

CASE STUDY

Melaleuca Refugee Centre Family Harmony Program

Melaleuca Refugee Centre's Family Harmony Program provides a series of workshops and activities that support families as they adjust to their new community and life in Australia. The workshops are complemented by more informal group activities, and one on one mentoring. Central to the success of the program is its strengths-based community development model.

About the program

The Family Harmony Program supports newly arrived refugees and migrants and their families as they settle into life in their new community. It helps families develop strategies for building strong, resilient and healthy family units. The program uses a strengths-based community development model, building on the values and understandings of different cultures around family. The program has been delivered, developed and refined for over 24 years.

The program delivers a series of workshops. Each workshop is delivered in clients' native language within community groups. Adopting a community development approach, training is provided to members of existing communities – who have undergone the same or similar journeys to participants – to co-facilitate the workshop.

The workshops cover a range of topics including: positive parenting and care approaches; maintaining healthy family relationships, child protection; domestic violence; managing family conflict; and skills to develop respectful relationships.

Through the workshops, participants explore together culturally appropriate ways of parenting. The workshops ask participants what parenting 'looks' like from their point of view, and asks them to share their own stories. The workshops then develop a way to parent that honors and builds on the strengths of their culture, while also incorporating new Australian norms.

The classes provide childcare and transport to make it easier for parents to attend. These have been crucial in ensuring attendance. Interpreters are also present at the classes. Even where participants have good English, interpreters allow them to share their stories more freely, without having to translate their stories in their own minds.

AT A GLANCE



Target Participants

Families from refugee and migrant backgrounds



Aim

To educate clients about Australian families' rights and responsibilities and build strategies for building strong, resilient and resourceful family units



Location

Darwin, Northern Territory



Funding

Department of Children and Families, Northern Territory Government



The program includes a number of practical group activities that provide capacity building for parents. Many parents find their children adjust to life in Australia more quickly than them, leading to a loss of confidence in their role as parents and their parental authority. The group activities help them to regain their confidence. For example, one group session provides swimming lessons for adults to help them to feel more confident in the water and in their abilities to take their children to pools and supervise them.

In addition to the workshops, clients are given numerous opportunities to apply their learning in peer to peer settings (such as play groups, sewing classes or drumming groups), or one-on-one mentoring.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this program include:

- Increasing the skills, capacity and confidence of parents from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Developing and embedding approaches to family relationships that both honor participants cultures, and incorporate new Australian norms

Challenges

- Topics such as what constitutes child abuse, what defines appropriate discipline, domestic violence, and healthy relationships are very sensitive issues to discuss. The emphasis on community consultation and building on the strengths of the community are key to being able to successfully unpack these topics.
- Family dynamics are highly influenced by culture, meaning that each cultural group will require its own unique approach. For this reason, the delivery of the Family Harmony Program is adapted to each community group.

Key Learnings

This experience has generated the following key learnings for Melaleuca Refugee Centre:

- 1.** Strengths-based and community development approaches are central to successfully promoting healthy family relationships in refugee and migrant communities. It's not about imposing an approach to family, but about developing a new approach together that works for them in their new community.
- 2.** Discreet practical skills, like knowing how to swim, ride a bike or other simple skills can have a big impact on parent-child relationships.

For more information, visit <http://melaleuca.org.au/family-harmony-program/>

