**Multicultural Services Unit**

# Cultural support planning for refugee and migrant children Practice Resource

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## Introduction

This practice resource aims to assist workers assess and address the cultural, linguistic and religious needs of refugee and migrant children and young people in care.

The guide can be used to inform casework practice at different points including placement needs assessment, care/case planning, and reviews.

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds removed from their birth families are at significant risk of losing their connection to their heritage, culture, language or religion. Where this occurs it can have profoundly negative effects on their immediate and ongoing sense of identity, self worth, personal growth and wellbeing.

The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 stipulates that children and young people temporarily or permanently removed from their family environment are to be assisted and supported as far as possible to maintain their identity, language, cultural and religious connections. It is a requirement that caseworkers and their supervisors identify and address the cultural maintenance and development needs of children in care. See Section 9 (2) (d) of the Act.

This guide provides information and advice on key issues to explore in cultural support planning with refugee and migrant children and young people.

## Understanding the family’s cultural context

It is important to understand the cultural context in which the child or young person was raised prior to their entry into care.

It is also important to explain at the outset to birth parents and other family members why cultural information is being sought. Explain that the information is being gathered for the purpose of identifying the child/young person’s cultural needs while in care, and assisting the child/young person to maintain a connection to their culture and heritage.

The intent is to understand the family’s cultural influences, language(s), religion, and their involvement in community, cultural and religious activities. Be mindful that families can have multiple cultural influences. Issues to explore include:

* What language(s) is spoken at home?
* What culture and/or religion does the family identify with?
* How does the family practise their culture and/or religion?
* What cultural or religious activities is the family involved in?
* Does the family have contact with members of their cultural community?

The views of birth parents should be taken into account when determining what aspects of culture, language or religion need to be maintained. Issues to explore include:

* Do they want the child/young person to learn about their birth culture?
* What cultural activities would they like the child/young person to be involved in?
* Do they want the child/young person to have contact with people from their cultural community?
* Do they want the child/young person to maintain or learn their first language?
* Do they want the child/young person to practice their religion?
* Are there religious observances or practices they want maintained?
* Does the child/young person have a religiously prescribed diet?
* What food preferences does the child/young person have generally?
* How would they like the above to happen?

In some cases, the birth parents may not be supportive of the child/young person maintaining contact with their culture or community. In these cases:

* explore the reasons/motivations behind the parent’s reticence
* address parents’ concerns and fears
* explain why maintaining connection is beneficial for the child/young person
* explain the negative impacts of loss of cultural connections.

## Understanding the child’s relationship to their culture and community

It is important in cultural support planning to find out about the child’s individual relationship with their culture and communities. This relationship may be different to the relationship that the family or birth parents have with their culture.

Every child is unique and so is their relationship to their culture and communities. It is important that we do not stereotype or apply assumptions based on the child’s cultural background.

The intent is to understand the child/young person’s relationship with their culture, language and religion **at the point of removal** from their birth family. Also note that some children/young people may have mixed cultural backgrounds (parents from different backgrounds). It is important in these cases to identify their links and support needs in relation to both cultures. Issues to explore in assessment of the child (as is age appropriate) include:

* What language do they use to communicate with other family members?
* What culture(s) do they identify with?
* What cuisine(s) form a key part of their diet? What do they like to eat?
* What are the cultural influences on their lives?
* What cultural activities are they involved in?
* What religion do they identify with?
* What religious activities/observances are they involved in?
* What general community or sporting activities are they involved in?
* What are their interests?
* How do they spend their time outside of school?
* What contact do they have with members of their cultural community?

Some children/young people may be inclined at the time of assessment to reject their birth culture. They may have cultural influences that are different from those of their birth culture, they may not identify with their birth culture, they may wish to avoid the perceived stigma associated with their birth culture, they may associate the culture with abuse that has occurred, and/or they may not want to stand out in the placement. Where this occurs:

* identify aspects of the culture, language, religion they do not wish to be involved with and their reasons for this
* address their concerns and fears
* explore past/current positive experiences with their culture, language or religion
* explain why maintaining connections is beneficial
* explain the negative impacts of loss of cultural connections.

In some cases, there will be significant differences in the views of the birth parents, child/young person and caseworker as to which needs should be supported in the placement. For example, the birth parents may want needs to be addressed that are not supported by the child/young person or vice versa. There may also be cases where the expressed views of the birth parents and/or child are considered by the caseworker to be not in the best interest of the child. It is important that significant differences in views are documented as well as why certain needs will be addressed and not others.

In managing differences in views and priorities, consider the following:

* the safety of the child/young person is paramount
* what decisions will be in the best interest of the child/young person
* the short and long term impacts of addressing and not addressing particular needs
* addressing needs which are within the scope of the agencies’ role
* the agencies’ legislated responsibility to address cultural maintenance
* the child/young person’s age and developmental stage
* the age of the child/young person and their capacity to develop informed views
* reasons or motivations for particular views being held
* the importance of working through concerns, anxieties and fears
* the importance of creating avenues for future exploration of cultural connections.

## Identifying family and community supports

Birth parents and other family members are a primary source of culture for children. As part of the case plan, actively seek the support of parents and/or relatives in meeting the child/young person's cultural, linguistic and/or religious needs.

Likewise, community, social, cultural and religious organisations can play a key role in supporting children to maintain their cultural connections. To identify these organisations, obtain service directories from your local council, visit the [Multicultural NSW](http://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/communities/new_arrivals_to_nsw/) and [DSS Settlement Services websites](https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/settlement-services/settlement-services-locator?state=NSW&type=HSS&filter=Filter).

## Consulting workers and members of the child’s cultural community

It is important that appropriate cultural advice and input is obtained in the process of identifying and meeting the child/young person's cultural needs.

Workers should conduct a cultural consultation with either a FACS Multicultural Caseworker or a bilingual worker from the child/young person's cultural background.

Seek advice about:

* cultural and family expectations, practices and norms within specific communities
* aspects of culture, language and religion pertaining to different communities
* specific needs relating to a child or young people
* strategies for meeting specific needs
* advice on engaging with the family, child/young person, significant others
* services, contacts and networks within communities.

## Developing cultural support activities for inclusion in case and care plans

It is important in cultural support planning to identify and address needs in the areas of cultural, linguistic, and religious connections. The following are examples of support activities which relate to each of these areas. Where appropriate, consider the incorporation of these activities into case and care plans.

### Examples of cultural support activities:

* learning about culture through contact with birth parents and other relatives
* being provided with approved cultural/community mentor
* being supported to maintain connections to culture and community through enrolment in culturally specific play, youth, dance, music, art groups
* maintaining contact with his/her culture and community through opportunities to develop friendships with children and adults from their cultural background
* being provided with books, toys and other entertainment materials which reflect his/her culture and heritage
* being provided with diets from his/her cultural community
* being supported to learn about and maintain a connection to his/her culture and heritage through the inclusion of relevant information in Life Story work
* maintaining a connection to his/her culture through the inclusion of relevant traditions from the culture in their life and that of the carer family
* participating in events and/or festivals marking days of cultural and religious significance with carers
* being assisted to develop pride in his/her culture through understanding of prejudice and racism through open discussion and education about positive strategies for dealing with this issue.

### Examples of activities to support religious connections:

* attending church, temple, mosque or other religious institutions
* receiving religious guidance and instruction
* being provided with diets that accord with religious requirements
* participating in religious events and festivals.

### Examples of activities to support linguistic connections:

* being supported to learn and/or maintain his/her community language
* being provided with opportunities to interact with people who speak their language
* being provided with reading and entertainment materials in his/her community language.

## Key assessment questions in cultural support planning

Use these questions to assess the connection between the child/young person and their culture. They can also be used to assess the views of the child/young person and their parents about aspects of their culture that they wish to maintain.

* What is the family’s connection and involvement with their culture, language and/or religion?
* What aspects of the family’s culture, language and/or religion do the birth parents wish to maintain or develop in the child/young person?
* What is/was the child or young person’s involvement and connection to their culture, language and/or religion at point of entering care?
* In cases where there are no significant existing connections with their culture, what are the potential connections which should be addressed?
* What aspects of his/her culture, language and/or religion does the child/young person wish to have continued involvement with or establish contact with?
* Where there are significant differences in opinions between the birth parents, child/young person and caseworker on the needs to be addressed? Provide a description/analysis of those differences, and a rationale for your casework decision to address certain needs.