



# Cultural considerations to support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds

13 May 2020 | Liz Gordon and Julio Alejo

## Comments

“ Hello. Thank you for your informative webinar. I'm interested to know if you use any particular tools to assist you in your cultural assessments. Have you found ecomaps and genograms useful at all? I'm assuming that the process of understanding culture is an ongoing process in our work with clients. Are there basic 'need to knows' that you look for when starting out with a new client?

*Jennifer Ng | 13 May 2020*

“ At QPASTT we work to find tailored ways to connect with our clients and support their expression of their cultural background. In assessment and/or ongoing work we do use visual tools such as genogram and ecomaps and weave through questions about cultural identity, practices and beliefs. Other creative methods include the use of symbols, maps, and drawing/painting and encouraging clients to share their own poetry, music, dance, stories and/or photos. The Tree of Life narrative therapy process has also been used effectively with individuals and in groups to engage with clients across the life span and share the important aspects of their identity and community. Other times, it is as simple as having a conversation that is grounded in curiosity and openness, exploring factors such as how the person describes their cultural background, religious spiritual beliefs and practices, connection to the culture in the new context and any experiences of discrimination or barriers due to cultural background.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

“ Hello there. First of all thank you for the webinar. It was great and I learnt a lot! I work as a Youth and Children librarian and during the COVID 19, I am trying to seek resources which would help me to connect and reach out to kids and families suffering mental health, who are migrants or asylum seekers using storytime as a platform. Can you guide me with this one? How can libraries particularly the storytime sessions be platform to reach out to families new to Australia or facing mental health as a whole.

*Wendy | 13 May 2020*

“ Thanks Wendy, our top picks are: My Two Blankets – Irena Kobald; The Name Jar – Yangsoo Choi; When I'm Feeling series – Trace Moroney; In My Heart: A Book of



Feelings – Jo Witek; We are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures; Children Just Like Me: A unique celebration of children around the world; Some Girls – Nelly Thomas; Sulwe – Lupita Nyong'o; The Invisible String – Patricia Karst; Anh's Anger – Gail Silver; The Rabbit Listened – Cori Doerfeld; Just Breathe - Mallika Chopra; I am Peace - Susan Verde; Why are you scared? (a child's book about parents with PTSD) – Beth Andrews; Why are you so sad? (a child's book about parental depression) – Beth Andrews; Planting seeds – Tich Nhat Hanh; The Arrival – Shaun Tan; The Heart and the Bottle – Oliver Jeffers; I am Australian Too – Mem Fox; The Tiny Star – Mem Fox; Things I Love series; The Jungle Tracks series from STARTTS (Sydney) – see <https://www.startts.org.au/resources/resources-for-sale/jungle-tracks-kit/>

*Liz Gordon and ... | 5 June 2020*

“ **Thank you for this presentation. I have two questions for the speakers. 1) How does a support worker or clinician best work with a client who engages in cultural practices that may contravene Australian laws or social norms (i.e., behaviours that are supportive of, or indifferent to family violence, enforcing strict gender roles on family members, refusing to work with health workers who may be LGBTQIA+, etc). What is the best way to guide a client who may hold such views? Many thanks**

*Stephane | 13 May 2020*

“ This is a difficult yet important issue and there is no quick or simple answer. This is an area where support from a supervisor or colleague is recommended. One strategy that has been effective is to introduce the idea of culture as changing (rather than fixed) and that no one culture is perfect. A couple of examples of this include that it was not so long ago that corporal punishment was used in Australian schools (during my own schooling) and that the Australia community continues to struggle with domestic and family violence. This can help move beyond a cultural hierarchy with Australia at the top and acknowledges that change can be difficult and involve losses in power and role for some in a community. It is important then to explore the meaning of changing a practice and the barriers to this. Some parents have discussed feeling disempowered in their parental role regarding not being able to use physical discipline with children and so a focus was on building of alternative skills and strategies. At the same time, information provision about law and services is important to enable access to services for those in need and ensure a shared understanding of Australian legal expectations. A commitment to justice and dignity, also includes a commitment to promoting safety for all so that if practices are harmful then we also have an obligation to share expectations and promote access to appropriate support and statutory services. Importantly, clients seeking services or interventions in relation to harmful experiences may also need additional support related to language and cultural needs in accessing mainstream services. It can also be important to acknowledge that speaking or acting out against cultural practices may increase their social isolation.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*



**“ What could be the priority in terms of helping them after they arrive here? As they have history already of being compromised and then they arrive and have to deal with all the new life.**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ This will vary for different individuals and families depending on the unique constellation of factors that brought them to Australia, their individual characteristics and their goals. A useful starting place can be to acknowledge that for many people arrival in Australia can be a varied experience with new opportunities but also difficult or unexpected challenges. This can include checking what is going well and what has been most difficult for the family. This can help identify what is most important for them at that time. Common priorities for the newly arrived includes access to language classes, healthcare (especially if there are untreated illness or injuries), education/employment, stable housing and connection to the host as well as the cultural community. This is an important time to promote connection to appropriate services, particularly local settlement services. Importantly, regardless of our role or service providing a warm welcome that helps build connection, provides respectful and accessible information on processes/supports and that allows families to share both their capacities and needs is meaningful place to start.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

**“ Are there particular tools you use to help you make those cultural assessments? Are genograms or ecomaps useful?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ At QPASTT we work to find tailored ways to connect with our clients and support their expression of their cultural background. In assessment and/or ongoing work we do use visual tools such as genogram and ecomaps and weave through questions about cultural identity, practices and beliefs. Other creative methods include the use of symbols, maps, and drawing/painting and encouraging clients to share their own poetry, music, dance, stories and/or photos. The Tree of Life narrative therapy process has also been used effectively with individuals and in groups to engage with clients across the life span and share the important aspects of their identity and community. Other times, it is as simple as having a conversation that is grounded in curiosity and openness, exploring factors such as how the person describes their cultural background, religious spiritual beliefs and practices, connection to the culture in the new context and any experiences of discrimination or barriers due to cultural background.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

**“ Do you need to be mindful of trauma when asking questions to unpack cultural identity?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*



“ Yes, this is an important consideration. While the discussion of culture can be grounding for clients, at other time it can be provocative reminding them of losses and/or traumatic experiences, particularly when their cultural identity was the basis for persecution. At QPASTT, we always let the client know why we are asking questions and reinforce that the decision to answer is voluntary. This includes that they can let us know if they don't wish to answer a question or they'd prefer to move onto another topic. We would also maintain our therapeutic presence with our client watching for any signs of increasing distress or disengagement which may indicate the activation of a trauma response. As a general principal providing choice and control is essential for trauma informed practice and that includes discussing culture.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

“ **(How do you) approach problematic or damaging cultural practices or norms such as oppression of women or restricting their freedom? Or violence (in any form - be it emotional, financial or physical) against women or children? Whilst of course acknowledging you have a different culture and different levels of privilege and look through culture through a different lens to a client.**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ This is a difficult yet important issue and there is no quick or simple answer. This is an area where support from a supervisor or colleague is recommended. One strategy that has been effective is to introduce the idea of culture as changing (rather than fixed) and that no one culture is perfect. A couple of examples of this include that it was not so long ago that corporal punishment was used in Australian schools (during my own schooling) and that the Australia community continues to struggle with domestic and family violence. This can help move beyond a cultural hierarchy with Australia at the top and acknowledges that change can be difficult and involve losses in power and role for some in a community. It is important then to explore the meaning of changing a practice and the barriers to this. Some parents have discussed feeling disempowered in their parental role regarding not being able to use physical discipline with children and so a focus was on building of alternative skills and strategies. At the same time, information provision about law and services is important to enable access to services for those in need and ensure a shared understanding of Australian legal expectations. A commitment to justice and dignity, also includes a commitment to promoting safety for all so that if practices are harmful then we also have an obligation to share expectations and promote access to appropriate support and statutory services. Importantly, clients seeking services or interventions in relation to harmful experiences may also need additional support related to language and cultural needs in accessing mainstream services. It can also be important to acknowledge that speaking or acting out against cultural practices may increase their social isolation.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

“ **How do you balance being culturally sensitive when views may sometimes clash strongly with your own values? for example when**



**some families may value education for their sons and not their daughters. How do you help them feel heard? Do we seek to understand first? Should we not offer our own views?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ This can be very uncomfortable yet shows us what we hold to be most important and is one of the gifts that cross cultural work give us in terms of own personal awareness. I work from a client-centred framework that first seeks to understand the client in their behaviours, practices and beliefs. In the example provided, this may include exploring this value, its origin and how this may have been experienced by the client themselves, including any benefits or problems. I may also introduce some exploration of what it has been like for them in Australia where generally the belief is around equality of education based on gender and how that has been for them and their family. This includes how they envisage they will manage their beliefs alongside the common practices in education in Australia that their children will be exposed. This can also connect with their overarching beliefs, hope and goals for their children (which may not be so far from my own). It is important to remember that there may also be instances when we experience the uncomfortable realisation that our own cultural beliefs and practices may have some disadvantages when held in contrast to another culture.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

**“ How do you separate effect of trauma due to migrant/migrant background from learning difficulties or settlement experience, e.g. learning new language for children?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ This can be difficult and it is not always possible to clearly separate out these difficulties or stressors and more than one type of intervention may be required. It is important to be familiar with the specific impacts of each of these areas while knowing that there may be places of overlap. For example, intrusive memories, nightmares and panic attacks related to trauma triggers are a few specific impacts of traumatic experiences. In general, what is very important is a thorough assessment which incorporates the possible impacts of all these experiences. At times, this includes involving other specialised services or professionals to assist in this process. For example, at QPASTT we may request referral to a paediatrician or consult with a school teacher in language support to ascertain more perspectives on a particular child's presentation while also ensuring that there is an understanding of the trauma history for these professionals. At other times, it may be that an intervention is trialled and its effectiveness reviewed as a way to ascertain what may need to be area of greatest focus. The attached article may also prove a useful resource <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Phoenix-Guidelines-Refugees-asylum-seekers-and-PTSD.pdf>.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*



“ **How can it be more possible to develop smooth learning for young ones, when they might not even be able to share about their feeling and insecurities?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ One of the most important tools in supporting young ones to learn is a secure relationship with their educator. If the child identifies their educator as a safe person who values and respects them, they will be more likely to explore their world which includes taking risks in their learning and sharing their feelings. This includes having an educator who can recognise their skills and delight in their achievements even when seemingly small. This also include an educator who scaffolds their learning so they can have experiences of mastery and also support their peer relations and communication. I would encourage the use of play based approaches – child centred play can help with relationship building, emotional regulation, self-expression and social skills. Also consider how you can convey a respect for and valuing of cultural diversity with toys, materials, artwork, activities and books. There’s also some other useful resources at <https://qpastt.org.au/resources/for-schools/>

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

“ **Can you say the name of the book (mentioned in the webinar) again?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ If this question was referring from my Quote by Kahlil Gibran, the quote was from his book “Broken Wings”...

*Julio Alejo | 2 June 2020*

“ **Hi, can you please provide that quote from that book (mentioned in the webinar)?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.” Kahlil Gibran

*Julio Alejo | 2 June 2020*

“ **The language of cultural expert has been used and my question is, couldn't this perhaps limit, or impact negatively - as how do we become a cultural expert, when culture can be an individual experience. Therefore having a cultural understanding, or hold a cultural awareness allows for some of the social norms and environments, however remains open to hear the individual experience of their (the individual) cultural experience.**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*



“ Agreed. The concepts of cultural safety and cultural humility propose a move away from practitioners as cultural experts but rather position the clients as experts of their own experience, including their unique cultural experience. While specific information about culture, as well as the history of a country of origin, can be a useful starting point the relevance of this should be checked with the client. This acknowledges that culture is not monolithic or fixed but instead has diversity and can change over time and space. At QPASTT, where we see people from a multitude of cultural backgrounds it would be impossible to be a cultural expert with every client and may lead to a superficial or presumptuous understandings of a particular culture. At the same time, we do have the fortune of a culturally diverse workplace where our colleagues can provide some useful background cultural information as a starting point for our understanding and engagement.

*Liz Gordon | 2 June 2020*

“ **What role can service providers play in supporting community between migrant families who are very traditional/religious and families who are same-sex couples with children?**

*Participant | 2 June 2020*

“ Perhaps one possible starting point is to consider what traces of interest in this project there might be in the community. Then explore the basis for this interest and the coexisting challenges. This interest might well have a history, perhaps largely obscured, in this community. How has the community has already responded to this interest in supporting community between families, perhaps in very small unnoticed ways, despite the challenges. Then perhaps invite them to explore their ideas about how this might be built upon and extended, and their ideas for the role your service could play in supporting them.

*Chris Dolman | 2 June 2020*