



A SPACE TO GROW: AFGHAN YOUNG MEN'S GROUP

On alternate Thursdays at Foundation House's Dandenong office, the upstairs training room is transformed with rugs, food and music into a comfortable, safe space, in preparation for the arrival of the Afghan Young Men's Group.

The members of the group are aged from 16 to 19, of Afghan background, and have all arrived in Australia without immediate family. They meet fortnightly, or sometimes more often, to chat, eat, dance, play music, celebrate cultural events, and participate in community based art as well as recreational events and outings. The group provides a basis from which participants are able to form relationships and feel a sense of connectedness. This helps them to break out of the social isolation that so often dominates their lives as unaccompanied minors in a new country.

The group also provides participants with the opportunity to share individual and common experiences, and to access information about relevant services, events, and local opportunities.

The Afghan Young Men's Group project began in September 2012. Foundation House Counselor Advocates, through experience with their own clients and feedback from other agencies, established that there was a need for a safe, supportive place for this particular group of young people who might otherwise be in danger of becoming disengaged and isolated. It had become evident that in order to respond to the needs of unaccompanied minors and accommodate the different ways young people engage in support, models of counselling needed to be flexible.

The initial pool of young people of about 25 was drawn from Foundation House counselling clients. The numbers have ebbed and flowed over time, but that is part of the flexible nature of the group where participants are encouraged, but not required, to attend. It is deliberately 'semi-structured' to lower the barriers for the young men to engage in much needed relationship building, psychoeducation, and mentoring. The group also provides the grounds to start processing some of the traumatic experiences the young people have been through; and the ongoing stressors of being uncertain when - or if - they might be reunited with their families, who continue to live in dangerous circumstances.

As well as providing social support and information, the group work model assists the young men recognise their abilities and skills in areas such as sport and art, and supports independent living skills. It helps makes connections between members, and with Foundation House workers, and together the participants build positive memories and experiences.

