

Resource sheet

Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

NUMBER 3 2008

**This Resource sheet is a brief summary of AFRC Issues No. 3,
available at www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/issues/issues3.html**

Enhancing family and relationship service accessibility and delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse families in Australia

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People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds originate from countries in which English is not the main language, and comprise 21% of Australia's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The main CALD groups in Australia are Italians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, Filipinos, Greeks, Germans, Malaysians, Dutch, Lebanese and people from Hong Kong. Most of these groups live in urban areas of Australia.

In Australia, services funded by the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) span a diverse and extensive range that aim to support and nurture family relationships. Little is known about the extent to which CALD families access family relationship services compared to mainstream families, or whether the kind of service they receive meets their needs effectively. Thus, it is important to investigate barriers that CALD families in Australia perceive or experience in the full uptake and use of these services.

Barriers to inclusion and engagement of CALD families in the family relationship service sector should not be seen exclusively in terms of the characteristics of CALD families, nor as the characteristics of services and providers, but rather as the quality of interaction and "fit" between the needs and expectations of CALD families and the provision of services (Katz, La Placa, & Hunter, 2007). Although inter-related, the mostly international literature points to three types of barriers that ethnic minority families might perceive or experience:

- cultural barriers:
 - language barriers: English proficiency, professional jargon and misinterpretation of body language;
 - cultural norms that prohibit seeking extra-familial support, especially for women and children;
 - traditional gender roles that prevent men from engaging with services or discussing family difficulties; and
 - fear of authorities, such as child protection, police, courts, taxation, immigration and housing departments.

- structural barriers:
 - practical barriers accessing services; and
 - lack of knowledge or understanding of services that are available.
- service-related barriers:
 - model of service is culturally inappropriate;
 - service not perceived as relevant due to lack of cultural diversity in the workforce and marketing of services;
 - service choice perceived as limited due to lack of cultural diversity in the workforce; and
 - reluctance to engage with services because of concern they will not be understood, or that they will be stereotyped or judged.

Issues and concerns that service providers and practitioners might perceive or experience that compromise service accessibility and delivery for CALD families include:

- lack of awareness or confidence to address the needs of CALD families;
- practice that is not culturally competent;
- lack of adequate resources;
- institutional racism; and
- lack of awareness and partnering with CALD-focused organisations in the local community.

The extent to which these barriers compromise service accessibility and delivery vary according to cultural characteristics of the CALD group. Service providers and practitioners need to consider:

- the family's language and religion; and
- the extent to which the family's cultural group is generally individualistic or collectivistic.

These barriers, issues and concerns are further explored in AFRC Issues No. 3.

Generally, the more CALD groups deviate culturally and linguistically from the mainstream community in Australia, the less likely services will reach or effectively meet their needs. Service providers and practitioners who consider the cultural characteristics of a CALD group and the similarities and differences between themselves and the CALD family are more likely to be culturally aware, sensitive and competent. *Cultural awareness* refers to knowing the cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices that are common to a CALD group. *Cultural sensitivity* refers to sensitivity to and familiarity with variation *within* a CALD group. *Cultural competency* occurs when service providers are aware of how their cultural norms differ from their clients' cultural norms.

Recommendations for enhancing service accessibility and delivery for CALD groups pertain to three factors: (a) practitioner-, (b) service- and (c) policy-level strategies. In order of priority, the following practice and policy recommendations can be implemented to enhance the CALD capacity of a family relationship service outlet:

1. Improve the overall quality of the service. High-quality, well-resourced services with dedicated, well-trained and well-supported staff are the basic ingredients for accessible services. Practices that encourage diversity, client participation and good worker–client relationships will benefit *all* clients, not only CALD families.
2. Implement equal employment opportunity and multicultural policies to increase recruitment of CALD staff, preferably to reflect the local ethnic mix in the community.
3. Collect data on factors that measure or assess culture, such as country of birth, year of arrival in Australia, main language(s) spoken at home, and self-rated cultural identity. This will allow the service outlet to monitor the size of (in)equity of access to and use of services, especially across different types of services.
4. Market and promote services to increase awareness of them, and their perceived relevance, to CALD families. This can occur through newsletters, local businesses, religious and community groups, and should be translated or indicate that translated versions are available. The cultural diversity of the staff profile and pictures of ethnic minority families should be included.

5. Service providers and practitioners in the outlet should receive training in cultural competency to become aware of:
 - cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices typical of a CALD group;
 - the need to pay attention to individual variation *within* a cultural group; and
 - differences in cultural norms between themselves and their client family to avoid judging behaviours as deviations from their own cultural norms.
6. Consider practical issues, such as the physical locality of the service, the layout of the rooms, opening times, staff profile and links between different services.
7. Partner with other CALD-focused centres or organisations in the local community to receive:
 - support through networks;
 - advice and consultation on appropriate service delivery;
 - clear referral pathways for CALD families;
 - language services;
 - cultural awareness training; and
 - provision of more holistic support for CALD families by building the CALD capacity of the service outlet.

In summary, enhancing service accessibility and delivery to CALD families in Australia requires the implementation of practitioner-, service- and policy-level strategies to provide holistic support. The practice and policy recommendations outlined in this Resource Sheet, and expanded upon in AFRC Issues No. 3, can assist service providers and practitioners to improve their service delivery to CALD families, develop their own expertise regarding CALD families, and develop their professional practice by partnering and sharing expertise with services that already have a CALD focus.

References

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The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is an information and advisory unit funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Clearinghouse aims to enhance family relationships across the lifespan by offering a resource and a point of contact for providers of family relationship and support services, policy makers and members of the research and broader communities. The Clearinghouse collects, synthesises and disseminates information on family relationships and facilitates networking and information exchange.

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Edited and typeset by Lan Wang
ISSN 1835-1166 (Online)