

# Don Chipp Foundation Ltd

ACN 008 618 488

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## **The Care, Protection and Adjustment of Refugee Children<sup>1</sup>**

**By Denise Lynch and Fiona Keast**

### **Denise Lynch**

Hi, I'm Denise Lynch, and we'd like to begin this presentation about the protection and adjustment of refugee children in Australia by giving some voice to some of the children and parents who have been part of this study. So we will begin with that.

*"I worry about my Dad all the time. He had a good job in Nairobi as an insurance broker. Now he is a cleaner sometimes. He is always sad and I wonder if our life will ever be good"*

Nelida, from Kenya, aged 13 years  
In Australia, 2 years

*"Every night we talk about the visa. We wait and wait. Dad and Mom cannot work and we never have anything"*

Alfredo, from Peru, aged 15 years  
In Australia 8 years

*"I got my children out of hell in Palestine and now they are in limbo in Australia. They cannot concentrate at school or be alright, because they do not know that they will not be deported... They are fearful the whole time. This is terrible"*

Mohammed, Father of children with Temporary Protection Visas  
In Australia 3 years and 3 months

I've chosen to begin this paper with the voices of three participants from this research. Their stories of being a refugee child in Australia provide valuable insights into the protection, care and adjustment of refugee children.

This paper is an initial report on a three year qualitative study conducted this year in Sydney Australia with the collaboration of the University of Sydney's School of Social Work and Policy Studies; The Asylum Seekers Centre; and with a grant received from the Don Chipp Foundation, for which we are very thankful.

The study concerns itself with the protection care and adjustment of refugee children in the Australian community. The study places the children in the current political context and aims to inform the research, but as importantly, give these children and young people a voice about their life in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a transcript of a presentation given at the Don Chipp Foundation Human Rights Seminar, 9 December 2004, NSW Parliament House.

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I'll now pass over to Fiona to speak for a few minutes about the Asylum Seekers Centre

## **Fiona Keast**

I'm just going to talk about the Centre. As you can see here from this slide, the Asylum Seekers Centre was commenced through initiatives of Uniya, the Jesuit Social Justice Centre and the Good Shepherd Sisters. It began ten years ago in our little home in Surry Hills, and to date our major financial sponsors have been The Good Shepherd Sisters and the Mercy Foundation. We also have other very generous supporters in the community. I've actually just come back from our Christmas party today, where we had over a hundred asylum seeker parents and children and other volunteers who assist us at the Centre. We had presents donated from different schools. We had the Show Mercy group doing the food for the day, and they had lunch donated from different restaurants from around Sydney. So it was a great day, it was very fun.

Our patron is Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC, Governor of NSW and the Centre receives no Government funding.

We work with asylum seekers, who are on-shore refugee applicants who are in the community and area awaiting decisions on their refugee status. This can take from three months to three years, and we walk with people throughout that time.

Sometimes we see people from the very beginning, possibly even before an application has been made, and other times we see them at the end of their time here, possibly at the large stage, with an application to the Minister, and other times we work with people who've made the difficult decision to return home or try somewhere else for their protection.

So the only folk we work with are ineligible for government services, no Centerlink services, no pharmaceutical benefits, and those that can't work don't have Medicare either. So many folk are relying on people in the community to support them – relatives, friends and other organizations as well. The greatest need that we've come across are health care, accommodation and food. Many folk we work with have survived trauma in their country.

I just wanted to say we provide other services as well – English classes, job search skills, health care, living skills, legal referrals, as well as skills for living in Australia. The program that has been around for one year is the family support program, which has really fed into this research. We're looking at providing parents and children in those families with some extra money for schools needs – it might be for an excursion, it might be buying a uniform or school shoes, basic needs for school so that children can feel comfortable going and their parents feel comfortable sending their kids to schools with those items that they need. The program also seeks to provide pharmaceutical costs for those children as well. Immunization, if it is needed, or other medicines.

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So the Centre is a place for support and hope, and is a safe place to gather. Having this research on children and their adjustment in the community is helping to feed into our family support project and hopefully to keep that going. It's been around for one year and I hope it will continue.

## **Denise Lynch**

We've given, at the very outset of this discussion today, the results of the research after the first year, and I guess that what is most concerning from a child protection background, is that the result indicate that the intra-familial abuse categories apply no more for refugee children than for any other children in the Australian community. However, the study has revealed a type of ambient policy induced stress with consequence that can match in harmfulness that of other recognised forms of child maltreatment. The uncertainty of the legal situation for all children in the study and the subsequent inability of their families and themselves to access normal citizenship rights and responsibilities, such as Medicare and job opportunities, has a resultant short- and long-term disturbing impact on these children. They are distressed and worried about their lives and future. And so I thought it was really important to give the actual results of the study before I give a whole range of things about it, because whilst the process and all the things are very interesting I think it's really important to remember that what we've actually come up with is structural abuse of children within the community.

The rationale for the study: both in Australia and overseas a great of attention has been given to the conditions of refugees and asylum seekers upon arrival in their host country. Thomas and Lao, in their submission to the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, described the major research funding of the period of 1992 reflecting knowledge gathered about the psychological health of child and adolescent refugees and asylum seekers. They say that "while there is considerable and growing literature on the mental health of adult refugee and asylum seekers, current researchers acknowledge a lack of understanding of the mental health of children and adolescents."

So there's a lot of research that talks about the impact of the process of getting to the host country, but there's been little investigation into the long-term adjustment of refugee and asylum-seeker children in Australia. There's some work done by McHelp in Western Australia, with Vietnamese adolescents, and by Brow in 2003 in Queensland.

This lack of longitudinal research into the resettlement of refugees is surprising and unsurprising. Part of the reason is there are a number of obstacles. Firstly, a lack of official published data collected by government. If anyone has tried, notwithstanding our wonderful Internet facilities, to try and find information out about refugee children is unbelievable difficult, even if you go into all the acceptable and accepted data sites.

The difficulty of identifying and locating refugees and asylum seekers who have been settled in Australia a number of years ago. There are cultural and language barriers,

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limited cross-culturally validated measurement techniques. The problems due to privacy and confidentiality legislation, and a wariness by parents and participants to trust researchers.

I won't go into the definition of refugees; I think you are a group that knows it. But I wanted to actually state that we tried to think more broadly and look and children with a refugee-like background. Who may have been asylum seekers, who may have temporary protection, most of them have bridging visas, and a whole range of others. So our group was comprised of either refugees, or those with a refugee-like background.

The history of refugees and their families in Australia reflect attitudes, policies and practices that are both proud and shameful. And we really have to place this study within the current context of the political structures that we have in this country. So nothing really can be thought about unless we do that.

We have to look at the role of the media, and we have to look, and previous speakers have spoken eloquently and passionately today, about the context of the Australian people's attitudes to refugees in this country, whether they've been constructed by the media or not.

The methodology for this paper is based on overseas and some current methodology here. But I would say as a researcher and as a social worker we have at the Asylum Seekers Centre an absolute duty of care about opening up with children and families that may cause distress or long term harm. And in that sense I refer people here to Rousseau's work in Canada, and she speaks about the importance of the unexpressed in doing research with refugee children. This is defined by her as the extreme range of human experiences that refugee children often live through in their young years. Her seminal paper recommends an understanding of refugee children experiencing a range of human experiences that often are not only too terrible to speak about but are too terrible to think about. And they include living under regimes of repression, seeing family members injured or killed, escaping with their lives, leaving homes and friends with little preparation, and attempting to understand their place in the new country.

To understand that context is very important in the way that we do this research. With my final year social work students, I give a lecture sometimes and say I want you to stand up and walk out the door and be told that you are about to get a plane now. You have no chance to say goodbye to anybody. You have no chance to get the material things that are important to you. You leave your home, your best friends, your people, and you have no chance to say goodbye to anybody. And it is an amazing exercise in what it does to the students. It really brings to their faces in a very raw fashion the issue of what being a child refugee is like, notwithstanding the incredible issues that adults face.

The study has limitations. It does not quantifiably represent refugee children in NSW or Australia. It looked at ten children and their families. The study is an investigation of factors that indicate the well-being and contentment or discontent of children in the

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Australian community. The study does not reflect the wide variety of legal citizenship, situations that refugee children and their families hold in this country. The legal situation as represented in the study are shown.

I guess what you see there is the countries that the children of this study come from, the length of time in Australia, the age of the child when interviewed, and their legal citizenship status. The table shows that the length of time of children in Australia ranges from 8 years to 2 ½ years. All children involved are at school or have completed their high school certificate. It also indicates the type of visa the child has currently. The visa may or may not be the same as the visa of their parents, and the visa may have changed since they arrived in Australia. Five children in this study had a migration lawyer.

I want to now look at the family constellation on arrival and the current situation. All except one child arrived with their family. All the children had a number of moves since they've been in the country. One child had 8 moves in 4 years while being in Australia. Most have a very interesting split between a positive relationship with the family and an intense worry and distress and concern about what's going to happen with that family. For some families being in an uncertain legal situation already had broken up their families, with siblings going to other countries to try and get visas, trying to get close ties visa, trying to get a whole lot of legal situations happening to help them.

Two of the children have been in Woomera for ten months, and they certainly, from my perspective, were the most worrying of children in terms of their emotional well-being and intellectual growth.

Their health situation, on arrival and currently, was quite good. And you may wonder, considering some of the experiences they've had, how that could be. But remember, the shortest time that any of these children have been in Australia is almost 2 ½ years, so even notwithstanding detention and a whole range of things they have had available to them reasonable food and sun. But that doesn't take away from the point that Fiona made that most of the children in this study certainly did not have access to Medicare, or if they have it, irregularly, and that was a huge issue.

Their education progress, we put great store in their education progress, and I will talk in regard to the findings, but one of the major things that came up from the education progress was the issue around English classes, the intensive English classes the moment they hit the school, have an incredible impact on their development, growth, sense of well-being, sense of positiveness, sense of ability to make friendships, that ability for those intensive English classes. So somebody was telling me in the coffee break that Brendan Nelson is a compassionate person. I would really like to speak to him about that because if there was anything that should not be at risk is those intensive English classes for children in public schools.

I want to give some stories in the last couple of minutes that I have, and the findings:

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Their life in Australia: when children were asked about their life in Australia the following emerged - All children did not know that they were coming to Australia, except one boy who was 15 years and was involved in the decision making with his parents. He was the only child in the ten children that I looked at that was almost on the verge of arrogant about his life. He had a temporary protection visa, and had just acquired permanent residency. The difference between him and the others was quite remarkable.

They want to have a visa, be happy and have a safe life and live a good life and have all the opportunities that Australia can give them.

## Conclusions

1. The issue for child protection that is consistently being raised by this study is the systemic abuse that is occurring as a result of the protracted legal situations. All children express worry, distress and concern for their unresolved legal situation and their inability to move towards an integration into the Australian community. Many children describe themselves as happy, good, but detailed their depression and distress that accompanied being in a limbo situation. The non-resolution of their migration or refugee situation was their paramount concern.
2. The current manifestations of distress, while particularly concerning are equalled by the knowledge of the long term impact of 'not belonging'; to a community; to a state and to a nation. If a child cannot access normal citizenship, then their ability to grow emotionally and integrate themselves into their new country is diminished. These children have the possibility of becoming adults with a sense of frustration and anger that will impact on their lives and will impact on our lives in the Australian community in the forthcoming years.

*"My brother uncovered corruption in Columbia and we had to leave. But our problems with visas has broken up our family. One brother has gone to Japan and we are very unhappy. Our time here has caused terrible heartache for the family"*

Amelia, 17 years  
In Australia 5 years

*"The children have no future. They cannot learn. My baby is stateless. We are trapped and there is no way out"*

Mohammed, Father of children with Temporary Protection Visas  
In Australia 3 years and 3 months

3. All participants children and young people in the study felt closer ties with their friends and the community with the acquisition of English. The confidence and high self esteem that accompanied early intensive language courses was evident in all participants. The children's ability to do well

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academically has a strong link with the nature and timing of their English classes.

4. The role of friendships developed at school for this group of children cannot be underestimated. All children detailed friendships, particularly within the school environment as one of the major factors that kept them going and made life bearable in difficult times. The role of informal and community supports coexisting with structures that gave their life stability and safety is important.
5. The presence or absence of Medicare was a factor for children and young people and especially parents. All participants in the study did not have dental or eye checks unless conducted by the school.
6. Children and young people in the study were forced by their situation to perform roles in their family that gave them a sense of greater independence. I'm not sure how to interpret that, perhaps they've grown older too early or they've grown too independent now, but often with the broken families and their housing situations, they are often at home for long periods by themselves.
7. Unless their legal situation was resolved all children spoke of their identity linked to their country of origin. There is evidence of cultural bereavement that is far more pronounced with children who have unresolved citizenship. And there's a whole range of studies about cultural bereavement, which I won't go into now, but it's very important in terms of that resolution of citizenship, their sense of belonging, their sense of eternal peace and contentment in this country, is very much tied up with that.

This is the first year of a three year study that I'm trying to get funding to enlarge on and do more work with. But it indicates again that it is not the intra-familial abuse categories that apply to refugee children, it's the stress and consequences of other maltreatment of the uncertainty of their situation.

In the child protection discourse, this small pilot study is the beginning of a three year study. Protracted legal processes that leave asylum seekers in a limbo state cause distress, worry and great anxiety for the child and family. This abuse is a systems abuse, that is a result of the current migration laws and policies existing in Australia. The success of refugee resettlement in Australia by key indicators such as health, educational attainment, the development of language skills and employability is a state responsibility on arrival, and, over time. It is a community responsibility and it is important that there is political and community intervention to ensure the safety and well being of children in Australia currently and in the future.

What this study has begun to report is the difficulty of children to be safe when their 'citizenship' integration cannot be fulfilled

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