

# Families in Cultural Transitions



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**A joint STARTTS/ NSW DET program is achieving good results in helping refugee school children and their families adjust to their new lives in New South Wales. The program is even being trialled with families from non-refugee communities. At the Diversity In Health Conference, in Sydney in May, Elisabeth Pickering and Monica Lamelas presented a paper titled A Holistic Approach to Families in Cultural Transitions – STARTTS and DET Working Together. This is an edited excerpt.**

Good afternoon, and thanks for the opportunity to present today.

Having been here for the three days of this conference, I must admit that by this stage I'm feeling a little exhausted. I have seen so many great speakers, heard information and discussions on so many important issues, that my head feels like it can't really absorb a lot more. What's more, there's a sense of being overwhelmed at the many issues faced in health, especially by those in our particular group of interest, refugees.

It feels really good, then, to be able to stand up here this afternoon and talk to you about solutions, rather than more problems. And in this case, about a solution that involves working in partnership across organisations and government departments, to address the needs of refugee families in settling into a life in Australia, in a way that will hopefully prevent problems within the families later on.

The concept of 'working in partnership' is almost cliché in the public service, but as we all know from experience, partnerships don't always work to their fullest potential - sometimes because of the different focus of the organisations involved, and at other times because of the bureaucracy that often needs to be faced and handled, particularly when we are talking about working with and within government departments. So, we will try to look at the process of partnership itself, some of the problems we encountered, and some of the things that worked really well, which will hopefully help you if and when you decide you want to set up something similar in your organisations and groups.

As you would all know by now, refugees face any number of complex and interrelated challenges when settling into Australia, not least of which are the physical and mental sequelae of their traumatic experiences overseas. Service providers working within a framework of divided services (one worker does counselling for trauma, another looks at finding accommodation, and so on) have found that it is very difficult to address any one of these issues in isolation.

A program which can approach the many areas of a refugee's life that are affected by their experiences has the best chance of really assisting in the very difficult task of getting better, and starting again here in Australia.

The Department of Education and Training was facing the impact of refugee experiences on students and parents every day in its Intensive English Centres, and Primary and High Schools. Although staff were doing great work with the students themselves, it was clear that the parents needed to take an active role in their children's schooling in order for them to really settle well, and advance through the system. In many cases, it was also clear that the parents had issues of their own which were not being addressed, and which were affecting the whole family. School staff would try and get refugee parents involved - but many just didn't want to know!

NSW STARTTS, as the specialist torture and trauma service in NSW, was also seeing these issues everyday. An issue they were also facing was that many families who could benefit from STARTTS' services were not taking advantage of them, sometimes because they didn't know about the service, and other times because of the not insignificant stigma, in many communities, associated with accessing mental health services. How to reach people without turning them off?

It was clear that although our 'core businesses' are quite different, here was a place where our paths converged and we could successfully assist each other. And this is what we did- through the "Families In Cultural Transitions" program.

This is a group program, designed by STARTTS, to assist migrant and refugee families with the family processes associated in making the cultural transition from their country of origin to Australia.

A resource kit equips facilitators with a comprehensive package to help groups of refugees or migrants deal better with the process of adjusting to their new home.

There are nine three-hour sessions or modules in the program, and each module covers a topic area (such as "Money" or "Children") of particular relevance to families trying to settle here. See the box at right.

When you put them all together, it's like putting together the pieces of a puzzle which, through the course of the program, will cover many of the key areas of concern.

Now let's look at the highlights and the hassles of working across government organisations.

We'll start with the highlights:

- A big plus of working together was the increased access that refugee families achieved to both services. By the end of the groups, many parents felt much more comfortable in the school environment and with school staff, as well as with STARTTS as a service.

- DET staff who were working as CIOs and TAEs often had a number of skills which were not being utilised to the fullest in their jobs. This program provided an opportunity for them to formalise some of those skills and really bring them all to bear on their work- they're happier and much more productive!

- Sharing resources is one of the major reasons why people go into partnerships in the first place, and this project has meant that, for instance, the money STARTTS had aside for FICT groups could be spread much further

The hassles - these were the more challenging aspects of the partnership:

- Red tape! - for anyone who has worked with any one government department, you should try working with 2!!! Need we say any more?

- Money is always a problem - especially the concept of one Government Department paying money to another. It took a while to sort out

who needed to pay what, and as DET took more full responsibility for the program that became much clearer and easier to organise. At the moment, DET pays STARTTS for the facilitator training, and any further kits and that's the extent of STARTTS involvement- everything else is already in-house.

- Legal responsibilities have to do with the venue of the groups, child-care and insurance for participants and children. If STARTTS are organising a group, but it is run on DET premises, such as a school, who is responsible for insurance? Again, this is something else that has been easier to sort out as DET has taken responsibility for the program as a whole.

- Clashes in responsibilities - facilitators were generally enthusiastic about the program and what it could do for their school community - but some schools were only willing to let the groups happen if organising them didn't take up any of their school time which, of course, is really hard as organising a group takes a significant amount of time.

Of course, the uncomfortableness and difficulties are really small compared to some of the results that have been achieved.

For example:

One school managed to run a group with mixed nationalities from the Former Yugoslavia- Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian, with Bosnian and Serbian co-facilitators. Not only was this group free of infighting, but they continued meeting after the group finished to try and counter the antagonism within those communities.

I don't know of anywhere else that this has actually succeeded - and it is an incredible success!

After groups, parents started being more active in their school communities - volunteering in the canteen and library, as well as attending Parents and Citizens and

School Council meetings - something unheard of before this!

One Afghani mother of three children, and whose husband had been killed, was very disconnected. After the group, the son said "Mum's got her soul back - and life is beginning to be good again".

Making it work for you - if you're wanting to implement similar programs in your organisations, there are a number of factors which we think have been critical to the success of this project.

- Keep it flexible - organising and running groups can create incredible headaches - flexibility on the part of everyone makes things go a lot smoother.

- Ensure support from the top - in this partnership, the people in charge of the Multicultural Programs Unit, as well as individual school principals, gave their support; without it, it would have been very difficult to get things done.

- Good internal structures are critical to the success of a program like this one. In particular, it's important to have someone who is coordinating the groups, to ensure that everyone has all the resources that they need, and that the standard of the groups is maintained. It is also critical to have inbuilt support for the facilitators, as the work they will be doing with the groups can sometimes get difficult and facilitators need to have an avenue through which they can discuss issues and exchange ideas.

- Ensure good screening and training of facilitators - In this program, facilitators need not only to be very familiar with the contents of the FICT kit, but also need skills in group facilitation, public speaking, and a great sensitivity to the issues of migrants and refugees. Screening and training are important in making sure that participants are receiving the best possible assistance through the program.

## The FICT Program: Nine steps towards successful resettlement

An outline of the topics covered:

**1 Introduction and Settlement** - getting to know each other, the concept of settlement, and differences between migrants and refugees.

**2 Support Services** - what's out there, as well as how to use basic tools like the phone book and street directory to find the services you need.

**3 Money** - everything from budgeting to getting a safety deposit box to buying in bulk at the markets.

**4 Trauma and Healing** - psychoeducation about the process of loss and grief and things that individuals and families can do to feel better

**5 Families** - issues faced by families moving between cultures - how things change and how they can stay the same.

**6 Children** - how children are affected by migration and trauma, common responses of children, how to communicate with children, and child protection issues.

**7 Gender** - dynamics between men and women in Australia, in comparison with the country of origin; legal issues including equal opportunity and domestic violence.

**8 Youth** - impact of migration and trauma on teenagers, cross-cultural conflict, and issues impacting on youth in Australia, such as unemployment.

**9 Enjoying the New Environment** - finding the time to take care of yourself and your family.

STARTTS is developing a further module to cover employment and education, and NSW DET has developed a module about the school system.

Achievements:

In the last three years, over 50 DET staff have been trained as facilitators, and plans are to continue training staff across different areas of NSW. More than 15 groups have been run in the last two years, seven of these in the last school term alone. More are planned, with the language base expanding all the time.

Looking to the future:

FICT has become a permanent part of DET's approach to parent involvement and participation in schools, as well as their approach to refugee students

The program is being extended to non-refugee communities, such as Filipino and Pacific Islander, and is being trialled with the students themselves.

Overall this has been an extremely productive and successful partnership, which has benefited the refugee communities and school students who needed it, and both organisations are hopeful that it will continue into the future. ■