with the world outside their family. An organised school life and good teacher-student relationship are important factors in the successful resettlement of refugee students.

The regular contact that teachers have with their students place them in an ideal situation to observe, monitor and respond to the student's resettlement difficulties and needs.

It is important to be aware of and consider the family context of the student. Some refugee students may have lost their families, be separated indefinitely from family or living in a different family context, such as a nuclear family. Students who are living with their families are often affected by trauma and resettlement issues experienced by their parents and there may be strained family relationships. These students may receive very little, if any, emotional support at home. **The teacher may be the only supportive adult available to the student.**

Teachers already have the tools and principles for working with these young people in the classroom. Whilst the experiences of refugee students may be overwhelming, teachers are capable of providing important assistance. The teacher's role may be one of the most pivotal in the prevention of ongoing mental health problems experienced by refugee students.



WHICH STUDENTS NEED EXTRA HELP?

All students from refugee backgrounds require social and emotional support to help them integrate into the school environment, establish relationships with other children and perform their school-work. A few children may require additional support. The following behavioural or emotional responses that are pervasive and persistent over time could suggest the need for a referral for specialist counselling:

Children five years and younger may:

- Exhibit anxious attachment such as clinging, whining, tantrums and attachment to security objects
- Regress to early childhood behaviour patterns
- Engage in thematic play with dolls, toy guns and play mates that recreates the past trauma or abuse
- Experience distressing dreams and nightmares
- Re-tell the story obsessively
- Withdraw, avoiding playmates and adults
- Refuse to talk or becoming mute
- Experience illness and/or tiredness

(Plummer 1997)

School-aged children may:

- Exhibit extreme aggression or persistent anger
- Exhibit out of control behaviour
- Cry a lot
- Exhibit social withdrawal/apathy
- Have poor school attendance
- Show ongoing signs of fear and anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Re-enact the trauma
- Exhibit perfectionist behaviours
- Continually and/or obsessively talk about their feelings
- Develop psychosomatic complaints such as headaches and stomach aches or frequent illness



■ Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors

14 Lockhart St. Woolloongabba 4102

Ph: (07) 3840 6141 Fax: (07) 3391 1174

Email: Woolloongabba.admin@mfsq.org.au

This program supports young people on permanent and temporary visas from countries who are here without their parents but have a family member over 21 assisting them.

■ Volunteer Refugee Tutoring in the Community (VoRTCS)

Email: info@refugeetutoring.org

Web: www.refugeetutoring.org.au

Provides free in-home tutoring English language support.

■ ACCESS Inc.

4/2 Carmody St, Woodridge 4114 Mail: PO Box 10 Logan Central Qld 4114

Ph: (07) 3808 9299; Fax (07) 3208 9319

Email: manager.ihss@accessservicesinc.org.au

Can provide settlement support, information, advice and referral on settlement related issue in the Logan and Beenleigh area. Offer English and computing classes.

■ Townsville Migrant Resource Centre Thuringowa Ltd

467 Flinders St

Townsville Qld 4810

Ph: (07) 4772 4800 Fax: (07) 4772 1840

Email: angela@townsville-mrc.org

■ Transcultural Clinical Consultation Service

519 Kessels Rd, Macgregor Postal: PO Box 6623, Upper Mt. Gravatt, 4122

Ph: (07) 3167 8333 Fax: (07) 3167 8322

Email: tccs@health.qld.gov.au

web site at www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/qtmhc/

Works in partnership with mental health services, can provide cultural information, mental health information, referral, advice and clinical consultation if needed. TCCS is a state-wide service

■ Refugee and Immigration and Community Legal Service (RAILS)

Level 1/170 Boundary St, West End Qld 4101

Ph: (07) 3846 3189 Fax: (07) 3844 3073

Web: www.rails.org.au

RAILS specialises in immigration and refugee law, as well as dealing with general law matters. Free evening advice sessions are held every Monday and Wednesday from 6.30 to 8.30 pm. Useful interactive web pages to guide people through legal questions they may have.

■ Multicultural Development Association Inc. (MDA)

512 Stanley St, South Brisbane 4101

Ph: (07) 3337 5400 Fax: (07) 3337 5444

Email mailbox.mdabne.org.au

Can provide settlement support, information, advice and referral on settlement related issues. MDA can provide contacts for similar settlement services in regional Queensland.

■ Multilink

38 Blackwood Rd, Woodridge 4114

Ph: (07) 3808 4463 Fax: (07) 3808 6337

Email: info@multilink.org.au

Services include settlement support, interpreting and language support, bi-cultural language support workers, a Multicultural playgroup, homework club, individual counselling, family mediation and recreational support for the southside of Brisbane.



If refugee students do display any of these signs and symptoms, it may be useful to keep a special eye on them.

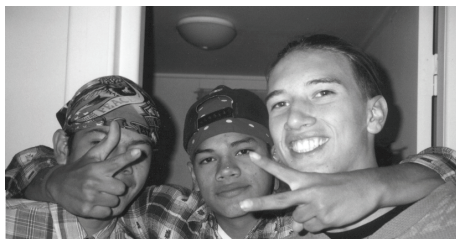
In determining whether these students are in need of extra help, or even a referral to the school guidance officer, school health nurse or chaplain, the following questions may assist teachers (adapted from Transact, 1997):

- How long has the student been in Australia? (There will usually be an Initial settlement phase).
- How does the student relate with other students?
- Do the student's experiences of life prior to living in Australia find expression through play, art or acting?
- Does the student have difficulty in remembering daily activities, routines or tasks?
- Does the student appear to experience mood swings?
- Is the student able to concentrate on a set task?
- Does the student appear frightened or fidgety?
- Are there any recurrent themes in the student's drawings?
- What are the student's strengths? (eg. coping mechanisms, abilities or interests).
- What is the severity of the symptoms and how long have they persisted?

WAYS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS AT SCHOOL

Most of the support strategies that teachers can use with refugee students can be easily integrated into normal school and classroom activities. Extra attention to social integration, in addition to classroom performance, can be of significant assistance (adapted from Save the Children, 1991):

- Assist the student to integrate into school life
- Provide the student with appropriate responsibilities – this improves self confidence and may reduce disciplinary problems
- Provide opportunities for the student to develop close relationships with other students
- Teach the student about Australia and Australian culture
- Promote creative and recreational activities
- Strengthen links with the student's family
- Provide opportunities for the student to share their culture and some of their experiences
- Develop a good relationship with the student. This is facilitated by understanding the difficulties experienced by the student, developing trust and regularly talking with the student
- Link the student and their family to additional support systems if needed (see page 13)
- Use professional interpreters if needed, to facilitate good communication with the student's family.



FURTHER ASSISTANCE AND RESOURCES

There are several agencies that can assist in working with refugee students. There are also a number of excellent written resources that may be helpful.

■ Student Services Branch

Education Queensland

Ph: (07) 3237 0815

Can provide advice about enrolment in schools, ESL services, access to TIS services and in-service training for teachers.

■ Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT)

50 Shottery St, Yeronga Ph: (07) 33916677 Fax: (07) 3391 6388

Email admin@qpastt.org.au

Website address www.qpastt.org.au/

Can provide counselling/advocacy, referral, in-service training for teachers, group programs in schools, access for young people to community activities and a homework club for high school students.

■ Refugee Claimants Support Centre (RCSC)

12 Bonython St

Windsor Qld 4030

Ph: (07) 3357 9013 Fax: (07) 3357 9019

Email refugees@ecn.net.au

Web: www.refugees.rg.au

Services are provided to refugee claimants only. These are people whose refugee status have not yet been determined by authorities. RCSC provides a drop in centre, English language classes, emotional support, information and referral, no-interest loans for employment purposes, limited emergency relief, computer skills, and assistance with accommodation, food, employment and health (including dental health).

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Most refugee students would benefit from being made aware of the availability of a school guidance officer, their role and how contact can be made. The school health nurse or chaplain may also be an appropriate referral for emotional support. Teachers are well placed to provide students with this information. Any referral should however consider gender and religious sensitivities.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

The teacher's role can be demanding at the best of times. Working with traumatised students, although rewarding, can add additional challenges to a teacher's workload. Teachers can also be affected emotionally by the trauma experienced by their students.

Sometimes teachers may experience emotional responses that mirror the kind of feelings their students experience. This is called 'vicarious traumatisation'. Such emotional responses can include helplessness, guilt, anger, idealisation, dread and horror, personal vulnerability, and avoidance reactions (VFST 1988). Vicarious traumatisation is an occupational hazard for workers who are in regular, empathic contact with traumatised people.

It is important that teachers seek support and assistance for themselves as early as possible. The resource guide at the rear of this booklet can be of assistance.

CONCLUSION

Teachers, and indeed schools, can be an integral part in the resettlement and recovery process of refugee students. The regular contact and stable environment that teachers can provide refugee students, can greatly contribute to their recovery and prevent the development of long-term problems.

USING INTERPRETERS

The *Queensland Government Languages Services Policy* (MAQ, 1999) states that whenever possible, professional interpreters should be used by Queensland Government agency employees to communicate with persons unable to satisfactorily communicate in English.

The Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) provides both over-the-phone interpreters at short notice and on-site interpreters that are booked a couple of days in advance. It is important to establish language, ethnic and gender preferences for interpreters and to request these from TIS.

The TIS telephone number is 131 450. Telephone interpreters can be accessed 24 hours per day. On-site interpreters should be pre-booked by fax on 1300 654 151 with reasonable notice. Request forms are available from TIS.

TIS will request a client service number for all interpreting jobs. To facilitate the use of TIS, Education Queensland has a centralised client service number that can be used by school staff. **Education Queensland pays for the cost of professional interpreters if the Education Queensland Code is used.** To obtain the client service number, please telephone the School and Commonwealth Resourcing Unit on (07) 3237 0778.

REFERRING STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS FOR COUNSELLING

For many students from refugee backgrounds, seeking help outside the family about emotional matters and/or traumatic past experiences may be unfamiliar. Students may be reluctant to initiate contact with a counsellor because this is a threatening and unfamiliar experience, or they may be unaware of the role of school guidance officers and the type of assistance available.

(continued on page 12)



HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

(from Pickering, 1999)

- Check background of students
- Provide a stable, predictable environment with clear rules and consequences
- Model and encourage relationships that rebuild trust
- Avoid aggressive confrontations
- Prepare students for changes to routine
- Be consistent but considerate
- Observe students playing and interacting with others
- Encourage journal writing and writing in first language, tune into themes
- Ask students about their drawings
- Focus attention and revise frequently
- Give plenty of praise and encouragement for small gains
- Allow breaks to relieve fatigue
- Communicate with the family
- Talk to the school guidance officer, school health nurse or chaplain, or consider referral to QPASTT



HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

(adapted from Pickering, 1999)

- Find out preferred language for communication
- Use professional interpreters to facilitate accurate and appropriate communication, especially during enrolment and in ongoing contact with students' parents/family
- Gently enquire about family background
- Try to find out about the culture
- Arrange first-language buddies and involve the student in peer support
- Ask the school guidance officer for community services that could assist the family
- Link parents with other families of similar background in the school
- Be sensitive to excursions and camps – costs and safety fears may be prohibitive
- Be considerate
- Be pro-active, keep communicating, listen carefully and be supportive
- Be aware that transition times are critical and increase refugee students' vulnerability