

Sport and recreation as a tool for social inclusion

The experiences of refugee and migrant young people

Overview

This information sheet outlines some of the evidence regarding the benefits of sport and recreation for refugee and migrant young people. The experiences of the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) show that sport and recreation can play an important support and service delivery role for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and can be a useful tool for facilitating social inclusion.

CMYI's direct service work with young people has shown that refugee and newly arrived young people identify sport and recreation as a major priority along with housing, employment and education. Sport and recreation can assist young people with language acquisition, provide a positive point of contact with other members of the community, and support a sense of purpose and direction for young people recovering from the traumas of the refugee experience or the impact of racism.

What do we mean by 'social inclusion'?

Social inclusion is often defined in relation to social exclusion. The European Commission defines social exclusion as being:

a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination. This distances them from job, income and education and training opportunities as well as social and community networks and activities. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and thus often feel powerless and unable to take control over the decisions that affect their day to day lives (Employment and Social Affairs Directorate 2005: 10).

In this context, social inclusion:

ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. (Employment and Social Affairs Directorate 2005: 10).

VicHealth defines a socially inclusive society as:

one where all people feel valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs are met so they can live in dignity. (VicHealth 2006)

Sport and recreation, whether structured competition or an informal community program, is only one of many tools that can facilitate social inclusion.

Sport – access for all cultures.



VicHealth

HEALTH THROUGH PARTICIPATION

Refugee and migrant young people's participation in sport

CMYI has found that a large number of refugee and migrant young people participate in informal, unstructured games of badminton, soccer, table tennis, basketball and so on. These are often sports that young people have played prior to settling in Australia and are already familiar to them.

Young people are more likely to participate in sport in familiar and supportive environments such as schools and ethnic organisations, rather than through unfamiliar environments such as mainstream sporting clubs, associations and competitions.

The under-representation of refugee and migrant young people in structured or formalised sport is well documented. Hutchins (2007) notes that "...overall, sporting culture in Australia is ethnocentric in character (McKay et al. 2000); a point that was true two decades ago and remains so today. Levels of involvement correlate with country of birth. People born in Australia had participation rates of 27 percent, compared to around 10 percent for people born in non-English speaking countries".

Social inclusion: the benefits of sport and recreation

Through the operation of multicultural sport and recreation programs, CMYI has identified a range of aspects of sport and recreation that facilitate social inclusion and provide a positive context for the creation of trust, capacity building, engagement and partnership. These include:

- Sport and recreation as a site for trust building;
- Sport and recreation facilitating settlement and transitional support;
- Sport and recreation as a diversion strategy;
- Sport and recreation as a capacity building opportunity;
- Sport and recreation as an entry point to broader participation;
- Sport and recreation promotes health and wellbeing;
- Sport and recreation as a way to build community understanding.

Sport and recreation as a site for trust building

Sport and recreation activities provide an ideal site for trust building with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Sport is a familiar activity in which young people readily participate. This provides fertile opportunity for those delivering services to engage with young people and build trust, having a significant flow-on effect for young people's help-seeking during settlement or transition.

Sport and recreation facilitating settlement and transition support

Sport and recreation can be an effective component in providing settlement support for newly arrived young people. Providing accessible sport and recreation opportunities can be important for newly arrived young people who have experienced significant trauma prior to arrival in Australia. Opportunities to play sport in familiar and supportive environments can also provide a site whereby information about other services and systems in Australia can be shared among participants and through trusted workers.

Sport and recreation as diversion

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds can feel disconnected from their family, community and peers as they search for their own sense of identity. This search can sometimes lead young people to come into contact with risk-taking behaviour. Diversionary activities such as sport may prevent some of this contact and give young people a sense of belonging. Participation does not, however, guarantee a diversionary outcome. Sports intervention programs need to be structured and coordinated with locally based services that can address issues as they arise both on and off the field.

Sport and recreation as a capacity building opportunity

Sport and recreation can be used to explore real life issues and challenges. Often viewed as a microcosm of life, the sporting field provides an environment whereby actions and consequences can be explored. Support workers can use the competitive environment to draw parallels between what happens on the sporting field and in other areas of life, such as school. This process does, however, require skilled workers who have gained the trust and respect of young participants.

A range of issues can be addressed when viewing sport and recreation in this way, including:

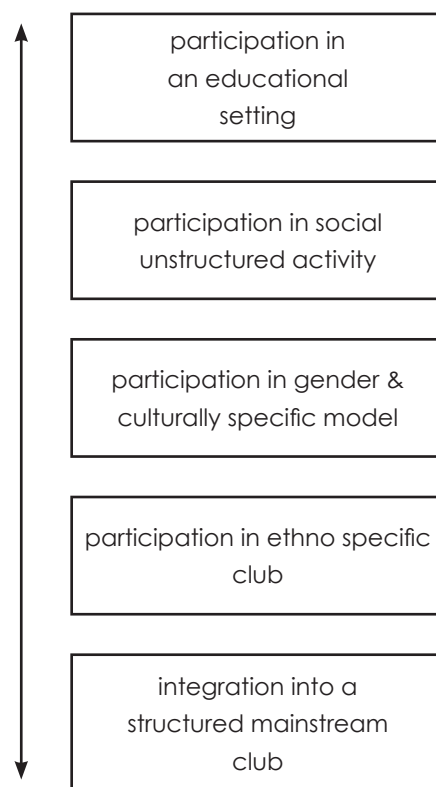
- Communication
- Conflict resolution
- Racism/tolerance
- Self esteem

Sport and recreation as an entry point to broader participation

Sport and recreation represents a practical and accessible entry point for addressing the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and providing links between and within communities. Many will participate in sport and recreation activities while at school which is easy to access, safe and reassuring for parents. This can be limiting as activities are determined by school-based sporting options. This process also does not provide for the most marginalised young people, those who are disengaged from school.

The continuum below provides a visual representation of the participation options for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This continuum is representative of the range of options for participation and is not intended to be exhaustive. Young people may

move between these options at different times, not always in a linear progression.



Ethno-specific models of participation are important for this target group. CMYI has found that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds identify with other young people from a similar background or experience and that this is an important factor in achieving participation. This is supported by Australian Lebanese Welfare (ALW) who have found that ethno-specific models, rather than compounding isolation, provide an important vehicle for young people to gain the confidence to participate in wider community activities. ALW cite models where groups have begun with a particular ethno-specific make-up but have broadened out over time to incorporate a range of cultural backgrounds as evidence that this is a developmental and evolving process.

Sport and recreation promotes health and wellbeing

Participating in a sports club or active recreation activities has been shown to have positive social and psychological effects. These include increased self-esteem, better development of life skills, and increase in academic achievement (VicHealth 2006). People seek participation



in organised sport and active recreation for three key reasons – fun, fitness and friends, all of which contribute to our overall wellbeing.

Sport and recreation as a way to build community understanding

Sport brings people together and can be used as a tool to build better understanding within and across communities. An example of such a model is the All Nations Soccer Competition. This annual round robin competition brings together a variety of communities, and includes a social component with barbeques and family activities organised after the matches. Players and supporters are brought together and the competition provides a backdrop for these social activities. An achievement of the All Nations model is that it brings players and people from different cultures and backgrounds face to face, requiring them to play against and with one another despite their differences.

Does sport always lead to greater social inclusion?

Sport in itself cannot achieve social inclusion. Its usefulness lies as a starting point. For social inclusion to occur, young people need to be linked to appropriate education and employment pathways, secure housing, opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, and in a welcoming and supportive environment. It is when these broader factors are achieved that refugee and migrant young people become active participants in society and reap the benefits of that participation.

It must also be noted that sport can be a site of tension and conflict. The internal logic and structure of sport is competitive, systematically demanding winners and losers. Sport is based on the principle of 'them' and 'us', and these opposing positions are what create the drama and excitement of sport. However, viewed from the perspective of community building and cross-cultural understanding, it can also act as a barrier to fraternity, friendship and mutual acceptance. (Hutchins 2007)

It is true racism and tensions appear in sport at all levels and affects players and supporters alike. To address the negative aspects of competition, programs need to be prepared and run competitions where participants are clear that the aims of the project are not as much about winning or losing, as about learning and gaining new skills.

Access to resources

In most regions of Victoria sport and recreation resources such as venues, open space, funded workers, grants, equipment and transport already exist. To effectively deliver sport and recreation opportunities to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, these resources need to be available and coordinated. Feedback from workers who provide sport and recreation opportunities to refugee and migrant young people suggests that many existing resources are unavailable, overbooked, too expensive, or simply not coordinated. Local councils that ensure local sport and recreation resources are utilised effectively and are accessible to marginalised populations can facilitate social inclusion and the benefits to refugee and migrant young people detailed above.

Further Reading

Hutchins, B (2006) "What role can Sport, as a universal language, play in promoting a cohesive, multicultural Australia?", SBS Radio (www20.sbs.com.au/podcasting/index.php?action=feeddetails&feedid=12&page=4)

Hutchins, B (2007) "The Problem of Sport and Social Cohesion" – to be published

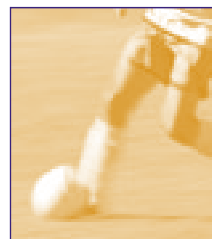
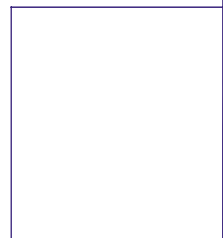
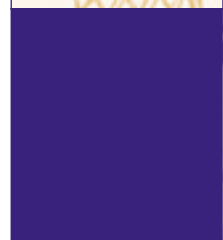
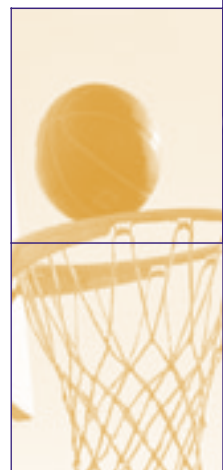
Brough, M, Gorman, D, Ramirez, E & Westoby, P (2003). "Young Refugees Talk About Well-Being: A Qualitative Analysis of Refugee Youth Mental Health from Three States" in *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 38(2): pp193-208.

CMYI (2005). *Connecting CLD Young People: Sport and Recreation as a Tool for Social Inclusion – A Briefing and Options Paper for the Department of Victorian Communities*, CMYI, Melbourne

CMYI (1998). *Sport: Creating a Level Playing Field*, CMYI, Melbourne

State Government of Victoria (2005). *A Fairer Victoria: Creating Opportunity and Addressing Disadvantage*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Melbourne

European Employment and Social Affairs Directorate (2005). *Report on social inclusion 2005: An analysis of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion*, European Commission



For more sport and recreation resources, check out

**[www.cmyi.net.au/
MulticulturalSport](http://www.cmyi.net.au/MulticulturalSport)**