

# Research to Practice Series

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### Building a meaningful relationship with young refugees

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This Research to Practice paper issue #28 explores a range of strategies that a youth worker can employ in their practice to build a better relationship with refugee young people.

In Australia, one in four young people is from a refugee or migrant background. These young people are some of the most vulnerable in our community, and they might reasonably be expected to have different complex needs compared with other young people.

Young refugees are not all the same. While some show resilience, others are overwhelmed by life's circumstances. There is no practice model of good youth work that meets the needs of all refugee young people.

This paper outlines some of the critical factors in supporting work with refugee young people. Using interview data, the paper offers insights into the needs of young people, as well as the perceptions of youth workers and the services they use. Central to the paper's argument is the importance of relationships in developing bonds of trust and building practice skills that are responsive and reflective.

# Introduction

Youth workers can play an essential role in supporting the resettlement of refugees and their adjustment to a new society. Youth workers who understand the specific needs of young refugees and the nature of the difficulties they can experience are better placed to help young people in re-establishing a life that is meaningful and worthwhile. The foundation of such an effective intervention is the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and a refugee young person.

A consistent, predictable relationship where the worker is caring, genuine and warm allows the young person's sense of security, value and trust in others to grow.

Refugee young people tend to be remarkably independent, resilient, opinionated and capable of making their own decisions. This should come as no surprise, given the determination and survival skills required to endure the refugee experience. This is not to deny the experience of trauma, but to acknowledge that it is important to learn more about the strategies young people employ to deal with their adverse circumstances. These strategies help them maintain material, psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing and help them sustain and share these strengths.

By recognising these strengths and attributes, our understanding of the adversities experienced within the pre-settlement context can shift from a deficit model of problems and barriers to a strength-based model. Young refugees are, in many ways, well-positioned to thrive after settlement as they are keen to replicate pre-migration networks and deploy existing skill sets.

## Human rights in youth practice

In Australia, human rights are fundamental to contemporary youth work practice. Given the violations that these young refugee people have often experienced, it is paramount that youth workers uphold their rights in every interaction.

We need to rethink the language that outlines the rights of young people in various conventions – the right to asylum, safety, shelter and the right to participate. We can do this using a rights-based approach rather than a needs-based approach. A needs-based approach can entrench dependency upon welfare agencies. In addition, the philosophy of 'needs' fails to acknowledge the right to settle and lead a 'normal' life, which is one of the major concerns for most refugee young people.

## Rights and respect

Young refugees who have been exposed to a continuum of human rights abuse need more than a welfare-driven notion of needs. If we concede that 'normal' life is a right for all, then in resettlement it is time that we move away from a needs model and embrace a rights model.

The youth workers interviewed for this project talked about the importance of 'meeting the young person where they are at', building on the understanding that young people have a range of circumstances, needs and ways of coping.

## Research background

The researcher team conducted interviews with 25 refugee young people and 10 youth workers.

### Young people

- aged 17-25
- from Sudan, Ethiopia, the Congo, Liberia, Burma and Afghanistan
- in Australia from 8 months to five years

### Youth workers

- well regarded by refugee young people
- worked in refugee sector for minimum of 5 years
- service experience: advice, advocacy, housing, mental health, counselling, specific youth service teams

# Building a meaningful relationship

It is common for a young refugee to have experienced first-hand the failure of the adult world to protect him or her. It is not surprising that young refugees who have witnessed or experienced violence have a sense that the world is unsafe. It is 'the place of relationships which defines youth work'.

The young people and youth workers in the research identified the need to build a relationship as being the most fundamental aspect of the support regardless of the nature of the presenting problem or the agency context. Interview data highlighted five primary building blocks that a youth worker can use to develop a meaningful relationship with refugee young people:

- building the connection
- respectful listening
- developing trust
- encouraging participation
- using a strengths-based approach.

## Building the connection

Encountering an adult worker who is caring, warm and has a genuine interest in the wellbeing of the young person, conveys respect and helps restore dignity. It can strengthen their sense of security, value and trust, and rekindle a belief in the capacity of people to be caring and sincere. The young people in the study wanted to feel listened to, heard, responded to and recognised by someone friendly, trustworthy, authentic and respectful.

All the young people described the importance of a relationship where there was time purely to get to know each other, and where youth workers were guided in practice by the young person's story. Young people appreciated interactions in which they felt a sense of genuine care and spoke highly of those youth workers who came across as profoundly attuned and responsive.

"I received a birthday card from my youth worker the other day [even though] I haven't been there for a while ... She didn't give up on me. I could call and talk to her all the time, She was just there to listen ... She is one person I can trust. It made me miss my mum so much; there is no one else like this in my life." (young person)



# Building the connection (cont.)

## Actions

**Recognise the importance of the introduction phase:** Young participants noted that the introduction phase of the relationship is crucial. They observed that youth workers who appear to be real and authentic are often willing to share aspects of their personal self so that connections are made on a person-to-person level. In this way, the traditional boundaries that are essential in youth work are more widespread and encompassing.

"He didn't say 'you poor thing' or anything. He didn't ask me to tell him anything. He just made me feel normal and safe ... I would go to play basketball and he was so patient, just always there. We would shoot hoops and talk [and it would feel] just normal."  
(young person)

**Aim to build a consistent and predictable relationship:** A consistent and predictable relationship where the worker is caring, genuine and warm provides the basis for allowing the young person's sense of security, value, and trust in others to grow.

**Use a flexible and welcoming approach:** They wanted to feel listened to, heard, responded to and recognised by someone friendly, trustworthy, authentic and respectful.

"My youth worker ... was different, she smiled when I walked in ... She walked over to me and introduced herself and said 'welcome'. She made me a coffee, and we talked about the photos on her desk of her family." (young person)

**Meet the young person where they are at:** Build on the understanding that young people have a range of circumstances, needs and ways of coping.

**Perceive them as people and not as their problems:** Embedded in this is an acknowledgement that young refugee people are diverse and are the experts on their worlds. Several youth workers spoke about the need to perceive them as people rather than collapsing their identities into the problems of their lives, something that can be effortlessly done when faced with the enormity of a young person's refugee experience.

"My youth worker ... never doubted that I could cope ... she was interested in me ... So many people just saw me as a problem. We would talk about my problems, but we would talk about other stuff too ... She would always say 'you know your situation best'."  
(young person)

Youth workers consistently identified the relationship with the young person as fundamental to practice, outweighing almost everything else. A relationship enables them to engage in an exchange that enriches the available meanings in any situation and the possible courses of action, without pre-determining either. Building trust is not without its challenges. Several workers noted that reactions from young people could range from caution and suspicion to clinging and extreme dependency.

# Respectful listening

Refugee young people identified respectful listening as a significant element of the process. They were also conscious of the stress involved in having to tell their story over and over.

## Actions

**Take an active role in helping them contextualise and understand the Australian environment:** Young people appreciated workers who took an active role in helping them learn the new context they found themselves in – this was about explaining and showing how things are done in Australia, but also 'modelling' what it was to be an 'Australian'.

"Most workers have no idea what it's like to not have a place to live or to feel so desperate that you have to humiliate yourself ... to receive help ... How many of them would feel comfortable walking into a stranger's office and telling them that you were abused or do not have enough food today?" (youth worker)

**Engage in 'deep listening' that shows value and care for the young person:** This listening allows the young person to have as much control as possible. They should be able to say as little as they like, have a role in saying how much contact they want, and importantly, they need to have control over the depth of the relationship.

"I was working with a 13-year-old girl from the Congo ... [who] was crying continually at school [grieving for] her mother... I explained that her reactions were normal for when you went through a loss ... I explained that her mum wasn't here anymore, but I could listen and I would be here. For the rest of the session we sat quietly and drew.." (youth worker)

**Understand and suppress judgements or evaluations of what is being said:** Speaking respectfully, no matter what they look like, and like they are a young adult, it helps them feel empowered. It is so easy to give off an attitude of 'you poor thing'. Not only is it degrading, but it is also not true. They are stronger than most of us.

**Critically challenge the power dynamics:** For youth workers it was essential to critically challenge the power dynamics in their relationships with refugee young people. They wanted to interrogate the role of expert 'knower' and the authority of professional knowledge - be comfortable with 'not knowing'.

"The person sitting with me has lost everything and I feel a heavy burden to 'fix things' for them ... I ... tell them ... we can work alongside each other ... I tell them they have so much knowledge about their situation and have learnt so much and we can use those skills to help fix the problem at hand." (youth worker)

One of the most important things to realise when interacting with a young refugee is that every encounter has the potential to restore a meaningful connection with another human being. It is the willingness of youth workers to accept the responsibility for a young person's welfare, as communicated to the young person, that is therapeutic..

# Developing trust

Working with young people of refugee background requires an understanding of the historical, political, and social influences, both past and present, that affect their lives on a daily basis. Their pre-arrival experiences are characterised by exposure to violence and loss, by systematic persecution, by human rights violations or forced displacement, and in the immediate term, such experiences shape psychological and social functioning.

## Actions

**Understand the profound impact of trauma:** Persecutory regimes destroy individuals, families and communities by creating a state of terror and chronic alarm; the systematic disruption of necessary and core attachments to families, friends and religious and cultural systems; the destruction of central values of human existence; and the creation of shame and guilt. These actions of the regimes bring about fundamental changes for young people, in their belief systems – about the self, others and the world. Young people develop symptoms and behaviours which are disruptive to everyday functioning and quality of life and deepen the impact of trauma.

"I didn't want to see a social worker. I'm not crazy! But everyone needs a friend and that's what she was to me. We went for walks and she told me to talk about whatever I wanted to." (young person)

**Challenge the dominant approach to caring:** For the young people we interviewed, caring does not involve trying to solve their problems. Caring involves offering individualised attention, unconditional acceptance, non-judgemental listening and emotional support. They used the following words and phrases to express caring: being there for me, staying in touch with me, letting me make hard decisions but guiding me, reaching out to me. The caring provided young people with a sense of safety, support, understanding and warmth. Young people appeared to value this relationship very highly, and many spoke about the connection in terms of friendship and kinship.

**Encourage taking personal responsibility:** Challenge them, hold them accountable for their actions, confront them with the consequences of decisions and set boundaries and limits. Young people felt that "sometimes workers look at you with pity like you are vulnerable and a victim". Young people said they felt comfortable with workers where they did not need to demonstrate and point out their resilience, but it was taken for granted. Young people appreciated youth workers for encouraging them to take personal responsibility by goal setting, planning and achieving, and giving them clear information.

"My youth worker ... gets stuff rolling, she will keep you going, she will make you get stuff done ... it's so helpful because ... if I was on my own I would just get lazy." (young person)

## Developing trust (cont.)

Accept fluctuations in their behaviour: This kind of behaviour may include caution, suspicion, clinginess, dependency, 'testing' the worker and anger. Young people clearly valued a personalised relationship with the youth worker that offers multiple levels of support. In this kind of relationship, the youth worker is emotionally invested, authentic and committed to the welfare of the young person.

The effects of war and state-sanctioned violence destroy not just individuals and families, but whole communities and races who represent a threat to the government or to a group seeking control. These devastating experiences have immediate and long-term consequences that shape psychological and social functioning.

## Encouraging participation

Refugee young people need to be encouraged to participate in decisions that affect their lives. However, they are often considered to be outsiders in their new societies partly through constructions of racial otherness. If programs reinforce young people's image of themselves as passive victims of their circumstances and as passive recipients of services, this may actually make them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Participation, therefore, can be a vital and powerful ingredient in helping refugee young people change their often very negative image of themselves and, in the process, can help to raise their self-esteem.

### Actions

**Involve young people actively as participants:** This can help them value themselves as people who are contributing both to their families and broader society. There seems to be a good reason to believe not only that participation enhances young people's self-esteem and sense of wellbeing, but it is also a vital ingredient for resilience.

"Being involved in the group and meeting other kids was so cool ... Here I made some friends and I can go to the night classes. Being part of something else gives me energy to cope with everything else." (young person)

**Encourage collaborative activities:** When refugee young people value themselves more positively, there are two significant results. Firstly, they have more energy to tackle some of the problems and issues that settlement raises. Secondly, they create bonds with other young people. This often leads to young people looking beyond their own immediate needs and playing a significant role in community development activities.

The trauma associated with the refugee experience challenges young people's understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and their identity formation can be damaged. When trauma has shattered a young person's sense of the world, an important step can be to involve the young person in activities that build trust and identity.

# Strengths-based approach

Young refugees are often discussed in the context of having settlement barriers to overcome and as somehow being limited by their pre-migration experience. Refugee young people tend to focus on language and cultural attributes as barriers to integration. This tendency to problematise language and culture creates deficit assumptions and can lead to neglect of strengths, skills, resilience and agency. However, on the contrary, most of the young people interviewed spoke about the skills they had learnt before arriving in Australia, and several youth workers noted how these skills could be used to provide a platform for social integration.

## Actions

**Draw on young people's strengths and agency:** The main aim of using a strengths-based approach is to shift the power dynamics in favour of the young person. This approach allows them to utilise their existing skill sets as a starting point for successful settlement and enables them to become active agents in their settlement pathways by being able to identify their needs.

"I feel as though people have the solutions to their problems. But they might not know how to go about it and the different systems and different channels to go through so maybe help them along the way." (youth worker)

**Create 'space' for network development:** The focus should not only be to develop 'space' among young people but also with the broader community so that young people can capitalise on their existing social skills and their ability to meet settlement needs through network synergy.

"A young man from Liberia ... [told] me how when he was living in the camps, he had to rely on groups of young people as there were so many things you couldn't do alone like going out bush or hunting ... This young man had great leadership, social and group work skills and ... he was keen to be involved in community networks. He ended up training as a mentor to work with other young refugees." (youth worker)

**Build on the practical skills they bring with them:** Often, refugee young people, have lived in challenging conditions where they have had to learn skills for their survival. These skills are an asset for them and should be used to help them to navigate the challenges that arise during the transition of migration.

"When I was back at the camp it was hard to find water ... [I would] always see the men ... putting things together ... [I used to watch them. It] was amazing how they put the pipes together. [Then] later [I would] try it, you know when they not around. Try to get the water from the pipes. So now I know the job already." (young person)



# Conclusion

In this study, young people and youth workers provided some signposts for future practice with young people of a refugee background. It seems evident that two key components embody this practice – the formation of genuine human relationships which start at a personal level, and engagement in a relationship where hearing and being heard, characterise the interaction.

History has shown us the incredible contribution that migrants from refugee backgrounds can make to our societies. Crucial to a refugee successfully resettling in a new country is their having the opportunity to regain their sense of power or control over life – regaining a sense of self-worth and purpose. Having already demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in the face of enormous difficulties, it would be a substantial loss to society if refugee young people were not given the opportunities to apply their determination and skills in their new home.

While traditional interventions have focused on enabling the individual to deal with their immediate crisis in order to heal, and to be able to function in and contribute to society; the youth work relationship actively engages with the young person and their communities.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' model for the support of refugee young people, but implementation of participatory, strength-based approaches will ensure that the emphasis remains on the empowerment of young people and on helping them build lives that are based on self-reliance and dignity.



# About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) at the Australian Catholic University aims to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families through quality research, evaluation, training and community education.

ICPS research strengths include promoting children's participation, strengthening service systems and informing practice, and supporting child-safe communities.

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