



# SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES IN PARTNERSHIP

A Desktop Guide to Engaging Families from  
Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's Learning



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# 1. BACKGROUND

This desktop guide is the result of a project involving five Victorian schools as part of the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP). RESP is a partnership between the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House), the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and the Department of Education and Training (DET), in collaboration with the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools Victoria (ISV).

RESP partners with clusters of schools and relevant community agencies to develop school-based strategies that strengthen the education and wellbeing outcomes of students and families from refugee backgrounds. RESP school networks are established over an 18 month project cycle in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, to implement a whole-school approach to support students and families from refugee backgrounds.



**Foundation House**  
The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

The project established a state-wide partnership group of parents<sup>1</sup> from refugee backgrounds and school staff. The group aimed to improve student educational outcomes by supporting schools to enhance their capacity to engage with parents from refugee backgrounds.

The evidence base supporting the relationship between learning achievement and parental engagement in the education process is well established. 'Supporting parents and carers to be actively involved in their child's learning' is a key strategy within DET's 2013–2017 Strategic Plan.<sup>2</sup>

There is much to be understood, however, about successful practices to establish sustainable relationships between school communities and families from refugee backgrounds.



**Department of  
Education & Training**

Many students from refugee backgrounds are highly likely to be disadvantaged when attending school in Australia. In addition to experiencing the trauma of war and displacement, students and parents may be unfamiliar with the Australian school system and have limited literacy and numeracy skills in their first language. They may also have limited English language skills. While all parents generally have high education aspirations for their children, parents from refugee backgrounds may have had limited access to schooling themselves, have different cultural expectations of parental engagement in school, and be unsure about the contribution that they can make to their children's education. Schools are reminded that while parents from refugee backgrounds may not be formally educated, they can, and should, be seen as co-educators of their children.

## Definition of parent engagement

During the project, the five schools' advisory groups developed the following common definition for all parent engagement activities in schools:

*'A two-way collaboration between families and schools based on good communication, trusting relationships and respectful partnerships, with the goal of enhancing children's education'*

This definition must be set within the context of schools that embrace a whole-school approach to intercultural awareness, and have an understanding of the refugee experience. Advice on a whole-school approach is provided in the Foundation House publication *School's In for Refugees: A Whole-School Approach to Supporting Students of Refugee Background (2011)* which can be accessed here:

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees)

The project brought together parents from refugee backgrounds with school leadership teams to form advisory groups in five schools in Victoria. The schools included three primary schools, one secondary school and one Prep-12 school, located in Dandenong, Mooroolbark, Laverton, Roxburgh Park and Traralgon. Schools participating in the project had a well-established relationship with Foundation House, and were known for their whole-school approach to intercultural awareness, and their solid understanding of the refugee experience. Parents were selected from a growing ethnic community within each school, coming from Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Burma (both Chin and Karen ethnic groups).

The groups met regularly to discuss barriers and facilitators to parents'

involvement in their children's learning. This guide captures these discussions and reflects the voice of parents from refugee backgrounds.

The background paper, *Educating Children from Refugee Backgrounds: A Partnership Between Schools and Parents*, has informed the development of this Guide and can be accessed at: [www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-support-program-resources](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-support-program-resources).

Schools that plan to use this guide may be at the beginning of their journey of supporting students from refugee backgrounds or may be experienced in a whole-school approach. The guide will be useful to all schools, as it reflects advice contributed by experienced school staff alongside parents from refugee backgrounds.

1 Children from refugee backgrounds may be cared for by members of an extended family, or friends, if parents have been lost. Some refugee minors may also be in state care. The term 'parent' in this report is used to encompass all such relationships.

2 [www.education.vic.gov.au/about/departments/Pages/stratplan.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/departments/Pages/stratplan.aspx)

## 2. INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING

*We've used bilingual students to provide information to parents, but they have insufficient knowledge to explain all the issues to their parents. (School)*

.....

*It's very good to have a relationship with the school. Some children might report what the school says. For example, 'There's no homework' or 'I don't have to wear a uniform.' If you have a good relationship and communication with the school you can check this out. (Parent)*

Open, two-way communication strategies, built on policies and practices within a school, are fundamental to building trusting relationships. Such relationships are crucial to engaging parents from refugee backgrounds in school activities and practices to support their children's education. Parents clearly state that there is no point in holding information sessions or meetings with them unless the information is accessible and able to be understood. Regular use of trained interpreters and translation of written communication by schools ensures an inclusive and respectful environment for parents. There are many issues associated with using family, friends or multicultural education aides (MEAs) as interpreters. Such issues include:

- Uncertainty of accuracy of information discussed
- Exposure of sensitive or traumatic material of a confidential nature
- Placing undue stress on family relations
- Imposing unfair responsibility on children
- Undermining the role of parents

It is important to always brief the interpreter. Schools use specific terminology and the briefing ensures that complex content is clearly explained; that goals and aims of the information session or meeting are clear; and that the format of any forms or reports is clearly understood. Many schools, and parents, will develop a relationship with interpreters who are regularly utilised. A positive relationship between the school and interpreter is conducive to effective outcomes for all.

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Specific recommendations for using interpreters are:

- Ensure there are sufficient interpreters and a system for effective allocation.
- Inform parents that teachers will be using interpreters.
- Monitor the standard of interpreting and provide feedback to interpreting provider.
- Seek feedback from parents regarding satisfaction with interpreting provided.
- Be mindful of privacy issues in small communities.
- Ensure teachers understand the protocols of effectively working with interpreters.
- Use telephone interpreters when needed.
- Request specific interpreters who are familiar with the ethos of your school.

MEAs are not necessarily trained interpreters (see Section 3: Multicultural Education Aides) and schools should utilise the Department of Education and Training services<sup>1</sup> when accessing interpreters.

It is important that schools alert parents to the opportunity for using interpreters at events such as parent/teacher/student conferences or information sessions, when their consent is required and when they are being asked to make decisions about their child's education.

See Section 5: Parent/Teacher Interviews for specific recommendations for using interpreters during parent/teacher/student-led conferences.

School personnel should be supported in their use of interpreters through professional learning opportunities. The DVD *Talking in Tune* (DET)<sup>2</sup> is a useful resource. Monitoring the effectiveness of interpreters ensures that parents

understand the material discussed, and are comfortable with the interpreter and process.

As not all parents are literate in their spoken language, consider:

- reducing translated notices sent home to key information only
- using the same template or colour for notices requiring permission or signature
- establishing and promoting notice boards in languages of parents from refugee backgrounds
- creating an audio file, in community languages, of the important information and upload as a podcast on the school website
- establishing a dedicated telephone line, in community languages, with a recording of key dates on the school calendar

## 2. INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING continued

- encouraging students to write articles for the school newsletter in community languages
- incorporating visuals as appropriate to enhance engagement with the material
- creating opportunities for students to present work to parents in their choice of language. This could include student-led conferences, or facilitating parent evenings using interactive strategies such as Creating Conversations.<sup>3</sup> Interpreters can be used to assist teachers to understand the presentations.

Increasingly, schools maximise the use of their website and other technology to convey information. To enhance accessibility of such material the following is recommended:

- Invite parents to classes to familiarise them with the school website.
- Provide supported access to computers and the internet at school.
- Utilise smart-phone apps, such as Viber, for group messages.
- Create DVDs for parents, in their own language, with advice on matters such as helping children's learning at home and in the classroom, the school structure and school expectations of staff, parents and students.
- Ensure the school website is available in multiple languages.

1 [www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/translate.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/translate.aspx)

2 [www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/Pages/ealresources.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/Pages/ealresources.aspx)

3 [www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/creatingconversations.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/creatingconversations.pdf)

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## CONTACT DETAILS FOR INTERPRETERS

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### 3. MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AIDES (MEAs)

*The MEA is a bridge between parents and school. The community feel they can't approach a teacher directly, but will do so via the MEA. It means the MEA role is very important for the school.*  
(School)

*The MEA is very important to parents from our community. We see her at all times all over the school. She stands in the corridors when parents drop off children and tells them about programs.*  
(Parent)

Multicultural education aides are an invaluable support to the whole school community: students, parents and all school staff. Refugee-background parents relate that they often choose their children's school based on the knowledge that the school has an MEA from their language group. Much of the work of partnering with families is reliant on the presence of an MEA in the school. The *MEA Handbook* (2015)<sup>1</sup> produced by DET advises that MEA language skills should be used for communicating with students and parents. English as an Additional Language (EAL) index funding is provided, within the Student Resource Package (SRP), to schools for the employment of MEAs as well as EAL specialist teachers. Schools often source their MEAs through their formal and informal networks and they can be employed across a number of schools depending on funding.

The *MEA Handbook* recommends that the MEA role is to assist with:

- effective communication between students and teachers in the classroom
- integrating EAL learners into school activities by helping them to understand school expectations and goals
- assisting teachers to understand the home cultures, and the expectations families have of the school and of education in general
- assisting newly arrived families to settle into the school community.

Schools are responsible for employment and role descriptions of their MEAs. Consider the following as appropriate tasks for the MEA:

- Keeping parents informed of school events and activities and encouraging them to participate

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- Helping parents to make school appointments and reminding them shortly before
- Translating school notices, letters and newsletters (written or verbal) as appropriate, and not as a replacement for the use of professional translating services
- Helping parents to complete forms such as those used during enrolment
- Liaising between teachers and parents: advise parents if a child is having a problem at school and encourage parents to speak with the teacher
- Attending home visits with student wellbeing coordinators
- Providing liaison between families and community organisations

MEAs are not necessarily trained interpreters, and it is therefore neither fair nor ethical to expect them to be responsible for communicating information in every interaction with parents: when possible, use professional interpreters to support communication.

Refugee-background parents rely heavily on MEAs. Supporting your MEA is vital to sustaining the work he/she does. In particular it should not be assumed that your MEA is familiar with the terminology and structure of your school setting. Supporting your MEA could come in the form of:

- a thorough induction to the school
- a mentor to provide ongoing support, supervision and debriefing
- opportunities for performance reviews with leadership

- regular review of the position description and time management
- profiling their work among the broader staff to ensure the MEA role is clear
- establishing a network of MEAs in the local area
- supporting them to participate in appropriate professional learning opportunities.

MEAs are often exposed to confidential and sensitive information. Schools need to ensure their responsibilities in this regard are clear, and that MEAs have appropriate support and supervision.

<sup>1</sup> [www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/meahandbook.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/meahandbook.pdf)

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## 4. TRANSITIONS

*I found it helpful to attend the orientation program and meet other people. Those relationships are continuing throughout the school years.*  
(Parent)

.....

*Our school aims to build relationships with the family. This is between teachers and parents, students with other students, and students with the teachers. The students see the cordial relationship between parents and teachers and this encourages the student's relationship with teachers. Getting to know teachers also makes parents more relaxed to approach teachers and talk to them during the rest of the year.* (School)

As students from refugee backgrounds transition into schools at all times throughout the year, they and their families often miss crucial information and orientation which is generally provided in terms four and one. Families from refugee backgrounds joining an Australian school often need additional support to engage in the educational setting in Australia, especially if their children have not attended an English Language School. Many schools facilitate orientation programs for parents alongside the program for incoming students.

Recommended topics for discussion at orientation, and subsequent follow-up, for new arrivals include:

- Practical details, such as school hours, school expectations, fees, breakfast club, breaks, uniforms, and teachers

- A school tour, including observation of classrooms
- Introduction to the principal, class teachers and other school staff
- An overview of classroom activities and advice on how to support children's learning at home
- School programs, such as homework club
- Potential referrals to student support services
- Healthy eating habits, including culturally appropriate food for lunch boxes
- Healthy sleeping habits
- The learning to be gained from play, and encouragement for children to be allowed to play at home
- The value of supporting children's aspirations

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Interpreted information sessions provide an opportunity to elicit questions and concerns from the parents.

Nurturing strong relationships between school settings (early childhood, primary, secondary and English language schools) is important. The accuracy of enrolment data is vital in order for schools to identify refugee-background families and to establish a relationship that is conducive to an ongoing partnership. Discussions held at enrolment can help schools to ascertain the well being and learning needs of the students. Further advice about supporting transition can be found in *School's In for Refugees*<sup>1</sup> Tool 4: Transition and enrolment checklist: new arrivals with a refugee background.

Primary and secondary schools could consider the following arrangements to ease transition:

- MEAs and transition staff at each school meet to discuss needs of the families (with consideration to confidentiality).
- Invite MEAs to accompany parents on tours, with interpreters, of the new school setting during school hours.
- Organise an information session and/or excursion to help understand booklists and uniform requirements (if appropriate).
- Schedule information sessions at beginning or end of school day when parents are dropping off or picking up their children.
- Ensure parents understand the significance of graduation ceremonies and be mindful of costs incurred with such events.

- Utilise key staff, such as school nurse or wellbeing personnel, to support transitions.
- Utilise community leaders who are excellent resources for communicating information.
- Seek the readiness of 'experienced' families and older children to share their tips on transitioning to a new school.
- As always, notices should be translated and interpreters be available for information sessions.

<sup>1</sup> The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Inc., *School's In for Refugees: A Whole-School Approach to Supporting Students of Refugee Background* (2nd edn), Melbourne, 2011.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## 5. PARENT/TEACHER INTERVIEWS

*I really liked the interview. It benefited both me and my children. My children didn't always bring home books or enough homework, and I told them I would ask their teacher about this. This encouraged and motivated them. (Parent)*  
.....

*We sent out translated questions to guide parents before the interviews. All staff felt that parents had a new level of confidence at the interviews because they were able to think about questions and answers beforehand. Parents asked many more questions than previously. Interviews were two-way and more equal than in the past. (School)*

Interaction between parents and teachers is successful when teachers make time to talk, are friendly, are culturally sensitive and respectful, treat parents as equals, use interpreters and

include the MEA in discussions. Parents also have a part to play. In some cases, they know they have to overcome a lack of confidence and a cultural shyness to participate in a two-way conversation. Schools have a responsibility to nurture trusting relationships through inclusive and respectful practices.

Interactions between parents and teachers take many forms and can range from the formal settings provided at meetings, to the informal greetings experienced at times such as school drop-off and pick-up.

A number of schools provide informal 'getting to know each other' opportunities such as morning or afternoon tea, either immediately following the morning drop-off or before the close of the school day. Teachers should be encouraged to maximise opportunities on other occasions to help build trust and develop a relationship with parents from refugee backgrounds. School leaders

could encourage teachers to record the number of incidental interactions they have with parents, identifying common themes about parental concerns or requests to be involved in the school.

Strengthening parents' confidence in communicating with teachers is likely to have a positive influence on engagement with the many formal scheduled interactions between teachers and parents: meetings, either at the request of the school or the parent; home visits; generic information sessions such as career advice, helping children at home or understanding school reports; helping in the classroom or at school-wide events like sports days; orientation days; focus groups and school council.

Parent/teacher interviews are perhaps the most obvious of these formal interactions. As the first parent/teacher interview of the year tends to be a 'meet and greet', its aims are quite different to those of the interviews later in the

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year where the focus is on the child's progress and may be accompanied by a written semester report. Parents may not necessarily understand these different aims. A number of steps are required to ensure the success of these opportunities for parents to engage with their child's learning.

## BOOKING APPOINTMENTS

A multi-layered approach is needed to ensure engagement with refugee-background parents.

1. Promote the interviews, and aims, in multilingual notices to parents, in the newsletter, to students and via the MEA.
2. The notice should list teachers' names with photos, subjects, time availability and interpreter request.
3. Explicitly invite both parents if applicable.
4. Offer an opportunity to help parents complete the booking notice.

5. If an online booking system is used, schools could consider training parents in the use of this system. This may entail making computers available at the school.
6. Monitor return of notices and follow up if necessary.
7. Confirm appointment and details through a translated note. Ask parents to arrive 10 minutes early to allow time for allocation of interpreter.
8. Ask the MEA and students to remind parents the day prior.

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Schools will have their own schedule and rationale for these interviews at various times throughout the year. To ensure refugee-background parents find the interviews accessible the following steps are recommended.

1. Provide an interpreted information session, potentially including a role-play to demonstrate the value of two-way communication. Share aims of the interview with parents and ask for their expectations.
2. Provide translated questions for parents the week prior – questions that they can ask as well as questions that the teacher may ask them. All teachers need to be aware that these questions have been sent home. This enhances confidence of both teacher and parent to engage fully in a two-way dialogue. As the relationship develops, it is likely that parents will share their concerns and be able to be guided in ways in which they can support their children's work at home.

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## 5. PARENT/TEACHER INTERVIEWS continued

These sample questions highlight the explicit needs of all involved, including interpreters, in the interviews. Parent may ask:

- How is my child going at school?
- Is my child behaving well?
- How can I help at home?
- How is my child's English? Will they do well when they have to cope outside school?
- Which subjects are my child's strengths?

Teacher may ask:

- How do I pronounce your name, and does it have a meaning you would like to share?
- Is your child happy and positive about school, and in this class?

- What does your child like doing?
- How is your child's behaviour at home?
- What routines do you observe at home (including meals and the child's bed time – if age-appropriate)?
- Do you have any concerns about your child (including medical – sight or hearing)?
- What are your child's favourite things about school?
- Does your child enjoy homework?
- Is there anything about school you would like me to explain?
- Have you been happy with the way we communicate with you? (Include satisfaction with availability of interpreters.)

In addition to the usual feedback regarding the child's progress and school expectations, teachers can take this opportunity to give the parents tips on how they can help at home and information about any after-hours programs that are available through the school or community.

The MEA is a crucial link in the interview process. Teachers need feedback on whether parents understand what has been conveyed to them, as parents may not always admit this to the teachers. The MEA may also assist parents with specific terminology and logistics: for example where staff, such as Year Level Coordinators, are located.

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## ENSURING PARENTS ARE COMFORTABLE

Parents' potential lack of familiarity with the school system may result in a lack of confidence when attending the school and participating in parent/teacher interviews. It is important that the school makes parents feel welcome and that the interviews are well organised.

1. Maximise opportunities for informal interaction with parents before the interview to support their confidence to approach and speak with teachers.
2. Ensure parents are familiar with expectations and what is involved in the interview process via information sessions.
3. A welcome by the principal in the foyer or appropriate space as parents arrive for the interviews is invaluable, as is signage and maps. The MEA can support those who do not read.

4. Display staff photographs, names and subject details on the walls of rooms allocated for the interviews.
5. A calm and unhurried atmosphere is important. Using an interpreter limits the conversation time: it is important that extra time is allocated for parents with interpreters.
6. Provide interpreters with a school map and orientation tour before the commencement of the interviews.
7. Allocate one interpreter for the whole family when there are several children.

## INCLUDING STUDENTS

Including students is important for families from refugee backgrounds.

1. The child can be helpful in navigating the school layout.
2. A parent's authority is less likely to be challenged if the child knows the

parent and teacher are engaging in two-way dialogue.

3. Using interpreters is excellent role-modelling for everyone. It reminds schools not to use the children, it protects the children from this role and it ensures the parents' authority is clearly respected.

## FOLLOWING UP

1. Keep track of parents who do not attend the interview, and consider strategies to engage them.
2. Keep a record of the sorts of questions parents ask or issues they raise. This allows schools to organise interpreted information sessions or translated materials on these topics.

Refer to Section 2: Interpreting and Translating.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

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## 6. HELPING CHILDREN AT HOME

*I had a big misunderstanding. My daughter was given a letter to bring home to explain she had to do a reading assignment. I thought they were asking me to teach her to read and that they weren't going to teach her reading at school. (Parent)*

*There is confusion about homework. In my home country there was a different approach – children did not bring work home for parents to do but might have to work by themselves for up to two hours. Here there is reading and maths to do at home and children ask parents for help. It is important to have information sessions about homework before a new parent starts at a school so that they understand it. (Parent)*

Parents from refugee backgrounds report that they are often uncertain about whether they can help with their children's education at home, as this idea may be culturally unfamiliar. In their home country, parents may have regarded teachers as unquestionable authority figures holding sole responsibility for the child's education. They may also believe that their own lack of education, English language and knowledge of the Australian education system prevents them from supporting their children's learning.

Parents do appreciate that they can support their children in a number of practical and beneficial ways: getting them to school on time and in uniform; preparing their lunch, stationery and equipment; providing a quiet study area at home; taking them to the local library; encouraging children to attend homework clubs; and generally encouraging them to study. Exposure to the classroom and information sessions about teaching and learning approaches

will help parents realise they can help with the child's learning.

Refugee-background parents of primary school children sometimes say they are not familiar with fun educational games. Information sessions together with classroom observations will help them to understand the value of home activities such as:

- rolling dice to add and subtract numbers
- using playing cards to add and subtract numbers
- counting items while supermarket shopping
- playing 'I-spy' to learn spelling or 'Simon Says' to learn listening skills
- tracing letters with coloured pencils
- singing ABC at normal speed, slowly and quickly to learn alphabet and sounds

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## OTHER STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

- Creating a shoe box of practical tools for a child to complete homework (e.g. pencils, ruler, eraser, dictionary, calculator, texas, word lists, and school timetable). Opening the box at homework time helps a child to maintain a routine, and unfinished homework can be kept in the box.
- Talking with the child, in their home language, about the books they bring home to read. The parents might tell a story around the pictures in the book or get the child to share their favourite picture.
- Setting aside time to talk to the child in their home language, about their school day, particularly when they are young, using exciting and interesting words.

- Participating in school programs involving literacy or numeracy.
- Making use of translated booklets on how to help children learn literacy and numeracy skills.

Refugee-background parents of secondary school children sometimes say they cannot help their children with their study, as they do not necessarily understand the subject being studied. Explicitly explaining the value of strategies such as the following can eliminate this barrier.

- Talk with your children about units of work, or texts they are studying.
- Display interest by attending information sessions and parent/teacher interviews.
- Maintain home routines that allow for study.
- Discuss global events as they occur and are covered in the media.

- Support your children's career aspirations.
- Accompany your children to university/TAFE open days.
- Find out from the school where local homework clubs are located and become involved.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

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## 7. HELPING IN THE CLASSROOM

*I don't speak English, but could chat with children who speak my language. I really enjoyed speaking to the children and helping them. They enjoyed it too!* (Parent)

*I was very happy when we walked into the classes, especially my son's class. I saw a lot of posters on the wall and different writing. I cannot read, but I thought how good it was for the children. It was great for the relationship between me and my son ... We saw the clay modelling in the classroom and I remembered it was the sort of thing we did back home. I could talk to him about it.* (Parent)

*It's very useful to have parents helping in the classroom when they speak the same language as children who have no English.* (School)

Encouraging parents to help in classrooms is well recognised as being beneficial to the child, the parent and the classroom teacher and is a common practice, particularly in primary school. A parent's level of English language and education need not be an issue. Participation by parents from refugee backgrounds can bring the added benefit of a language shared with a number of children in the class.

In preparing parents for their work in the classroom the following preparatory steps are recommended.

- Demonstrate and describe classroom activities.
- Tailor activities to match parents' skill and confidence level.
- Support parents to obtain a Working With Children Check (WWCC).

- Identify parents' skills and interests to assess where best to direct their efforts, e.g. assist with language, artwork, story-telling, cooking, gardening, literacy and numeracy.
- Utilise expertise of parents as guest speakers at careers expos.
- Be explicit about when, and how often, they can help.
- Identify which parents are unable to make an ongoing commitment and ensure they are engaged in flexible activities such as excursions. Parents with cooking or gardening skills can contribute their cultural knowledge to these activities.
- Enhance the confidence of parent helpers through the support of the MEA or a teacher who speaks their language.
- Have options available for occupying pre-school children.

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It is important to promote the opportunity for parents to help in classrooms through:

- profiling a helper from a refugee background in the translated school newsletter to demonstrate the benefits of helping in the classroom. This demonstrates how language and formal educational barriers are unimportant
- regularly appealing for helpers in the translated newsletter
- sending specific invitations, made by the students, to parents to help in the classroom
- inviting parents to a morning tea information session about helping in the classroom
- inviting parents to observe classroom activities and try them out
- organising a training session on helping in the classroom
- making a video of classroom activities and helpers with a voiceover in parents' languages
- inviting parents to come with a friend to improve confidence
- promoting helping in the classroom at all school events attended by parents.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## NOTES

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## 8. SCHOOL TOURS/LEARNING WALKS

*We were unaware that the school had so many facilities and now we appreciate that our children are educated in such a good environment. We have seen what is important to our children's learning. We've seen things entirely new to us. We consider this country is extremely lucky because we didn't have these kinds of facilities.* (Parent)

*Some parents think the school is not doing enough and children come to school, play and go home. They should have a tour!* (Parent)

### SCHOOL TOURS

Typically schools conduct regular tours for parents throughout the year, particularly during orientation

programs. Refugee-background parents may be unfamiliar with the layout and extent of school buildings, resources and opportunities provided to their children. Tours provide parents with an important opportunity to get to know the school and also to observe and ask questions about teaching techniques and classroom behaviour in Australia.

These are some key strategies to aid success of a school tour.

- Distribute a translated flyer to promote the tour.
- Ensure an interpreter accompanies the tour.
- Ensure the whole school is covered and that the tour moves through classrooms while lessons are being conducted.
- Introduce parents to reception staff in the front office.

- Explain gender-segregated toilet arrangements and procedures.
- Explain safety arrangements for recreational areas, such as yard-duty teachers.
- If appropriate, explain your school's approach to religion and cultural differences (e.g. halal food, dress code).

Questions and observations during the tour may trigger the need for information to be clarified about particular aspects of curriculum or structure of the school. This can be addressed via an interpreted information session or highly visual or translated parent information booklets.

The school could consider training some parents representing specific community groups to be future tour leaders.

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## LEARNING WALKS

The practice of learning walks,<sup>1</sup> while generally used to enhance teaching practice,<sup>2</sup> can be offered to parents in schools where peer observation or instructional rounds are already embedded. For parents from refugee backgrounds, this is an opportunity for them to observe and reflect on the teaching and learning experiences in their children's school. An additional focus of the walk could be the school's overall organisation, ethos and environment. Inviting parents to participate in such observations, with the commitment from leadership to value their feedback, offers the opportunity for a deepening of respectful two-way communication between parents and school personnel.

In considering inviting parents from refugee backgrounds to a learning walk, the following is recommended:

- Conduct a comprehensive briefing to clarify specific aims and expectations of parents.
- Consult with parents to ascertain what they would specifically like to observe on the learning walk (with interpreter).
- Limit observations to visual rather than verbal interactions with teachers or students.
- Use an interpreter for the feedback session.
- Involve the MEA on the learning walk.

1 [www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/pages/ihsareconsiderlw.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/pages/ihsareconsiderlw.aspx)

2 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Looking at Classroom Practice*, 2014, pp. 48–9.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## 9. CAREERS PLANNING

*Careers information is new for people from my country because there was no such thing there. (Parent)*

*It's good to see students and parents from refugee backgrounds understanding a range of options that are available, whereas previously boys only talked about being soldiers and girls being nurses. (School)*

The career experiences of parents from refugee backgrounds often differ considerably from the choices experienced by their children in Australia. Parents may be unaware of the range of career opportunities presented to their children and the pathways available to pursue them.

Schools have strategies to provide comprehensive information about career

pathways and Career Conversations<sup>1</sup> is a useful online resource to help parents discuss careers with their children. However, parents from refugee backgrounds relate that this information is not easily accessible. The logistics of managing interpreters at careers information sessions is a challenge for schools, but parents may fail to understand career presentations when information is not interpreted. In order to engage parents in this stage of their child's schooling, they should include them at every step of the process.

To maximise the effectiveness of careers information sessions the following is recommended.

- organise information sessions with interpreters for culturally and linguistically diverse parents
- train a teacher who speaks the language of parents, if available, to deliver the careers information
- consider multiple interpreters and position them with their language group in a room with audiovisual access to the English presentation
- allocate rooms for different language groups, provide interpreters and rotate subject staff around the rooms to explain pathways related to their subject areas
- brief interpreters before the session to ensure terminology and concepts are accurately interpreted
- do not use bilingual students as interpreters, as they may not understand the concepts and may bias the information in their preferred direction
- support the explanations with visual images, simple diagrams, examples of past students' experiences and presentations by past students

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- carefully explain terminology, abbreviations and acronyms that schools may take for granted such as pathways, managed individual pathways, vocational education, apprenticeships, VCE, VET, VCAL, and TAFE
- provide translated handouts of the most important information, such as school expectations of Years 11–12 families
- as always, ensure notices about information sessions are translated.

<sup>1</sup> [www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/conversation.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/conversation.aspx)

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## NOTES

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## 10. STUDENTS

*Back home, children are able to be disciplined with a stick or cane and when we come to Australia we can't do this. Children take on a different attitude, and it's hard to keep them on a straight road without being able to discipline them with a stick. (Parent)*

*We try to encourage and celebrate positive relationships through acknowledging the great things our kids do. We have to let parents know that this is our philosophy. (School)*

Open two-way partnerships between schools and families are important to support every student to feel safe and comfortable at school. This is a complex and sensitive issue. The impact of the refugee background and experiences of trauma may affect the establishment of

trusting, equal relationships between school staff and families. Equally, the behaviour of some students from refugee backgrounds may be especially impacted, and it is vital that school staff have a solid understanding of the link between trauma, wellbeing, learning and development. DET supports Foundation House Schools Support Program to provide professional learning for people working in schools to understand the refugee experience and the impact this experience has on children, young people and families.<sup>1</sup>

Some families from refugee backgrounds report being confused and disturbed by the way in which schools manage student behaviour. While they appreciate that there are different rules for disciplining children in Australia compared to their home countries, and that rules apply to both teachers and parents, it is valuable for schools

to carefully explain their behaviour management approach and how it is closely linked to student engagement and wellbeing. Parents specifically expressed concern in relation to behaviour management and wellbeing approaches that they had never experienced before. They felt that their child's potential lack of understanding of English or cultural norms may interfere with fair treatment by school staff. Translated information about the school's policies on student engagement and behaviour management needs to be distributed upon enrolment and at other opportunities.

Schools are in a good position to promote positive parenting practices, and could do this in many ways and at many opportunities including: facilitating accredited interpreted parenting courses; role-modelling respectful relationships; tailored and interpreted information sessions; and an inclusive

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approach to reviewing behaviour management policies.

In order to reassure some parents from refugee-backgrounds that their children will not become 'uncontrollable' if corporal punishment is not used, interpreted information sessions are essential. It is important that all such sessions are guided by an awareness of the cross-cultural context that families and schools are experiencing.

Consider including the following details in any information session, which you may co-facilitate with relevant local family services/agencies:

- School discipline is bound by Australian laws which prevent physical punishment. As well, teachers are legally mandated to report suspected child physical and sexual abuse.

- There is sound research that when physical punishment is used, children learn to take an aggressive approach. Respectful behaviour management practices are effective.
- Behaviour management policies are closely linked to student engagement policies that emphasise respectful relationships.
- Unacceptable behaviour (for students, staff and parents) includes verbal and physical abuse, bullying, racism, inappropriate use of technology, and substance abuse.
- Information about these behaviours is provided to all students throughout their school life in a variety of ways including units of work, information sessions, and external speakers and programs.
- Many schools include social skills programs within their curriculum in order to encourage positive behaviours and respectful relationships.
- The whole school community (staff, parents and students) contribute to regular reviews of all policies, including student engagement and wellbeing.

Parents state they often speak to the MEA about any concerns they have for their child's welfare, so the MEA needs to be well supported by the school Wellbeing team. (see Section 3: Multicultural Education Aides).

<sup>1</sup> [www.foundationhouse.org.au/2015\\_calendar](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/2015_calendar)

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

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# 11. GOVERNANCE

*I didn't know about focus groups, but would like to contribute if it helps the children. (Parent)*

*My ultimate aim is for the group of advisers to be a voice, to be attached to the school and associated with School Council. There's insufficient connection with all the school's communities now that the school is being joined by a lot more Arabic speaking students and their parents. School committees are not reflective of the growing groups. (School)*

Parent focus groups and school councils or boards are invaluable ways for parents to contribute to the school community. Participation by refugee-background families in these processes provide an opportunity for them to understand and be a part of the school's governance and consequently deepen their understanding of the complexity of the Australian education system. Such opportunities may have been rare in their home countries, so it is important for schools to familiarise parents with this aspect of belonging to a school community.

In explaining the governance structure, schools should include the main points appropriate to their school council and focus groups processes. The following may be relevant points to cover during a briefing for parents from refugee backgrounds.

## SCHOOL COUNCIL

- All parents may nominate for school council, regardless of whether they speak English.
- The primary focus of the school council is to assist the principal in making major decisions and managing school finances. The council also considers school policies.
- Nominated council members commit to attending and participating in regular meetings.
- Only members of the school council can vote but other parents are welcome to observe school council meetings.
- Parents benefit from contributing to the children's education through the school council and children benefit from their input.

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## FOCUS GROUPS

- All parents may join a focus group.
- Focus groups differ from volunteer roles in the school, in that they contribute to the management of areas which are important to the school. Focus groups give parents a voice in the running of the school.
- Focus groups discuss selected areas of school governance to provide advice to the school council. Areas might include such topics as finances, fundraising, the school environment, literacy and numeracy practices.
- A focus group initially receives an explanation of what is currently happening in the school in a particular topic area, and parents are invited to provide feedback to guide the focus group's approach to school council.

Schools and parents may identify barriers to participation in school governance. The following advice can help overcome these barriers.

- Ensure the council meeting room can accommodate an interpreter.
- Summarise and translate briefing papers.
- Utilise the MEA to facilitate a comprehensive orientation to the council or group and procedures.
- Buddy parents from refugee backgrounds with experienced council members who can act in a supporting role.
- Create an opportunity for observation of a school council meeting before making a commitment to joining the council.

Refer to Section 12: Useful Resources.

## 12. USEFUL RESOURCES

### 2. INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING

#### *Talking in Tune:*

[fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?id=2650e1bd-555d-455c-a7a3-a742042d4554&Source=%252fpages%252fView.aspx%253fpin%253dj5HJL4](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?id=2650e1bd-555d-455c-a7a3-a742042d4554&Source=%252fpages%252fView.aspx%253fpin%253dj5HJL4)

#### *Interpreting and Translating (DET):*

[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/translate.aspx](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/translate.aspx)

#### *Caring for Refugee Patients in General Practice: A Desktop Guide (4th ed.) Victoria:*

[refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/desktop-guide-victoria](https://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/desktop-guide-victoria)

### 3. MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AIDES

#### *MEA Handbook:*

[www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/meahandbook.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/meahandbook.pdf)

### 4. TRANSITIONS

#### *Talk's In: Families of refugee background and schools in dialogue:*

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/talks-families-refugee-background-schools-dialogue](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/talks-families-refugee-background-schools-dialogue)

#### *Raising Children in Australia: A resource kit for early childhood services working with parents from African backgrounds:*

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/contact-us](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/contact-us)

#### *Beaut Buddies: A school-based peer support Transition Program:*

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-refugees-resource-1-beaut-buddies-school-based-peer-support-transition-program](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-refugees-resource-1-beaut-buddies-school-based-peer-support-transition-program)

#### *Schools in for Refugees: A Whole-School Approach to Supporting Students of Refugee Background (2nd Edn):*

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees](https://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees)

Department of Education and Training website > Parents, Professionals and Service Providers:

[www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/Pages/default.aspx](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/Pages/default.aspx)

### 6. HELPING CHILDREN AT HOME

201 Literacy and Maths Tips to Help Your Child Booklet:

[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/literacynum.aspx](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/literacynum.aspx)

201 Literacy and Maths Tips to Help Your Child Booklets Translated:

[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/literacynumtrans.aspx](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/literacynumtrans.aspx)

Learning Beyond the Bell:

[cmy.net.au/article/learning-beyond-bell](https://cmy.net.au/article/learning-beyond-bell)

## 7. HELPING IN THE CLASSROOM

Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre (LMERC):  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/pages/lmerc.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/pages/lmerc.aspx)

## 8. SCHOOL TOURS/LEARNING WALKS

Looking at Classroom Practice:  
[www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/classroom-practice/looking\\_at\\_classroom\\_practice\\_interactive.pdf?sfvrsn=8](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/classroom-practice/looking_at_classroom_practice_interactive.pdf?sfvrsn=8)

## 9. CAREERS PLANNING

Career Conversations:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/conversation.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/conversation.aspx)

Engaging Parents in Career Conversations (EPICC) Framework:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/parentsframe/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/parentsframe/Pages/default.aspx)

Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/carframe/Pages/framework.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/carframe/Pages/framework.aspx)

## 10. STUDENTS

Engagement and Wellbeing:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/reengagewellbeing.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/reengagewellbeing.aspx)

*SAFEMinds*:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/safeminds.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/safeminds.aspx)

*Headspace*:  
[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

*Calmer Classrooms*:  
[www.ccyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](http://www.ccyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf)

*Schools in for Refugees: A Whole-School Approach to Supporting Students of Refugee Background (2nd Edn)*:  
[www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees)

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Parents Victoria:  
[www.parentsvictoria.asn.au](http://www.parentsvictoria.asn.au)

Introduction to School Councils:  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/schoolcouncilguide.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/involve/Pages/schoolcouncilguide.aspx)

Remember your local library

## THANK YOU

This guide represents the outcomes of many meetings between parents from refugee backgrounds and school leadership teams. Their contribution to the project was invaluable and their patience immeasurable. Parents willingly shared their own, sometimes difficult, educational and life experiences. School teams openly received suggestions for improving school practices and implemented changes. There was a sense of equality and respect between the two groups. Their sustained hard work provides many innovative approaches to parent engagement in schools and we thank them for their dedication and generosity.

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This guide has been produced in consultation with parents from refugee backgrounds, school principals, teachers and multicultural education aides from around Victoria, to support schools partnering with families from refugee backgrounds to enhance access to their children's learning. Readers are reminded that this is a guide only. The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Inc. cannot be held responsible for error or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this guide. The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Inc. disclaims all responsibility for any loss or damage which may be suffered or caused by any person relying on the information contained herein.

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