

Supporting students from refugee backgrounds

What schools can do



Students from a refugee background and their families often arrive in Australia with high expectations about schooling and education. Many bring a range of skills and capacities and most have survived extraordinary life experiences.

In the early stages of settlement they may have greater educational and support needs than newly arrived migrant students. Refugees have usually escaped from war or civil unrest, have experienced trauma and in some cases torture, have lost family members and have often spent long periods in refugee camps.

Many children and young people from refugee backgrounds have had disrupted or no education prior to arrival in Australia. Some have no literacy skills in their first language. In addition students may have health problems, including mental health problems as a result of their experiences. School-aged refugee students generally require high levels of support to enable them to settle successfully in school, to learn English and to acquire academic literacy in order to access the full curriculum.

Schools receive resources to provide targeted support for recently arrived refugee students. They are required to plan and report on how they use these to improve outcomes for refugee students.

The strategies each school develops will depend on the number of refugee students enrolled, student needs, the EAL/D program model being implemented and other programs and strategies the school has in place to support the learning and wellbeing of all students.

This document aims to assist schools in:

- understanding the needs of refugee students
- planning strategies and targeted programs for refugee students
- accessing resources and planning professional learning for staff
- making links with community organisations that support refugee students and families.

A coordinated school response

A coordinated response to supporting refugee students is important because many refugee students will have educational, physical, social and emotional needs. This response should be coordinated by executive staff and key personnel.

This starts during the enrolment interview when data should be collected about visa status, prior experiences of schooling and current wellbeing. If there is insufficient time during the enrolment process to collect required information, schools will need to gather the information as soon as possible following enrolment. Staff facilitating the enrolment must be aware of both the type of information required and the reasons for collecting it.

This information can assist schools in identifying the support needed by students. Most refugee students will require EAL/D teaching support. Others may require additional learning support.

Information about a students' prior schooling, English language proficiency and literacy and numeracy levels can alert the school to any need for modifications to school routines, programming and assessment practices, additional learning support, curriculum options and professional learning needed

by teachers about effective pedagogy and differentiated teaching and learning strategies.

Most refugee students will need support from the school counsellor; some may need referral for specialist trauma counselling. School counsellors can make referrals and access professional support from STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors).

A coordinated school response should consider specific strategies targeting the educational, physical, social and emotional wellbeing of refugee students such as those listed below.

Emotional wellbeing

- build a sense of safety, belonging and acceptance by making students and their families feel welcome in the school
- allow time and support to build trusting relationships and adjust to the new country
- assist students in understanding and coming to terms with the impacts of ongoing grief and trauma

Educational support

- intensive English language support
- support to develop literacy and numeracy skills; curriculum concepts
- bilingual support
- first language maintenance through community language classes
- learning programs to 'bridge the gaps' caused by disrupted schooling
- explicit instruction about expectations in relation to schooling, learning and discipline in Australia
- opportunities to develop social skills and strategies in classroom learning activities
- structured lessons that support learning by making expectations explicit, (including social rules, behaviours, class work, homework and assignments)

Social support

- inclusion of students in peer support strategies
- school social activities that support participation of refugee students
- classroom strategies that promote and support cooperative learning
- linking to community organisations, resources and support
- referral to agencies for support in family settlement needs.

Physical

- monitor ongoing physical wellbeing of students

- health screening through GPs or refugee health clinics
- information and advice about nutrition, dental health, hygiene
- referral to support agencies and service providers when remediable physical injuries or conditions continue
- adjustments to school equipment during rehabilitation programs for injuries or for permanent disabilities.

Schools should use existing structures e.g. the learning and support team to coordinate this support.

A personalised approach to planning support for refugee students ensures that appropriate support is provided and relevant information about individual students is provided to teachers and other staff.



Professional learning for staff

Assisting refugees to settle into life in Australia can be a complex and long-term process. Teachers can make a significant contribution by being aware of refugee students' strengths and needs and adapting to these over time. All staff should seek out opportunities for professional learning about teaching EAL/D and refugee students.

Information about professional learning and resources available for schools can be found at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/curriculum/multicultural-education>

Enrolling refugee students

The enrolment of refugee students as soon as possible after their arrival in Australia is critical for their successful settlement. The structures and routines associated with attending school and the relationships formed with staff and students can be a stable and positive influence on them at this time.

Enrolment provides the first opportunity to welcome refugee students into the school. A positive experience of enrolment will help new students and their families feel welcome and connected to their new community.

To enable the collection of relevant information on enrolment and appropriate assessment of students' needs, it is suggested that a nominated staff member, such as an EAL/D teacher or member of the school welfare team be involved in enrolling refugee students.

Strategies for enrolment

- Make sure an interpreter is available, if required. If necessary use telephone interpreting and book an interpreter for another day. Advice on interpreter services is available on the department's multicultural education pages: <https://detwww.det.nsw.edu.au/multicultural-education>
- If this is the student's first enrolment in a NSW government school, assist the family to fill out the Application to enrol in a NSW government school form. Explain the purpose of the form. Remember that this form, translated into a range of languages, can be downloaded from the Department's website: <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/>
- Make contact with the family's case manager and get their contact details to assist in communicating with the family.
- Ensure key school personnel, e.g. the school counsellor, an EAL/D teacher and welfare coordinator are informed when a refugee student is enrolling. A staff member may be nominated to assist in enrolment of refugee students, such as an EAL/D teacher or member of the school welfare team. Arrange for them to meet and greet the new student and family if possible.
- Ensure other relevant information about a student's background, interests and talents, family situation and previous education is collected to inform the development of the student's individual learning plan. Show sensitivity when asking questions—refugee students and their families may not feel safe providing personal information until they have developed a trusting relationship with school personnel.
- Provide information about the school in first language if possible. This could include details of the uniform, bell times, activities, school rules and expectations, staff, homework and support provided for students.

Provide an orientation to school

Enrolling in a primary school in Australia is for many refugee students their first experience of schooling. These students need a good orientation program to support their transition to school - to make them feel safe and help them understand the routines and expectations of schooling in Australia.

In high schools in metropolitan Sydney, most high school aged refugee students will have already attended an intensive English program before enrolling at high school. Nevertheless their transition to mainstream high school may be a period in which they need intensive support. It is important to provide them with a good orientation to high school to make them feel safe and welcome and help them understand the routines and expectations about learning and behaviour.

Strategies for orientation

- Provide information about the school, in first language if possible. This could include information about uniform, bell times, learning activities, school rules and expectations, school staff, homework and assessment practices.
- Ensure students and families/guardians are provided with information about support available for students, e.g. English as an additional language (EAL) teaching support, homework and tutorial support, help with uniforms and equipment, financial support to enable students to participate in excursions and other school activities, if needed.
- Provide basic information about school routines as well as a school map and a timetable. It is important to recognise that for some refugee students, this may be their first experience of schooling. They may have no previous experience of school expectations and of reading and interpreting timetables and maps. Such students will need a highly scaffolded introduction to school routines and expectations.
- Provide an orientation program for students to assist them in understanding school routines, practices and expectations.
- Provide the student with a 'buddy', preferably who speaks their first language. The buddy will need to be shown how to help the new student.
- Identify a staff member who new students can approach for assistance, e.g. an EAL/D or classroom teacher, a year adviser or stage coordinator or welfare teacher. It is important to assign this role to a person who is at school every day and can be easily located at any time.
- Consider providing students with a basic stationery pack on enrolment and explaining the

need to bring basic school equipment to school, such as exercise books, pens, pencils and ruler.

- Offer assistance with uniforms and equipment - many refugee families may struggle to provide new shoes and other uniform items for all their children on enrolment. Refugee families may find it difficult to buy expensive equipment, e.g. calculators and laptops.

Provide coordinated learning support

Assessing the initial learning needs of refugee students and monitoring their progress requires input from a variety of school personnel such as the EAL/D teacher(s), school counsellor, school learning support officer (Ethnic), year adviser or stage coordinator and student welfare coordinator. This is best coordinated through the school learning and support team.

Collecting information about a student's background and life experiences, family situation, health, wellbeing and interests and talents can help the school to plan appropriate support. Information about a student's English language proficiency, literacy and numeracy levels and prior schooling can alert the school to any need for modifications to school routines, programming and assessment practices, additional learning support programs, curriculum options and professional learning needed by teachers about the impact of refugee experiences on learning, effective pedagogy and strategies for differentiating teaching and learning.



Support students to learn English as an additional language

Refugee students with disrupted or limited education usually require EAL/D and literacy support and may take longer to achieve curriculum content and language outcomes than other EAL/D students as they may not have the curriculum content knowledge or literacy skills in their first language on which to build new knowledge.

Resources to provide English as an Additional Language programs are provided to primary schools, high schools and Intensive English Centres to support the English language learning of EAL/D students, including refugees. Refugee students receive a higher level of resourcing than other EAL/D students in recognition of their generally limited previous education and greater need for support.

Newly arrived non-English speaking students, including refugees, require short term intensive English language support when they first enrol, followed by ongoing EAL/D support. High school students may receive intensive English tuition in an Intensive English Centre or high school, while primary school students receive initial intensive support in their school. After completing an intensive English program, refugee students require ongoing support in developing English language in the context of the curriculum provided by specialist EAL/D and classroom teachers.

Communicate with relevant staff

Obtaining, recording and distributing information about refugee students assists teachers to better understand the possible behaviours and learning needs of their students. Each school should establish a distribution list for essential information about newly enrolled students. This list could include the school counsellor, school executive, welfare team, year adviser, class teachers, EAL/D teachers and careers adviser as appropriate. Before distributing information, schools should establish procedures to ensure that information is treated confidentially and the privacy of students and their families is protected.

Monitor student behaviour

Refugee students' capacity to cope with traumatic experiences varies greatly. This capacity to cope and the degree to which the learning of a student is influenced by previous trauma depends on factors such as:

- the severity of previous experiences
- the number of traumas and the length of time they were suffered
- whether parents or close family members were killed, injured or disappeared
- how well the student's carers are coping with their trauma, resettlement and anxieties about family members in their home country
- how well the individual student is being supported in their new country at home, at school and in the local community

Ensure all teachers develop awareness about refugee students in their classes

Some refugee students enrolling in Australian schools need considerable assistance to overcome a range of difficulties that are the result of trauma, physical hardships, missed or disrupted schooling or the loss of familial and social supports. Teachers are pivotal in providing this assistance.

Teachers should inform themselves about the backgrounds of refugee students in their classes and the impact of refugee experiences. They should not assume that all refugee students need the same level and types of support. Students should be considered as individuals and conclusions about their capabilities or future pathways need to be reached through careful assessments over a period of time.

Understand the impact of trauma

A student who is suffering distress as a result of trauma may consistently or intermittently exhibit a range of indicators including:

- being anxious about separation
- experiencing difficulties in the building of trust and friendships
- lacking the organisational skills, resources, confidence or language needed to access school facilities or support
- being distrustful of schools as institutions and of teachers and school administrators as representatives of authority
- appearing to be slow, confused, disinterested in schoolwork
- being absent from school for extended periods
- over-reacting to discipline strategies of teachers or to threatening behaviour by other students
- responding with fear and anxiety to unfamiliar situations or triggers in the environment, (e.g, sudden loud noises, sirens or planes passing overhead)
- displaying 'instinctive, survival-type' behaviours which are no longer required
- becoming significantly distressed during class discussions of some topics, such as families, warfare, or current events in their country
- over-complying with requests for assistance.

In some cases, students who initially appear to adjust well may at a later stage show symptoms of a delayed reaction to their previous traumatic experiences. Such symptoms may be triggered by events or circumstances that closely resemble events of the past. They may also emerge during periods of sickness, times of stress such as examinations, prior to or during overnight excursions, when an individual is emotionally unsettled by anxieties in the transition

from one school to another or from one class to another in primary schools. Reactions may also be triggered by increased turmoil in the country of origin, particularly if there is the potential that loved ones or neighbours may have been involved.

Allow time for refugee students to recover and adjust

Some refugee students adjust quickly and easily to life and schooling in Australia while others take longer - during this period of adjustment, students may appear withdrawn and distant, unresponsive, moody, easily provoked to anger or aggression. They may also be often absent from school. They may have other physical symptoms such as headaches, skin conditions, intermittent nausea or respiratory ailments such as asthma.

These reactions may be linked to trauma in the past or to current anxieties about loved ones who are not in Australia. They could also result from the stresses of resettlement in a new country. On the other hand, they may have more to do with adolescence and intergenerational conflict than with being a refugee. Any of these concerns and responses can disrupt the capacity of refugee students to concentrate on learning at school.

Consider English language proficiency as an influence on student learning

Students' level of oral and written language proficiency, in their first language and in English, will influence their rate of learning English and learning outcomes across the curriculum. Most refugee students are developing English language skills at the same time as they learn the content of lessons through the medium of English language. This is demanding and tiring.

Some refugee students may be proficient speakers, readers and writers in their first and other languages. Others may have acquired effective everyday communication skills in their first language but may not have had

Differentiate assessment, teaching and learning

All teachers share responsibility for developing understanding of refugee students' learning, emotional and social support needs. Lack of or previous education or disrupted schooling can mean that refugee students are operating at literacy and numeracy levels well below their peers. They may also have considerable gaps in their understanding of essential curriculum concepts and limited English language proficiency. In such cases, teachers may need to differentiate assessment tasks and activities

within their teaching and learning programs to allow students to access and demonstrate understanding of stage appropriate outcomes despite differing levels of language and literacy.

In some cases it may take considerable time for students to participate actively in learning and benefit from teaching programs as they may require a 'settling in' period. This further demonstrates the need for ongoing monitoring of students' needs, learning progress and classroom behaviours. Contributing to the development and implementation of individual learning plans with the learning support team will assist in this process.

Monitor student needs over time

Over time, most students from a refugee background adjust to the educational and social environments of their school and local community. As they settle, their needs may change: disappear or others emerge.

The school learning and support team or the welfare team can provide ongoing support for other teachers of refugee students by discussing student's current situation, determining the student's ongoing needs for EAL/D or other special program support, discussing appropriate placement, programs, teaching strategies and support personnel and consulting with the school counsellor, careers advisor and the parents / guardian where necessary.

Involve the school counsellor

The impacts of trauma can seriously affect the capacity of young people to concentrate, participate and perform academically and socially at school. The educational response to students with such backgrounds needs to be multifaceted, incorporating contributions from the school's leadership, curriculum, literacy, learning support and student welfare teams. In this context, the professional expertise and insights provided by the school counsellor will aid in delivering quality interventions for refugee students.

School counsellors can assist teaching staff to discern the influences of trauma on the performance and behaviour of students. They can assist by suggesting involvement of other members of the school's learning support teams such as EAL/D teachers and year advisers. Counsellors can provide direct counselling to individuals or groups of refugee students. Counsellors can play an important role in accessing additional community support and, where appropriate, referral to specialist services.

In some cases referral of students to the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) by the

school counsellor may be appropriate. STARTTS produces *Hints for Healing*, a monthly e-magazine designed to strengthen student welfare personnel's knowledge and skills about the needs of refugee students.

Advice on the *Cognitive Assessment of Students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds and Supporting Students in Times of International Conflict* are available in the *School Counsellor Manual — Practices and Procedures*.

When a school counsellor has worked separately with a number of refugee students in a school it may be appropriate to establish a group program to continue providing counselling support for the recovery and adjustment of these students.

Consider conducting a small group program for refugee students

A counselling approach using a small group program has many advantages:

- Many students are from countries where there are no counsellors, or there is a belief that counselling is only for 'mad' people. A group situation provides a comfortable context for students to gain an understanding of counsellors and counselling.
- Refugees are often fearful of disclosing things to people in authority. A group situation provides a counselling setting in which to provide information and advice while building trusting relationships.
- Young people often feel uncomfortable about being singled out to see the counsellor. A group program helps to reduce feelings of stigmatisation.
- A group setting helps to normalise feelings and reactions among peers.
- Groups provide opportunities for students to gain psycho-educational perspectives on trauma, an important process for those who have lived through war and political upheaval.
- Groups provide an opportunity to re-establish social bonds and connection.
- A group setting provides a context in which to develop skills for resettlement.
- A group situation provides an opportunity to identify students at risk, facilitating early intervention and referral to services.

Deciding whether to establish a group program must be guided by counsellor assessment that students require assistance to reconnect with others and build trusting relationships. School counsellors must be convinced that participation in the group will not have

a detrimental impact on student adjustment and that they will manage the demands of the program.

The contents and focus of group counselling programs for refugee students make it essential that such programs be supervised by school counsellors. Guidelines for conducting such groups are contained in the manual: [Settling In](#) - A group program for newly arrived refugee and migrant students.

STARTTS also offer small group programs in schools. For more information about STARTTS programs and services go to: <http://www.startts.org.au/>

Plan targeted support for students

Resources are provided for schools to develop targeted support for recently arrived refugee students.

These resources are additional to those provided through the Equity loading to support the development of students' English language proficiency and will assist schools to help refugee students settle into school in Australia and bridge the gap caused by disrupted schooling.

Many schools are implementing programs and strategies to provide targeted support for refugee students. These include:

- Transition support
- Intensive English programs
- Bilingual learning support
- Orientation programs
- Homework and tutorial assistance
- Mentoring and peer support programs
- Social inclusion programs
- Work readiness programs



Support refugee parents and families

A welcoming atmosphere is important for newly arrived refugee parents. They need to be confident that their children are safe in school in order to develop trust in the school and its staff. Ensuring that school staff members, particularly front office personnel, are trained in communicating with parents whose first language is not English, and in accessing and using interpreters, is an effective strategy.

Providing interpreter assistance when required and translated documents when available are important first steps. Interpreting and translation services are provided for parents and carers who do not speak or understand English well. A large number of publications have been translated in up to 40 languages and are available on the NSW Department of Education website.

When refugee families are settling successfully into Australia, their children learn more effectively. It is important for schools to support refugee families in the resettlement process and to encourage their participation in school activities.

Schools might like to consider conducting a Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) program for newly arrived migrant and refugee parents. This group program is designed to help participants to understand the impact of resettlement on the family and family dynamics. For more information go to: <http://www.startts.org.au/>

A number of government and non-government organisations provide support to newly arrived refugee families. Schools should be aware of these organisations and their roles, and refer refugee families to appropriate agencies when required.

Develop partnerships with government and community agencies

There is a large range of government and non-government service providers who support refugee students and their families. These include:

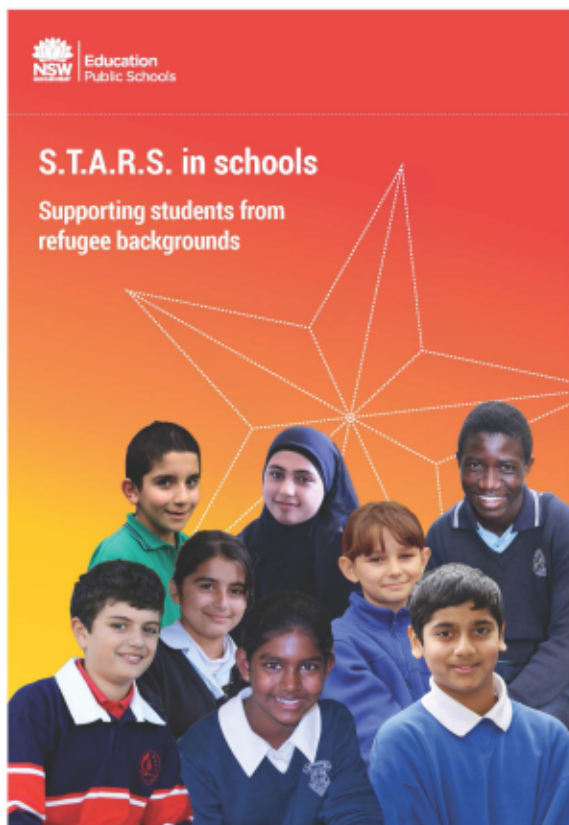
- STARTTS
- Settlement Services International
- Navitas
- NSW Refugee Health Service
- The Australian Red Cross
- St Vincent de Paul
- Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation

Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) can provide information about the organisations providing support in your local area.

Professional learning

A number of professional learning programs are available for executive staff and teachers of students from refugee backgrounds. These include:

STARS in Schools: Supporting students from refugee backgrounds



This is a 5 hour professional learning course that aims to raise awareness about refugee students and their experiences and assist schools to create learning environments which support their recovery. Participants will develop strategies for responding with sensitivity to behavioural issues that may arise in relation to students' emotional and learning needs.

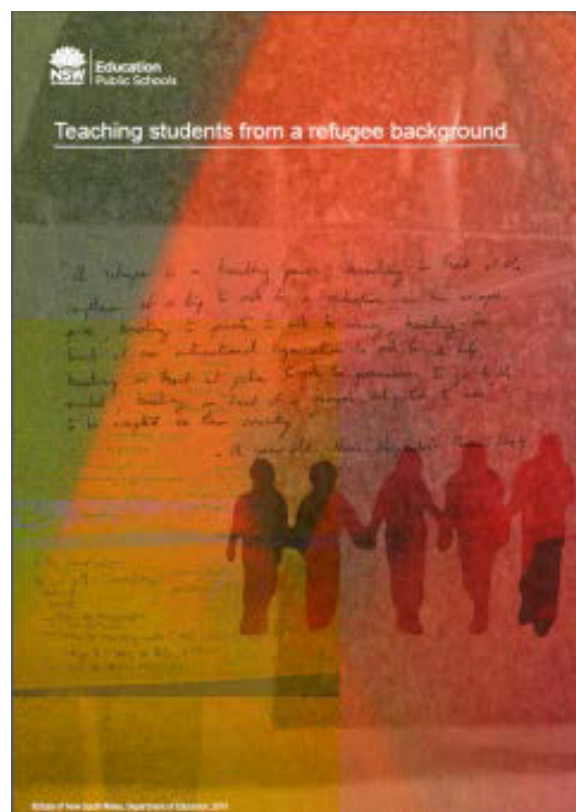
Professional learning modules have been developed to assist in delivering training for school staff. School counsellors, behaviour support personnel, school executive and Learning and Support Team members can be trained as facilitators.

Teaching students from a refugee background

This is a 20 hour registered professional learning course designed for classroom teachers, K-12, to develop their understanding of the educational needs of refugee students in order to provide effective teaching support.

The course aims to develop participants' understandings of the experiences, skills and knowledge that refugee students bring to school as well as the language related needs of recently arrived refugee students with low levels of literacy.

It assists teachers to develop skills, knowledge and understandings for effective teaching of refugee students in the mainstream classroom. It also increases their awareness of specialist personnel, external agencies, training programs and resources available to support refugee students.



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