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| Engaging with culturally diverse children and families |  |
| A practice resource for child protection practitioners  Office of Professional Practice |  |
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## Overview

Victoria’s community is one of the most culturally diverse in the world. This practice resource assists the Victorian child protection workforce to provide culturally responsive, capable and respectful services to all children and families. This resource contains:

* a summary of **principles** **in action** as they relate to child protection practice with culturally diverse children and families
* an insight into what it means to **parent across cultures**
* **practice tips** – including cultural consultations, using interpreters and data recording
* **practice tools** to support conversations with children and their families about culture, ethnicity, faith and language
* **suggested resources** for further reading to support your practice.

It should be considered in conjunction with the SAFER children framework and relevant practice advice within the child protection manual.

## Principles in action

The principles guiding practice with culturally diverse children and families are consistent with the principles guiding practice with all children and families and underpinned by the SAFER children framework (2021) and the good practice approaches in the introduction to the Best interests case practice model (2012)

Build relationships

The strongest determinant of good practice outcomes with children and families is the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and family members. Developing relationships across cultures – like all relationship building - requires a respectful approach, good communication and flexibility. Remember that families may understand things from a different perspective to your own. Critically reflect upon your own personal beliefs, values and views to understand how they may influence your cross-cultural communication. Be curious about and celebrate difference.

Engage

Families’ experiences of trauma, loss, pain and violence can mean that extraordinary courage and resilience is needed to begin to engage with a new practitioner. Developing trust will take time. Addressing practical needs in the early stages of getting to know a family can help to build trust.

Partner

Partnering with the child, family, their community and existing services will support a coordinated response to complex challenges. Be mindful of and look for the strengths, protection and safety within the naturally occurring ecology of the family and community. Consider where there may be differences in values and expectations between the home, community and other services. Partnering with a bi-cultural worker or community leader can provide invaluable advice and support.

Empower

Understand children and families as experts in their own lived experience.

Encourage children, young people and their families to connect with family, community and environment and culture in ways that are meaningful to them. These connections can contribute to empowering the family to protect their child from harm, protect their rights and promote their development. Seek to understand what is happening for a child and/or their family when they are disconnected from community.

Apply an intersectional lens

Intersectional practice requires child protection practitioners to recognise experiences of structural inequality and discrimination when making decisions in the best interests of the child. An intersectional lens supports our thinking about the interplay between different forms of discrimination. We need to explore our own unconscious bias in relation to the culturally diverse families and communities with whom we work.

Applying an intersectional lens, below are some of the barriers that people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities may experience when they are required to engage with child protection:

* language, for example, not proficient in English
* isolation, for example, no family members or friends locally/in Australia/disconnected from culture
* fear and mistrust of services
* negative past experiences with services
* limited knowledge of, or access to, services
* limited services or service types, for example, no interpreter available for a particular language
* trauma history
* racism and discrimination (perceived or actual)
* impact on cultural identity and belonging
* shame as a cultural construct
* lack of confidentiality and fear of interpreter being known to the family
* traditional gender roles and non-acceptance of LGBTIQ status.

Keep in mind that most of these barriers also apply to individuals and families in relation to:

* alcohol and drug use
* mental health
* disability – consider different cultural concepts of mental health and disability.

## Parenting across cultures

Sociocultural influences, refugee and settlement experiences all influence family life (Kaur 2009).

Sociocultural experiences

In all cultures, parents tend to raise their children the same way they have been raised as a child. It is important to be aware of cultural differences and be curious about family traditions. For example, raising children may traditionally be a community rather than a family responsibility. Asking questions about what a family’s culture means to them helps you understand their experiences more deeply. Practice tools associated with this resource offer ideas about engaging children and families in discussions about culture, ethnicity, faith and language. Drawing genograms with family members can help to develop a deeper understanding of the family and their experiences. Practitioners should seek to understand the cultural norms which may be influencing decision making within a family.

Occasionally, when learning about a family’s traditions, practitioners may feel challenged by culturally unfamiliar child-rearing practices. Practitioners must engage in respectful critical enquiry as they consider whether the practice is merely unfamiliar or whether the behaviour is harmful to the child. In child protection practice, culture or tradition is never an acceptable explanation for behaviour that hurts or is emotionally harmful to a child. Cultural consultation (see below for more detail) is a useful tool to support practitioners as they seek to understand the role which family dynamics, cultural beliefs and values may play in mitigating or increasing the likelihood of harm. Consultation with a bi-cultural worker or community leader is crucial to avoid the mistake of minimising concerns or conducting rigid, unfair assessments. .

Refugee experiences

Some families and their children may have been affected by their experiences of living in circumstances of insecurity and acute hardship, war, violence and persecution. The pre-arrival experience of families from refugee backgrounds could include torture, human rights violations, forced dislocation, prolonged political repression, refugee camp experiences and possible loss of, or separation from, family members and friends in traumatic circumstances.

The impact of these experiences should be explored with utmost sensitivity and only if necessary to better understand the child protection concerns. Many people with an experience of fear, trauma or torture are not able to speak about these experiences for many years after, if at all. Consider referring the family to specialist services to support them in their trauma recovery. Talk with them about what is available as seeking support is a process and identifying supports when families are pre-contemplative can result in new opportunities for families.

Settlement

The experience of settling in a new country can be extremely difficult. Learning a new language and understanding how things work can be challenging and stressful. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and worry for those left behind can affect adults and children. Family members may experience survivor guilt. There may be ongoing stress due to job insecurity and/or financially supporting family and community overseas. Settlement can also have an impact on family structure and functioning, leading to changes in the roles of family members. Understanding how migration and resettlement have affected family functioning is crucial in assessing which supports the family might require as they make adjustments. The role and functions of many services and agencies, particularly those delivered by government, including child protection, may be unfamiliar or frightening.

Migration status

Temporary migration status can create additional complexities and increased risk for women and children. For example, in the case of family violence, in addition to financial, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, uncertainty of migration status can contribute to heightened fear and vulnerability.

The visa that a child and family is subject to may have implications for safety and support needs. The [*Visa types for newly arrived and culturally diverse families*](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/specialist-resources/culturally-diverse-children-and-families)resource provides an overview of visa types that child protection practitioners are most likely to encounter when working with newly arrived communities.

## Practice tips

Cultural consultations

The Cultural Engagement Team sits within the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Refugee Minor Program and has a long history of working with refugees and newly arrived communities across Victoria. The Cultural Engagement Team can assist by providing the following:

* accompanying practitioners on home visits in certain circumstances
* secondary consultations and case reflection
* identifying appropriate referral pathways
* support with using language and interpreting services
* participating in care team, case plan and professionals meetings
* engaging with community stakeholders – when appropriate to facilitate specialist cultural advice and involvement from community leaders to improve outcomes
* working collaboratively to respond to specific issues affecting refugee and newly arrived communities
* information on culturally specific matters.

The Cultural Engagement Team is bound by departmental privacy principles and legislation. The information sharing provisions in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (s192) allows child protection practitioners to request, receive and disclose information to help protect children and promote their wellbeing and development including other internal programs. For more information please refer to the Child Protection Manual - [*Information sharing in child protection practice*](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/our-approach/information-sharing/information-sharing-child-protection-practice).

### Child protection practitioners can contact the Cultural Engagement Team for further information or assistance on 8765 5444 or via email at [cultural.engagement@dffh.vic.gov.au](mailto:cultural.engagement@dffh.vic.gov.au)

Communication

Every child and family, regardless of their cultural background, has unique characteristics and lived experience. By exploring and acknowledging differences in parenting practices, values, life experiences, attitudes and language and literacy, you can develop a solid base on which to build all future communication. As a frontline practitioner, there is a small window of opportunity to engage with children and families. If you are not culturally responsive, the communication gap may become larger. Watch some powerful video examples of cultural understanding and misunderstanding in relation to family violence at [1800RESPECT](https://goshare.realtimehealth.com/conditions/205).

Child protection practice uses technical, specialised and precise language. Be careful not to assume shared understandings of family support, family violence and child protection. When language barriers and cultural differences are added, you may need to take extra care to ensure that:

* information is clear and meaningful to the family and child
* all terms, definitions, explanations, descriptions, requirements, expectations are unambiguous and understood (see the link to the *Glossary of terms – child, family and relationship services* below which is available in a number of community languages)
* people understand by seeking confirmation or testing their understanding
* the translated information sheets located on the Child protection manual are used.

Use of interpreters

Interpreters used in child protection practice are trained and accredited professionals who provide interpreting services where:

* the child or family has limited English proficiency
* English is not the first language of the child or family
* the child or family may be hearing impaired
* complex information or foreign concepts are being communicated.

The Child protection manual has detailed practice advice on [the use of interpreters](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/service-descriptions/support-services/use-interpreters).

Children, families and communities involved in planning or decision making in child protection processes should be provided with an interpreter, if necessary, to allow them to participate fully. An interpreter may therefore be needed at any stage from intake through to case closure.

In small or newly arrived communities, there may be particular challenges relating to interpreter availability. Women, particularly where family violence is a risk factor, may prefer to use a female interpreter. Consider using an interstate interpreter where confidentiality may be compromised due to small communities and the possibility of the interpreter being known to the family.

Family violence - an intersectional approach

When families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities are required to engage with child protection because of family violence, they may experience additional barriers to those mentioned, such as:

* fear of being ostracised by the community
* multiple perpetrators including other family or community members
* visa/immigration status.

Undertake your risk assessment, paying particular attention to the family violence essential information category. Remember to identify in the Child identity and Parent and Caregiver characteristics essential information categories that the child and family are culturally, linguistically and faith diverse. Include information in the family, community and environment essential information categories. Consider consulting with The Orange Door and/ or specialist family violence senior practitioner.

Undertaking a MARAM assessment to inform your risk assessment and decision-making.

Data recording

Information relating to the cultural, ethnic, faith and linguistic characteristics of children and families must be recorded in CRIS. The timely and accurate recording of the information will support current and future assessments and decision making.

## Practice tools

The following practice tools support conversations with children and their families about culture:

1. *Celebrating diversity – a family snapshot*
2. *In our family*
3. [*My views*](https://dhhsvicgovau.sharepoint.com/sites/PDW/SitePages/SAFER-children-framework-practice-tools.aspx)
4. *Family reflection tool*

Consider developing [genograms](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/tools-and-checklists/genogram-program-user-guide) with family members including children.

You’ll find these practice tools on the Child Protection Manual in [Specialist resources/ Culturally diverse children and families.](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/specialist-resources/culturally-diverse-children-and-families)

## Suggested resources

[The child protection manual](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/%3e): The manual includes detailed advice about [forced marriage](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/advice/children-specific-circumstances/forced-marriage-advice) and [female genital mutilation](http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/advice/children-specific-circumstances/female-genital-mutilation-advice).

[Glossary of terms - child, family and relationship services](https://www.ceh.org.au/glossary-terms-child-family-relationship-services/): This glossary is designed to help families understand the technical terms related to child, family and relationship services in Victoria. Available in Arabic, Assyrian, Dari, Farsi, Karen, Khmer (Cambodian) and Vietnamese.

The Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health [www.ceh.org.au](http://www.ceh.org.au)

[The Cultural Atlas](https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/): Aims to inform and educate the public in cross-cultural attitudes, practices, norms, behaviours and communications. The goal is to enhance social cohesion in Australia and improve outcomes for individuals and organisations operating in an increasingly culturally diverse society.

[Foundation House - The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/): Provides services to advance the health, wellbeing and human rights of people of refugee backgrounds in Victoria who have experienced tortu4re or other traumatic events in their country of origin or while fleeing those countries.

[InTouch](http://intouch.org.au/): Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence addresses the needs of refugee and migrant women who are experiencing family violence.

[New Hope Foundation:](http://www.newhope.asn.au/) Delivers programs that support migrants and refugees across different life stages in the settlement and migration journey.

[Family Safety Pack:](https://www.dss.gov.au/family-safety-pack) Provides information for men and women coming to Australia about our laws regarding domestic and family violence, sexual assault and forced marriage, and a woman’s right to be safe.

[Statistical Data for Victorian Communities](http://www.greaterdandenong.com/document/18464/statistical-data-for-victorian-communities): This useful website provides information about Victorian suburbs and municipalities including birthplaces and languages spoken. Data from 2016 census.

[Ask Izzy:](https://askizzy.org.au/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI8_bl5vGH3wIVzoyPCh2nXQLKEAAYASAAEgLpjfD_BwE) This website helps people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to find the services they need, right now and nearby.

[English and support for refugees and asylum seekers app](https://itunes.apple.com/au/app/eas-network/id1049963885?mt=8): This app helps new members of our community find support, for example, where they can learn English, access food and vouchers. Most relevant to Dandenong and surrounds.

[1800respect](https://www.1800respect.org.au/inclusive-practice/cald/offering_support): This website has resources about cross cultural communication and engagement.

## References

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing 2021, SAFER children framework: the five activities of risk assessment 2021

Department of Health and Human Services 2012, *Children and their families,* Specialist practice resource, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

Kaur 2009, ‘Developing “Culturally Sensitive” Practice when working with CALD communities in child protection – An Australian exploratory study’, *Developing Practice,* 23: Autumn/Winter, pp. 22-34.

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Child Protection Manual <http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/>

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