



Settlement
Council
of Australia

Submission: Early Years Strategy

Settlement Council of Australia

May 2023

The Settlement Council of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate, the Ngunnawal people. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which migrants and refugees settle across Australia, and on which our sector operates.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to our lands and waters.

About the Settlement Council of Australia

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services and support to people of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Our members include organisations large and small, who are committed to the successful settlement of migrants and refugees across the country. Their services range from greeting new arrivals at the airport, through to assisting them to secure housing, learn English, make social connections, access services and find their first job. Australia's settlement services are recognised as being among the best in the world.

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List of acronyms

AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
CSC	Childcare Subsidy
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
SCOA	Settlement Council of Australia
SETS	Settlement Engagement and Transition Support

Introduction

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy. The Settlement Council of Australia is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services and support to people of migrant and refugee backgrounds. Settlement is a two-way process of migrants and refugees adjusting to a new life in Australia, and Australia welcoming migrants and refugees. Australia has an obligation to those who come here, including providing the best settlement outcomes for its youngest arrivals.

With almost a third of the population (27.6%) born overseas, and 22.3% of people using a language other than English at home, it is critical to include Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)¹ perspectives in the context of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy.² Additionally, parents and children who come through Australia's humanitarian program as refugees face additional barriers which will be discussed in this submission. Almost 40% of Australia's humanitarian arrivals are under the age of 17, and a quarter of children enrolled in their first year of school in Australia are from a CALD background.³ Thus, having policies and programs in place to support these groups is vital. Past research in Australia shows that children from CALD backgrounds are at a higher risk of experiencing developmental vulnerabilities when they enter school compared to their peers, and are also less likely to participate in early childhood education programs such as preschools and playgroups.⁴

The importance of CALD backgrounds in the Early Years Strategy cannot be overstated. The Strategy must reflect the diversity of the Australian community and ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education and care, regardless of their background. It is also important to recognise that early childhood education and care can play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and integration. By supporting families from CALD backgrounds to access quality early childhood education and care, the Australian Government can help to build a more inclusive society and promote understanding and respect between different cultures.

Children from refugee backgrounds

Children from refugee backgrounds can face a myriad of barriers that make their transition to a new country and culture incredibly difficult. Sometimes children arrive to Australia unaccompanied, on the other hand refugee families are often large, and there may be many children within one family.

One of the primary challenges that these children encounter is learning a new language. Without proficiency in the local language, refugee children may struggle to communicate with others, both

¹ We note the Department of Social Services (DSS) refers to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members in the Early Years Strategy. The term CALD can sometimes be criticised for homogenising diverse communities by grouping them together based on their cultural or linguistic differences. It may not adequately capture the unique and individual experiences, needs, and identities of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is important to be mindful of the diversity, agency, and self-identification of individuals or communities, and to use language that respects their identities and experiences. We prefer to use the term migrants and refugees, but have utilised CALD where necessary to align with DSS.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas*. Available online at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas>

³ Department of Home Affairs. (2022). *Australia's Offshore Humanitarian Program: 2021–22*. Available online at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/australia-offshore-humanitarian-program-2021-22.pdf>; Rajwani, H., Culos, I., & McMahon, T. (2021). *Stronger starts, brighter futures: Exploring trends in the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Settlement Services International. Available online at: <https://apo.org.au/node/312414>

⁴ Ibid

inside and outside the classroom. This language barrier can also make it difficult for them to access educational opportunities and services, which can have long-term impacts on their academic success.

Another significant barrier that refugee children face is adjusting to a new culture. Children who have recently fled their home country may feel disoriented, confused, and uncertain about their new surroundings. They may also experience culture shock as they navigate new customs, traditions, and social norms. This can be particularly challenging for children who come from cultures that are vastly different from Australia.

Additionally, refugee children may have significant gaps in their education due to the disruption caused by fleeing their home country. This can make it challenging for them to keep up with their peers in school. They may also struggle to adapt to the different teaching styles and educational systems in their new country. In addition, the Australian Refugee Health Practice Guide notes that some refugee children may have an incorrect date of birth recorded on their migration paperwork, which should be considered when assessing growth, development, learning or school placement.⁵

Refugee children may also face experiences of trauma, racism, and financial hardship. Many of these children have experienced significant trauma in their home countries or during their journey to a new country, which can have long-lasting psychological impacts. Furthermore, they may encounter racism and discrimination from their new peers and communities, which can further compound their feelings of isolation and marginalisation. Financial hardship is another challenge that many refugee families face, which can limit their access to resources and opportunities.

Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and community members to provide support, resources, and opportunities that can help these children thrive. Education and awareness in early childhood education and schools can help foster positive connections between children and parents from diverse cultural backgrounds and educators. One effective approach to facilitate such connections is through the use of multicultural liaison officers, who serve as intermediaries between educators and families, helping to bridge language and cultural barriers. Language and cultural barriers can sometimes hinder effective communication between parents and educators, leading to misunderstandings or miscommunication. Multicultural liaison officers can serve as valuable intermediaries, facilitating communication and building trust between parents and educators. They can provide language translation services, cultural interpretation, and guidance on cultural norms and practices. Furthermore, education and awareness can help parents understand the value and importance of early childhood education and schools in their children's development.

Recommendation 1

Policies and programs should take into consideration the unique challenges refugee children encounter such as language, culture, educational, racism, trauma and more.

Children from refugee backgrounds may experience comparable health issues to Australian children, however, they may also encounter health concerns that are particular to their country of origin and the circumstances of their migration. Policies and programs should take into

⁵ Australian Refugee Health Practice Guide. *Children*. Available online at: <https://refugeehealthguide.org.au/children/>

consideration the unique challenges refugee children encounter due to their past experiences. The government should prioritise early identification and intervention for developmental delays or health issues to ensure early access to appropriate support services.

Recommendation 2

The government should prioritise early identification and intervention for developmental delays or health issues for children from refugee backgrounds to ensure early access to appropriate support services.

Early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care plays a crucial role in equipping young children with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in kindergarten and beyond. CALD families face unique challenges when it comes to accessing and participating in early childhood education and care. These challenges can arise from differences in language, cultural practices, and beliefs. To ensure that the Early Years Strategy is effective and meets the needs of all families, including those from CALD backgrounds, it is essential that the Strategy takes these challenges into account.

“I think the preparation that happens for those children, particularly before they start school is incredibly important to them and their families.”

- Settlement Service Provider

The pre-school preparation process for young children, particularly prior to their formal education, holds significant importance for both the children and their families. Establishing positive engagement with early learning centres right from the outset is crucial. The readiness of a child (and their parents) to transition smoothly into primary school and embark on a successful educational journey is greatly influenced by the development of key aspects of independence fostered in early childhood centres prior to their entry into formal schooling.

“School readiness is a joint effort - the child must be ready for school, the school must be equipped and ready for the child, and the community must have the capacity to provide the appropriate support to ensure a child’s development and learning.”⁶

One main recommendation we have heard from settlement service providers is the need for bicultural staff, and greater cultural awareness among early childhood educators. The presence of bilingual or bicultural staff within early childhood centres plays a crucial role in facilitating families’ comprehension and acceptance of separating from their children, as this separation of children and parents would not often happen in many migrants’ home countries.

⁶ Community Hubs. *Submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Communities*. Available online at: <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Inquiry-into-early-childhood-engagement-of-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse.pdf>

“Having bicultural staff employed by centres is incredibly important for easing the family’s understanding of leaving children [in care], which they wouldn’t have done in their home countries. They would have always been cared for by extended family.”

- Settlement Service Provider

The reality of the current cost-of-living crisis is that families are going to increasingly need childcare so they can get into the employment space. Therefore, it is important to have bicultural support and cultural awareness among staff, so CALD parents feel more comfortable, and the experience for the child is also beneficial.

Recommendation 3

There is a need in early childcare centres for bicultural staff, and greater cultural awareness among early childhood educators.

Community Hubs model

Community Hubs are targeted at migrant and refugee women with young children and have been described as ‘a good soft entry point for refugees’ to help build confidence and link to the wider community.⁷ SCOA believes that many of the challenges that 0–5-year-old migrant and refugee children face, can be addressed through something like a Community Hub.

Community Hubs are situated in schools and help:

- connect women with schools to get familiar with the school environment
- connect women with other women
- connect women with organisations that can provide health, education and settlement support for their children⁸ (i.e., if there are learning difficulties or developmental delays)
- build trust
- help with prep transition.

What works with Community Hubs is the ability of those who attend being linked with services, the education and awareness provided and a safe space where they can learn and ask questions. Early childhood programs offered in Community Hubs can provide access to quality early learning opportunities, promote healthy child development, and foster social skills and resilience. Expanding Community Hubs can reach more migrant and refugee women and provide them with the necessary support, empowering them to overcome challenges and thrive in their new communities. Community Hubs can also have broader social and economic benefits for the community. They serve as a platform for promoting cultural exchange, celebration of diversity, and mutual respect among community members.

⁷ Shergold, P., Benson, K., & Piper, M. (2019). *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: the findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Available online at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugees-humanitarian-entrants.pdf>

⁸ Community Hubs. *Submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Communities*. Available online at: <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Inquiry-into-early-childhood-engagement-of-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse.pdf>

Recommendation 4

Expanding Community Hubs can have multiple positive impacts, including promoting inclusivity, supporting vulnerable populations, fostering early childhood development, and enhancing community cohesion.

Access to Childcare during AMEP

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) provides free childcare services to support the participation of migrants and refugees with children in the program. The provision of free childcare is critical to removing barriers to learning English and increasing participation rates, especially for this high-risk group. The childcare services are currently funded on an hourly basis, but many centres require daily bookings. This hourly payment model can be administratively inefficient and may not align with the actual needs of the clients. Even in centres with morning and afternoon bookings, the end of the morning session often does not coincide with the end of AMEP classes and so the afternoon session also has to be booked. Payment should also be made to cover the cost of the holding fees applicable during term breaks and in the December/January holiday period. Therefore, a suggested alternative is to fund childcare on a daily basis to engage external providers and on-site childcare.

Recommendation 5

The government should fund childcare for AMEP clients on a daily basis to engage external providers and on-site childcare.

Onsite childcare

Migrant women, especially those who have children, are among the most at risk of disengaging with learning English. Access to childcare is therefore essential to ensure the best chance of success for such a high-risk group. The successful model of the Community Hubs, where services are provided on location, demonstrates how removing barriers can encourage participation.

Many AMEP providers in more urban settings have purpose-built childcare facilities. Utilisation of these in-house creche models allow for greater ease in accessing childcare services. Onsite childcare assists in retention and providers often have a better understanding of the settlement experience. It also eliminates the need to pay for individual children's hourly childcare needs making them a cost effective and convenient model.

“We find onsite childcare centres much more effective in not only the child's development, but also the participant engagement, knowing that their child is there, in the same centre, particularly if they come from a refugee background.”

- AMEP Provider

Recommendation 6

Where feasible, the government should have onsite/ in-house creche models for childcare provided during AMEP.

Mention needs to be made of the impact of childcare on parents learning, especially when they have had a refugee journey characterised by trauma and loss. Many families experience anxiety of losing their base culture and also uncertainty of what is happening to their children while they are in care. There is an instant separation of children and infants from their parents, which can create some internal emotional turmoil that has an impact on the adults learning. Given that employment is one of the outcomes for settlement, there is an opportunity for providers to collaborate with the settlement sector to explore some innovative models of childcare which might include children being cared for by members of their own communities in their own languages and experiencing cultural continuity. Such an approach blended with considerations previously mentioned could generate positive outcomes for parents separating from their children to positively learn, knowing their children are in cultural care settings.

Recommendation 7

Bicultural staff and/or members of migrants and refugee communities should be employed by childcare providers of AMEP participants.

Issues in regional Australia

Childcare availability can be limited in regional areas due to many reasons such as lower population density, geographic remoteness, travel issues, workforce availability and other access and availability issues. We have heard from some regional settlement providers that AMEP providers/ TAFEs struggle to get childcare providers on board. This means children in some regional areas are straightaway at a disadvantage and this can further push back their progress. In addition, there are workforce issues in many regional areas as many centres are unable to employ bicultural staff. We have heard from settlement workers that many CALD women in the care workforce are moving from childcare to NDIS due to better pay. If regional settlement is going to continue to be a focus of the government's migration plan, issues such as childcare availability, availability of bicultural staff, and pay should be looked at.

Onsite childcare models may not be feasible in regional areas. As mentioned above, many AMEP providers in more urban settings have purpose-built childcare facilities. However, for AMEP providers in more rural areas, or where there is less demand, this model may not be useful, instead here providers may find it more cost effective to employ a daily rate to assist families to engage childcare services.

Recommendation 8

If regional settlement is going to continue to be a focus of the government's migration plan, issues such as childcare availability, availability of bicultural staff, and pay should be looked at.

Expanding settlement support

The Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program provides support to humanitarian entrants and other eligible vulnerable migrants for up to 5 years after arrival. SETS client services helps in accessing English language skills, education, and programs to prepare for employment, among other support. It is a key program for supporting many migrant women, and includes a dedicated domestic and family violence component. SCOA has previously advocated for removing limitations to accessing SETS. Some women are limited in accessing SETS as their settlement journey may be impeded by assuming caregiving responsibilities.

Children born to migrant parents in Australia often face settlement challenges, regardless of when their parents arrived in the country. It is important that these children and their families have access to support services that can help them navigate these challenges and achieve better outcomes. As mentioned, eligibility for such support may be limited by the parents' immigration status or the timing of their arrival in Australia. For example, a child may be born several years after their parents arrived, however if the mother is no longer eligible for SETS, the family does not benefit from the wraparound settlement support that would result in improved life outcomes for the child. This highlights the need for more flexible and inclusive policies that can better support migrant families and their children, regardless of their circumstances.

Recommendation 9

Remove limitations to accessing SETS based on length of stay in Australia and visa category.

Conclusion

Australia's growing cultural diversity is reflected in the growing number of children from CALD and migrant or refugee backgrounds. As Australia's demographics evolve, it is essential for educational institutions and policymakers to recognise and respond to the changing needs of CALD children and their families. This includes promoting inclusive and culturally responsive practices in early childhood education and care, providing support for language development, and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.

“There are many CALD children who, together with their families, require a suite of universal and targeted responses to increase their participation in learning and development in the pre-school years.”⁹

In conclusion, the recommendations put forth highlight the need for comprehensive and inclusive policies and programs to address the unique challenges faced by CALD and migrant and refugee children in Australia.

⁹ Rajwani, H., Culos, I., & McMahon, T. (2021). *Stronger starts, brighter futures: Exploring trends in the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Settlement Services International. Available online at: <https://apo.org.au/node/312414>

List of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Policies and programs should take into consideration the unique challenges refugee children encounter such as language, culture, educational, racism, trauma and more.

Recommendation 2: The government should prioritise early identification and intervention for developmental delays or health issues for children from refugee backgrounds to ensure early access to appropriate support services.

Recommendation 3: There is a need in early childcare centres for bicultural staff, and greater cultural awareness among early childhood educators.

Recommendation 4: Expanding Community Hubs can have multiple positive impacts, including promoting inclusivity, supporting vulnerable populations, fostering early childhood development, and enhancing community cohesion.

Recommendation 5: The government should fund childcare for AMEP clients on a daily basis to engage external providers and on-site childcare.

Recommendation 6: Where feasible, the government should have onsite/ in-house creche models for childcare provided during AMEP.

Recommendation 7: Bicultural staff and/or members of migrants and refugee communities should be employed by childcare providers of AMEP participants.

Recommendation 8: If regional settlement is going to continue to be a focus of the government's migration plan, issues such as childcare availability, availability of bicultural staff, and pay should be looked at.

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