Discussion Paper

The impact of migration and dramatic life experiences on a child’s emotional and social development and how we can create respectful and supportive services within this context

Developed by
Gudrun Benjamin & Liz Turpin

We would like to thank PSC NT and RUCSN for their support in developing and presenting this paper
Abstract

This paper examines the effect of migration and traumatic life experiences (with particular reference to people from non English speaking backgrounds) on a child’s social and emotional development during early childhood and looks at the role of child care services in providing appropriate, responsive services and support to those children and families affected.
Introduction

Contemporary society is experiencing unprecedented levels of global migration. Between 1985 and 2005, the number of international migrants in industrialised countries more than doubled, with cities such as Sydney, Moscow, London, Hong Kong, Dubai and Chicago each registering more than a million foreign born residents.¹

Not surprisingly, the direct and indirect impacts on those people migrating and those communities receiving new arrivals, is profound. This is especially true of young children who are the most vulnerable to the effects of migration, and yet they are often the least visible and, often, the least considered when developing or providing services.

The exact number of young children directly affected by migration is unknown however estimates provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees suggest that children under the age of 5 make up approximately 11%, and children aged 6-17 make up around 32% of those in forced migration and asylum seekers (Adams, 2008).

Research conducted suggests that immigrant children are often at increased risk of poor development outcomes, with three and four year old children in immigrant families less likely, than children in native born families, to participate in early childhood programmes that could compensate for some of the risk factors.²

A number of immigrant parents choose to have family members caring for their children but other reasons for lack of participation in early childhood programs include limited awareness of early childhood care and education options, language and cultural barriers and a reluctance to interact with those in authority.

¹ UNESCO policy brief on early childhood no 43/ April-September 2008 - The impact of global migration on the education of young children
While global awareness and acknowledgement of the value of early childhood care and education is increasing, and continues to be supported by research, further development is needed to ensure that early childhood staff and services are equipped with adequate resources, information and training, to recognise and respond to areas of concern and allow services to confidently provide appropriate levels of support and intervention.

The Importance of Early Childhood Care and Development

Scientific research has established the importance of promoting healthy development during the early years and demonstrates that an integrated approach to early childhood care and development can help to prevent or reduce the impact of developmental problems, bringing lasting benefits to individuals and society.

Evidence continues to accumulate from many disciplines such as pedagogy, physiology, nutrition, psychology, sociology and other fields, showing that the early years are critical in the development of intelligence, personality and social behaviour. Research has shown that children are generally born with the social, physical and psychological capacity to learn, develop and communicate, but if these capacities are not recognised and supported they will wither rather than develop.

Experiences in early childhood affect children’s brain, cognitive and behavioural development. The pre-school years are critical for the structuring of neural connections and the definition of a child’s capacities. This process is affected by a child’s nutritional and health status as well as the type of interaction the child has with the people and things in his or her environment.

Research indicates that young children who receive consistent, caring attention are better nourished, less prone to be sick, learn better and, later in life, develop healthier relationships than children who do not receive such care.
Clearly, the key relationships formed early in a child’s development, including family, friends and other formal/informal associations, become the principle source of opportunity to nurture healthy physical, emotional and cognitive growth.

Access to appropriate early childhood services and support offers a vital opportunity to provide positive interventions for children and families who may otherwise be at risk.

**The Potential Effects of Migration/Traumatic Events on Children**

People choose to leave their country of origin for various reasons. The decision to leave may occur as a result of intentional decision making, choice and careful preparation or as a result of circumstances requiring immediate departure where the only choice is life or death.

Irrespective of their reasons for leaving their country of origin, migrant families, especially those from non English speaking backgrounds, face similar challenges and potential barriers, namely the pressure to find accommodation and employment, learn a new language and the possibility of facing bias, discrimination, rejection, marginalisation, isolation or even indifference.

This information is supported by data collected from a recent consultation pilot project commissioned by the Northern Territory Government, which looked at the settlement experience of humanitarian migrants from Africa. The survey found that migrants rated the following factors as the most difficult part of their experience; finding work, learning English, access to housing and access to affordable housing, accessing and understanding health services, childcare, maintaining traditional culture and family life, homesickness and understanding Australian culture. The least difficulty rating was having enough money.
People migrating under humanitarian or refugee status experience any or all of the generic challenges, but with additional complications arising from having been exposed to a range of traumatic experiences, some of which may have resulted in emotional or even physical damage. For these particular families, the resettlement process is often referred to as “secondary trauma” to highlight the specific problems they face.

A number of those migrating under these circumstances will have spent time in Detention Centres on their arrival, some staying for considerable periods of time. Research into the impact of prolonged confinement /in Detention Centres has shown that the experience has a detrimental effect, not only on individual adults and children, but on the family process itself.

“Immigration detention profoundly undermines the parental role, renders the parent impotent and leaves the child without protection or comfort in already unpredictable surroundings where basic needs for safe play and education are unmet”. (Mares et al, 2002).

The kinds of events frequently experienced, either directly or indirectly, by people resettling under refugee and humanitarian status can include;

- Imprisonment and torture
- Witnessing of death squads and mass murder
- Disappearances
- Forced marches
- Persistent and long term political repression, deprivation of human rights and persecution
- Removal of shelter, forced displacement from home
- Separation from family members
- Sexual assault and rape
- Becoming fugitives in their own country
The psychological consequences of such experiences will vary from person to person, but may include any or all of the following:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Panic
- Sleep disorders
- Survivor guilt
- Homesickness
- Anger

The emotions frequently associated with these states can include:

- Grief and loss
- Loss of future
- Sensitivity to injustice
- Identity shattered
- Diminished capacity to trust
- Moral concepts affected
- Dislocation from culture and tradition

### Possible Effects on the Family Unit

Unfortunately, survivors of traumatic experiences are rarely affected in isolation. Other family members frequently become unintentional recipients of the consequences of these experiences. Young children, at a crucial stage of cognitive, emotional and physical development, are especially vulnerable, having limited cognitive resources with which to deal with traumatic events. Situations of extreme stress become an integral part of their development. Without appropriate support and intervention, these children are more likely to develop chronic behavioural and emotional problems that will remain with them throughout childhood and are almost certain to follow them into adulthood.

---

3 Pages Oliver and Clapton: *Cultural Diversity in Family Therapy*, 2008

---
The effects of traumatic experiences may impact on the family unit in the following ways:

- Roles and responsibilities are often dramatically altered
- There may be extreme disturbances in parents’ behaviour, such as violence
- Children may be taught not to trust anyone
- If parents have been the victims or witness to acts of violence, it can be difficult for them to be emotionally available and responsive to their children.

The Role of the Child Care Service

Early childhood services are well placed to offer positive, satisfying and meaningful experiences and opportunities for learning and development. Provided with care and skill, these can have a profound effect on both the child and his/her family, offering benefits, not just for the present, but with the potential to impact well into the future. This is especially so for children considered to be “at risk”.

Supportive environments that foster strong relationships with emotionally important adults, especially mothers, have been shown to assist in triggering a child’s inherent strengths and self-righting capacity. The developing child remains open to protective influences throughout the early years, and resilience grows from a combination of positive early relationships, the modelling of active coping strategies and community support and encouragement. (Jackson, D, 2006)

Early childhood services and staff are not expected to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to provide professional counselling and/or intervention, nor should they attempt to replace the many community based and private services that can be accessed for these purposes. However, as one of the major opportunities outside of the family for learning and development (and often the first), child care services are in an ideal position to support migrant children and their families to identify areas of concern, provide information/contacts that may be of assistance and facilitate the process of relationship building and community integration.
Skilled and experienced workers will appreciate that providing a responsive service to migrant children who have experienced traumatic events does not require special or even, different services - the basic elements of a quality early childhood service are applicable for all children, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Perhaps the greatest gift we can give all children, and especially those at risk, is the opportunity to begin a new life in a safe, nurturing environment that will allow them to discover their full potential.

However, to ensure our early childhood services are responsive to the needs of migrant children and their families, we must demonstrate an appreciation and willingness to learn and understand. To ensure that the challenges and barriers already faced are not unintentionally reinforced or increased by our action or inaction.

- Create a warm and welcoming physical environment
- Embrace/promote diversity as part of everyday programming and activities
- Encourage and promote positive learning opportunities and experiences
- Be prepared to adjust activities where these may cause distress to a particular child or his/her family, perhaps due to prior experiences
- Communicate regularly with the child’s family/caregiver to build trust.
- Cultivate an environment that encourages openness, honesty and a willingness to learn about each other’s lives and experiences
- Demonstrate concern and respect for children and their families by listening and responding swiftly to issues of concern
- Respect privacy and confidentiality
- Be alert to small changes that may indicate something is wrong.
- Attend relevant training and development courses to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills.
- Recognise your limitations - know when to refer on. Keep information and contacts on supports available should these be required.
The Role and Response of Bicultural Inclusion Support Services (BISS)

BISS provides support to Children Services in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We believe an appropriate response to the current capacity and strengths of child care service staff is the sharing of strategies that educate and build capacity of child care staff, and in turn, families.

The methodological foundation of the support is an integration of the relevant disciplines – Pedagogy, Early Childhood Development, English as a Second Language Development, Inclusive Pedagogy. These methodologies are being translated into strategies guiding child care staff through, from the beginning to the end of the inclusion process - enrolment, settling in, maintaining a culturally inclusive environment.

The framework for developing, implementing and evaluating what we believe is a best practise approach is based on a multi-level tactic that encompasses all stages of inclusion of children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) and Indigenous background:

1. Before the child starts the first day of child care these things should be in place:
   a) Family and community collaboration to enhance connectivity
   b) Enrolment
      a. Preparing the child
      b. Knowing about the family and child
      c. Working out a plan with the family

2. The First Day and Beyond –

Best practice to enhance settling in on the first day, and beyond includes:
   a) Welcome routine/Ceremony
   b) English as a Second Language Development
   c) Making your routines and activities inclusive
   d) Communicating with families throughout this period
3. To maintaining a culturally inclusive service attention should be paid to the following:

a) A multicultural appeal. This includes what your service could look like, i.e. the environment

b) How you communicate to CaLD and indigenous families, such as building communication systems

c) Training and educating staff in what they need to know and do

d) Ongoing Multicultural Programming and review of your materials and resources

e) Values based learning
Some Resources - Northern Territory

The following resources offer a variety of support and information ranging from documents, research papers and general information/referrals to counselling.

Aboriginal Interpreter Service : Alice Springs
Telephone: 08 8951 5576

Aboriginal Interpreter Service: Darwin
Telephone: 08 8999 8353

Anglicare Top End
Providing settlement services to refugees
CentreLink (for non English speakers) 131202

Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia
Ph: 02 6282 5755
Website: www.fecca.org.au

Centacare NT
Ph: 08 89442033
Email: Darwin@centacare.nt.org.au

Interpreting and Translating Service NT
FREECALL 1800 676 254

Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission
Level 6, National Mutual building, 9-11 Cavenagh Street, DARWIN NT 0800 J
(08) 8999 3000

RUCSN / PSC NT
1800 138 662 or (08) 8947 4512

Somerville Community Services Inc
Ph: 08 89204100

The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory
The peak community advocacy body in the Northern Territory representing the interests, concerns and aspirations of people of Non English Speaking Background and aiding the settlement of refugees.

Torture and Trauma Survivors Service of the Northern Territory
Address: 1 Phoenix Street, Nightcliff, NT 0810, Telephone: 08 8985 3311
References


Braveman, P et al: Early Childhood Experiences: Laying the foundation for health across a lifetime, issue brief, June 2008, commissionhealth.org, accessed 14/10/08


Early Childhood Care and Development, pp1-7 (Author unknown),www.iadb.org, accessed 14/10/08


Pages -Oliver, J & Clapton S: Cultural Diversity in Family Therapy, William St Relationship and Family Therapy Training Manual, 2008-10-21

REPP OSHLSP Tutor Training – Presenter notes (Author unknown), accessed14/10/08