



Sexual Health

Overview

Sexual risk behaviours among newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds are on the increase. The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to provide service providers with background information, and practical tips and pointers for developing youth-specific and culturally sensitive reproductive and sexual health programs for newly arrived refugees.

Background Information

Sexual Health Knowledge

As many young people from refugee backgrounds arrive in Australia with limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, in general, there is little awareness about sexuality, reproduction, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Even after arrival in Australia, very few are exposed to health services, education, and resources that can increase their knowledge and understanding. Moreover, many come from a cultural context where parents do not believe young people should learn about sex prior to marriage.

The level of understanding of sexual health issues among young refugees, particularly those in the early to middle stages of the resettlement process, is generally low. There is a lack of knowledge about common infections such as Chlamydia, and many have not heard of sexually transmitted infections other than HIV/AIDS. There is also a perception that there is a low risk of HIV infection in Australia. Many young people also have poor knowledge of modes of transmission, symptoms, and treatment options for STDs, including HIV. There is a common misconception that individuals with STDs always display symptoms, and that potential carriers of STDs can be identified by their reputation or by behavioural or visual cues.

Relationships

While there are often religious and cultural expectations that sex only occur after and within marriage, many young people become involved in premarital sexual relationships. The stigma and associated secrecy surrounding this can place young people at increased risk of STDs and unwanted pregnancies, due to a reluctance to turn to parents or health professionals for health information and advice.

Sexual Behaviour

Young people, some as young as 12 years old, are increasingly engaging in unprotected sex, resulting in STDs and unwanted pregnancies. Some of the key contributors to early sexual experiences include peer pressure, lack of supportive parenting, drug and alcohol use, and dropping out of school. While sexual health services are readily available and some have provided outreach into refugee communities, many young people still have limited knowledge of safe sexual practices and STDs. Many males are not aware of Australian law in relation to engaging in sexual relationships with underage girls.

Teenage Pregnancies

Unplanned teenage pregnancies and homelessness among young refugees is on the rise. Contributing factors include a perceived need among young women to resist the imposition of tight parental and caregiver control, peer pressure, lack of parental and caregiver support, and drug and alcohol use. Many young women also



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experience significant pressure from their partners, many of whom are not aware of safer sexual practices, or do not consider them important.

Teenage Parents

Many young refugees come from a cultural context where parenting styles and disciplinary practices differ from those generally found in Western society. Parent-child relationships are often characterised by authoritarianism, hierarchy, limited intimacy, and fewer rights for children. Physical discipline is also used frequently. Teenage mothers often transfer these practices into their own parenting, with limited understanding of the legal ramifications. Many lack the knowledge and skills to provide supportive parenting.

Tips and Pointers for Service Providers

Finding effective and culturally sensitive ways to educate and motivate young refugees to avoid or reduce sexual risk behaviours is a challenge. The following tips and pointers draw on MYSA's research and service delivery experience to engage young people in unwanted pregnancy and STD prevention education.

Designing the Program

Before implementing a sexual health work program for young refugees, it may first be necessary to review your agency's culture, policies, and practices to ensure they are culturally responsive and inclusive. This may require organisational change, adjustment, or improvement in a number of areas:

Do Your Homework

It is very important to learn as much as possible about your specific target group of young people before trying to recruit them to your program. An awareness of their cultural values and practices in relation to reproductive and sexual health will enable you to design an appropriate program.

Outreach in the Community

The key to getting your program known to young refugees and their communities is to engage in outreach. Visit schools with a high refugee student population, attend community functions and events, hire stalls at multicultural festivals, and ensure that multicultural agencies and other organisations involved in service delivery to refugee communities know about your program. Consider partnering with other agencies on programs that are already reaching young refugees. Ensure that any promotional material you disseminate is both youth friendly and culturally and linguistically appropriate. Be creative and promote your program in a way that will appeal to young people by focussing on the recreational and social aspects of the program

Gaining Parent and Caregiver Support

Parents may have concerns that service providers will introduce their children to ideas that conflict with their cultural values and practices. Here are some suggestions for gaining parental support for your sexual health program:

- ❖ Undertake a thorough community consultation process before implementing your program.
- ❖ Make connections with parents and families as well as young people to build trust and dispel any uncertainty they may have about your agency.



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- ❖ Provide reassurance to parents and caregivers that the purpose of your program is pregnancy and disease prevention.
- ❖ Ensure that parents and caregivers receive the information in the appropriate languages, especially consent forms. However, be aware that some caregivers may be illiterate in their own language.
- ❖ It may be helpful to recruit workers from the same communities as parents to help break down potential barriers. However, young people should always be consulted as it cannot be assumed they will automatically relate to these workers just because they come from the same community. In fact, some young people find it difficult to trust these workers because they are in a position to disclose confidential information to their parents and community. When recruiting bi-cultural and bi-lingual workers, whether as volunteers or paid workers, it is therefore important to select people who are known and trusted by your target group. Ensure that all workers, including volunteers, are aware of their responsibilities to respect confidentiality. Consider asking a young person to participate in the selection process.
- ❖ If necessary, arrange transport for young people to and from your program.

Create Youth Friendly Surroundings

Another important recruitment strategy is to create and maintain a youth friendly environment in which every aspect of your agency's operations from policy to décor is mindful of multicultural young people. Is the environment that you are seeking to bring young people into youth friendly? What is the physical space like? Would it appeal to young people? What measures does your agency have in place to be culturally accessible to multicultural young people? Are your group work facilitators friendly, approachable, and respectful?

Here are some suggestions for improving the cultural accessibility and acceptability of your agency:

- ❖ Review your agency's culture, policies, and practices to determine the extent to which they acknowledge and respect cultural diversity. Make changes where necessary.
- ❖ Provide an open and accountable service to young people and inform them of their rights and responsibilities.
- ❖ If possible, provide information in young peoples' first languages, especially consent forms and other information being sent to families.
- ❖ Consider using visual displays that promote cultural diversity. Feature the images of multicultural young people in your promotional and other materials. If your agency is not youth-specific, consider creating a separate space and/or program times for young people.
- ❖ Ensure that the first contact person in your agency, whether a group work facilitator or administrative officer, is able to effectively engage young refugees.
- ❖ Seek regular feedback from young people about issues relating to your agency's practices and programs.

Work from Young People's Understanding of the Issues



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Identifying and responding to young people at their point of need, as defined by them, is essential to recruitment. This cannot be achieved without engaging young people in an ongoing consultative process and encouraging their participation in all aspects of the program including design, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Address Potential Barriers to Participation

Identifying and addressing the barriers that prevent or limit the access of young people to your program is fundamental to recruitment. Most young refugees do not access sexual health programs and services for a number of reasons including language and cultural barriers, stigma, lack of information about available services, lack of transport, financial difficulties, and distrust of service providers. Another barrier concerns where the young person is situated in the resettlement process. New arrivals are still trying to come to terms with mainstream Australian culture and systems and may place less importance on learning about sexual health. For young people from new and emerging refugee communities, parental and caregiver restriction can be another reason. Newly arrived parents and caregivers can be protective of their children until they become more familiar and comfortable with their new country.

Implementing the Program

Be Aware of Cultural and Contextual Issues

A young person's understanding about sexuality and sexual health issues will depend on her or his cultural and religious background, acculturation to Australian society, level of education, and stage of resettlement. Pre-marital sex, de-facto relationships, homosexuality, contraception, and abortion may be sensitive or taboo subjects for those from traditional and religious families. Women's information about sexual health issues should be delivered sensitively and only in the presence of other women.

Recruiting Peer Educators

Consider recruiting peer educators from a broad range of cultural backgrounds, particularly those who support the program's goals and want to be involved in achieving them. Effective peer educators will reach out to young people rather than expecting them to respond to a flyer. If it is not possible to recruit peer educators, ensure that group facilitators receive regular youth-specific, cross-cultural training and support so they are able to effectively engage and develop rapport with young people.

Be Aware of Language and Communication Issues

Many young people have had limited formal education or experienced disruption to their education prior to arriving in Australia. For many young people, English is their second or third language. Furthermore, some may not be literate in their first language. Becoming acquainted with the nuances of a new language can be a long and difficult process so it is important to be sensitive and patient when working with young people.

Facilitating effective cross-cultural communication and understanding can be a significant challenge as many Western words, expressions, concepts, and humour may not transfer to other cultures and languages. Even young people who speak English very well and are reasonably familiar with Western culture may not understand many of the terms and concepts routinely used. Assistance with cultural issues can be obtained by telephoning MYSA (see contact details below).



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Be Flexible in Program Delivery

Many young people are very relaxed about punctuality and keeping appointments so it is important to be flexible with program delivery. It is also advisable to allow more time than usual for program sessions because they are likely to start late and go on for longer than planned. Young people lead different lives than adults so it is also important to arrange programs for times when they are likely to attend, that is, in the late afternoon, in the evenings and on weekends.

Respect Confidentiality

Many young people fear there will be intended and unintended breaches of confidentiality if they access community programs, particularly in relation to personal, sensitive, or culturally taboo issues. This fear may be heightened if they come from a small or close-knit community and are assigned workers from their own cultural background, where information can easily be passed on to their families and broader community. When promoting your program to young people, it is therefore important to provide constant reassurance about confidentiality.

Youth Friendly Programs

Many young people are not interested in participating in programs that are primarily educational in focus so it is important to explore ways of incorporating social, cultural, and recreational activities into your sexual health program. Consult with young people about their different needs and preferences.

Reading Material

Due to unfamiliarity with mainstream Australian culture and systems, young refugees may take longer than their Anglo-Australian peers to understand how your program works and what it can offer them. Ensure you provide reading material that is sensitive to the religious and cultural backgrounds of young people and, if possible, provide the material in their first languages. The material should also be youth-focussed, clear and easy to understand. Some young people are illiterate in their first language so it is important to ensure information is also available in non-written form, for example, videos. Try not to overload young people with too much information as most of it will be forgotten, especially if it pertains to issues that are not immediate concerns for them.

Where Can I find More Information?

Multicultural Youth SA (MYSA)

Telephone: 8212 0085 (business hours)

Website: www.mysa.com.au

Disclaimer

The Fact Sheets have been developed in close collaboration with cultural informants from each of the communities represented and are, to the best of MYSA's knowledge, accurate at the time of writing. However, these Fact Sheets should not be taken as authoritative statements. Should you discover any errors in the Fact Sheets, please contact MYSA on: (08) 8212 0085 or email: info@mysa.com.au