

Framework for Supporting Children from Refugee Backgrounds



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1. Rationale

In general, students from refugee backgrounds have greater educational and support needs than most other newly arrived migrant students.

Students from refugee backgrounds are highly likely to be disadvantaged when attending school in Australia. In addition to traumatic experiences of war and displacement, they may lack English language and have had limited schooling. While parental support is important to a child's education, many parents from refugee backgrounds have themselves had little access to schooling. They are unfamiliar with the Australian school system, may have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and their English language may be limited. They may feel unable to help their children with schoolwork.

Resettlement support is critical in enabling children from refugee backgrounds to overcome the impacts of trauma and adjust to life in Australia. Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School has a

responsibility to ensure that appropriate support is provided to meet their educational and welfare needs.

Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School is committed to providing equitable access and opportunity for all children. Awareness of, recognition of, and response to the needs and rights of all individuals are essential to human dignity. These are also essential elements of the Catholic identity of the School. The school's inclusive practices embrace and celebrate diversity, invite belonging and provide opportunities for participation and achievement of appropriate learning outcomes.¹

2. A Life Fully Lived

At the heart of our learning and teaching process is the child and how he or she may come into the fullness of their own unique self. A fundamental belief at Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School is that Jesus is seen in God's image and likeness in its human expression, and that Jesus' life and teachings show all people 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14:6).

In accordance with this belief, our School's Core Values underpin all that we do:

Mercy: We act with kindness and with a heart full of love.

Compassion: We seek to understand the needs of others and are willing to help them.

Justice: We treat everyone fairly, recognising that each individual has both rights and responsibilities.

Respect: We value the sacredness and dignity of each person.

Excellence: We strive to be the very best we can possibly be.

It is these values that guide the development of our strategy to support children from refugee backgrounds.

Through immersion in a safe, inclusive and positive learning culture we seek to lead children from a refugee background to develop awe and wonder about the world and a deeply held sense of personal responsibility for self, others and all creation. We will seek to encourage them to act as agents of change and be confident that they can contribute to the greater good.

Our dream for each child from a refugee background is a *life fully lived*².

3. School Context

Good Samaritan Primary School has large population of children from refugee backgrounds. 593 children representing 80% of all enrolled students are of Iraqi heritage with either the children themselves and/or their parents having had a refugee experience. This population is growing all the time as current families sponsor relatives to come to Australia. It is anticipated that large numbers of the new intake of refugees from Syria will be of Christian/Catholic background and will be moving into the Roxburgh Park region, making it likely that numbers of refugee background students at the school will continue to increase.

4. Background

4.1 Definition

The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." UNHCR, 2016

There is a range of visa classes that people with refugee experiences may hold.

¹ F6 Framework for Promoting Student Engagement and Positive Student Behaviour, Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School, 2016

² 6.1 Lives Fully Lived: School Strategic Plan 2016 -2020, Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School, 2016

The most common visa classes in the Humanitarian Program are: Refugee – 200, Refugee (In-Country Special Humanitarian) – 201, Refugee (Emergency Rescue) – 203, Refugee (Woman at Risk) – 204, Special Humanitarian Program – 202.

Some people may be seeking asylum in Australia and be holding a bridging visa that allows them to remain in Australia while they apply for a permanent protection visa. These people will be under enormous stress as their future is uncertain and they may have only limited work, health, and education entitlements in Australia.

4.2 The Refugee Experience

The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme defines the refugee experience as: exposure to political, religious or inter-cultural violence persecution or oppression, armed conflict or civil discord that incorporates the following basic elements:

- a state of fearfulness for self and family members,
- leaving the country at short notice and without choice,
- inability to return to the country of origin, and
- uncertainty about the possibility of maintaining links with family and home.³

When children from refugee backgrounds settle in Australia, they have a range of needs because they have suffered the trauma of persecution and displacement. Their pre-settlement experiences may include denial of human rights, forced separation from families, witnessing family members being tortured or killed, exposure to violence, physical and sexual abuse, illness and exploitation.

Children from refugee backgrounds have often experienced major disruptions to their education due to social upheaval in their country of origin and periods of displacement in refugee camps. Such children and young people have little experience of a classroom or school environment. Incidental learning may also have been hampered through years of impoverished conditions and lack of stimulation.

4.3 The Settlement Experience

Children from refugee backgrounds are affected by many issues of the past while they adjust to a new country, culture, language and school environment. Complex settlement issues may also affect a student's ability to settle in at school.

The past experiences of children from refugee backgrounds have a profound impact on their school education. In addressing some of their needs, it is important to that the School addresses two important areas: student learning and psycho-social reaction to trauma.

There are many ways in which trauma and stress resulting from the refugee experience can manifest itself, including:

- anxiety and fear
- re-experiencing traumatic events through nightmares and flashbacks
- withdrawal and emotional numbing
- disconnection from others, over self- sufficiency and avoidance of close relationships
- anxious attachment where children remain fearful of losing people who are important to them
- sensitivity to failure and a diminishing sense of self-efficacy and self-worth
- loss of feelings of safety, a loss of trust in others, anger and a negative view of the future
- unjustified feelings of shame and guilt as a result of exposure to violence by others.⁴

³ *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist refugee young people in transition to independence*, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, 2002

⁴ *School's In for Refugees: A Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness*, Foundation House The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc., 2016

5. Meeting The Needs Of Children From Refugee Backgrounds

5.1 Knowing and Understanding the Child

Most refugee-background children and young people will have been subjected to, or have witnessed, horrifying and traumatic events. All will have experienced some degree of loss of home, place and culture, as well as the profound losses of parents, siblings, friends and significant others through death or separation.

Refugee-background children and young people will also have endured a level of change unprecedented in the lives of most of their Australian-born counterparts. Adaptations to school must be taken into account when considering the impact of trauma, as these effects also contribute to the overall development and wellbeing of the individual. The developmental impact of pre-arrival and settlement experiences will depend on the nature and extent of exposure to traumatic events; the age of the child at the time of maximum disruption to life; the degree to which the family has remained intact; the quality of the post-trauma environment; and the opportunities for recovery.

Specific effects of the refugee experience on children and young people can include anxiety and fear, re-experiencing traumatic events, fluctuations of emotions and behaviours, disruption to connections with people, impact of isolation and separation, impacts on self-concept and perceptions of the world, shame and guilt.

Refugee-background students at Good Samaritan School may have:

- little or no formal schooling experience prior to arrival in Australia
- disrupted and/or unpredictable learning opportunities
- little or no literacy and numeracy skills in their first language
- greater proficiency in oral language than written language
- received schooling in a language other than their first language
- been exposed to very different learning environments and styles from those in Australia
- had limited access to basic school resources such as books, pens and desks
- moved regularly between schools in Australia
- past trauma or health issues that may be impacting on learning
- no parent or family support to assist with challenges.

Adaptation to school may be particularly difficult for those students who have had limited or no school experience. These students may be facing the intellectual and behavioural requirements of a structured learning environment for the first time. These new challenges must be taken into account when considering the impact of trauma, as their effects also contribute to the overall development and wellbeing of the individual.

At Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School we recognise that the effects of the refugee experience are not time bound, but may be life long. Therefore, it is important that children from refugee backgrounds receive targeted support throughout all their years of schooling so that they are afforded every opportunity for a successful and life-giving education.

5.2 Establishing a Positive Learning Environment

Trauma is the emotional, psychological and physiological residue left over from heightened stress that accompanies experiences of threat, violence, and life-challenging events.⁵ Trauma can impact on all elements of children's development.

The capacity of traumatised children and young people to learn is significantly compromised. Their neurobiology is stressed. Their relationships can feel unstable. Their emotional state is in flux. They find it difficult to stay calm or regain a state of calm if they feel distressed or perturbed. Change is perceived as dangerous. Their memory is under pressure. They are disconnected from themselves

⁵ Making Space for Learning, Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010

and time. Their behaviour rules them. New experiences and new information carry with them elements of threat and uncertainty. Children and young people who have experienced toxic levels of stress and trauma find the demands of the school environment extremely challenging to navigate and benefit from.

Foundation House⁶ identifies four recovery goals that address the core effects of traumatic experiences that children from refugee backgrounds may have experienced. These are to restore:

- a sense of safety and control that has been undermined by effects of anxiety and fear
- attachment and connections to others, which have been lost as a result of prolonged isolation and separation from loved ones
- meaning and purpose and a sense of future after these concepts have been undermined by a loss of faith of a safe and secure world
- dignity and value to address a sense of guilt and shame over making impossible choices or being unable to act.

The overarching goal is to create a learning environment within which children from a refugee background can maximise their potential for learning and growth and recover from the effects of trauma.

Traumatised and stressed children and young people have little space left for learning. Their constant state of tension and arousal can leave them unable to concentrate, pay attention, retain and recall new information. Their behaviour is often challenging in the school environment.

The consequences of trauma on children and young people are multiple, yet they are not well understood. These children are often labelled as disruptive, defiant and poor learners at high risk of disconnecting from school.

With support, children can, and do, recover from the harmful effects of trauma. To do so, however, they need adults in their lives to be understanding of and responsive to their unique needs. They cannot easily adapt and change to their environment. Their environment and the people in it must adjust to help them. These children need the space to learn to be created for them by those who care for and support them.

Children are only able to learn within a context of safety and security. School staff who interact with children from refugee backgrounds have an enormous opportunity to effect major change. Refugee-background children may not necessarily require clinical support; they require adults who can extend vital relational skills and a learning environment that provides the safety and security for these relationships to be sustained.

Children who have been traumatised unconsciously do the same thing over and over.⁷ They give other people in their environment certain cues for behavior that will induce an outcome similar to the original trauma. Then, when people around them act in the way they have been cued, the child is retraumatised. Children who have been profoundly rejected will evoke rejection in others. Children who have tried to defend themselves against threat with hostility, will evoke hostility from others. The role of the school staff therefore, is to engage with the children so as to understand the motivation of their actions and then change the direction of the behaviour, redirect the traumatic scenario so that the trauma is not repeated. If the members of each classroom and the members of the school community can begin to function in this way, the group itself can become the agent for change for the child from a refugee background. This can only occur within a context of safety and trust.

⁶ *School's In for Refugees: A Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness*, Foundation House The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc., 2016

⁷ Bloom, S.L, *Sanctuary in the Classroom*, Journal for a Just and Caring Education (4): 403-433, October, 1996

6. A Strategic Approach to Supporting Children from Refugee Backgrounds

6.1 Strategy Elements

Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School has established a whole of school strategic response to supporting children from refugee backgrounds. Our trauma informed practice supports an emphasis on making the school space – its routines, its relationships and its activities in and around our students – facilitative and flexible to the needs of all children, but in particular those who are affected by the consequences of trauma and stress.

The strategy encompasses five interconnected elements:

6.1.1 Support for Students

The School is committed to ensuring:

- Effective school enrolment and orientation processes are available to ensure that children from refugee backgrounds are supported in their transition to school.
- That all school policies and practices are effective in identifying and addressing the needs of children from refugee backgrounds.
- That data on the wellbeing and educational needs of children from refugee backgrounds informs the development of personalised learning support approaches.

6.1.2 Support for Students' Families

Parental and community involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour. Family involvement can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family.

Good communication must occur if school staff and parents are to reach a mutual understanding of the expectations and needs of both parties. Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School can not rely on the same engagement strategies for all parent/carer groups, without including targeted strategies to suit the specific needs of families from refugee backgrounds.

The School is committed to:

- Guaranteeing enrolment for families from refugee backgrounds who seek a place for their child at Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School.
- Providing direct access and/or referral to counseling services for parents and family members.
- Providing inclusive processes for communicating with parents and carers of children from refugee backgrounds
- Providing interpreting and translating services to parents of students as requested, and as standard practice for processes such as parent/teacher interviews and information nights.

6.1.3 Support for School School Staff

Therefore, the School is committed to:

- Developing the understanding of all staff of the impact of trauma on children from refugee backgrounds, so that they are able to respond effectively to the learning and welfare needs of children from refugee backgrounds.

6.1.4 Partnerships with Agencies

The School is committed to:

- Working with appropriate government agencies and community based services to support newly arrived children from refugee backgrounds and their families.
- Identifying and establishing partnerships with community based services in the City of Hume which can support families from refugee backgrounds.
- Working with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd and Catholic Education Melbourne to support newly arrived children from refugee backgrounds and their families.

6.1.5 A Nurturing Learning Environment

Therefore, the School is committed to:

- A safe and nurturing learning environment that is sensitive to the need of children from refugee backgrounds, by providing a safe and healing environment for children who need to recover from the effects of trauma.
- Providing a physical environment that is designed to be conducive to positive behaviours and effective engagement in learning including: internal and external withdrawal spaces, small group learning spaces, calm rooms and safe zones.

6.1.6 Advocacy

The School is committed to:

- Acting, speaking or writing to promote, protect and defend the rights of families from refugee backgrounds.