



Life skills development in household management and family care to emerging communities

Edmund Rice Centre, Mirrabooka, Western Australia

This project also relates to:

Education

The *Life Skills* program empowers humanitarian entrants by providing them with education and understanding of the issues involved in maintaining and keeping a house in Australia.

Held over two semesters (20 weeks), the *Life Skills* workshops cover general living skills with such topics as nutrition, renting a property, looking after the house and garden, the role of the police and accessing Australia's medical system.

Lessons are delivered in a group setting to facilitate socialisation and interaction and are structured to cater for low levels of English proficiency. The workshops are delivered in a culturally sensitive way with the assistance of bilingual workers.

The number of humanitarian entrants settling in Perth has recently increased, with noticeably more people coming from the Horn of Africa. Many humanitarian entrants, especially those from Africa, were having trouble settling because they lacked basic life skills and were in unfamiliar situations.

Often newly arrived refugees have spent long periods in refugee camps or in situations where it was difficult, if not impossible, to meet basic nutritional needs and access formal education and health services. For many humanitarian entrants, the initial settlement period in Australia is highly stressful and is characterised by feelings of isolation, homesickness and culture shock. Many face additional hurdles because they have low levels of English proficiency and suffer the effects of torture and trauma.

Identifying a need

The Edmund Rice Centre in Mirrabooka had, for a number of years, been offering a variety of educational programs, assistance and support to refugees. It became apparent to staff that for the newly arriving African families other structures and new programs could be of more assistance.

Community nurses, some school staff and agencies, such as the Ishar Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, and the Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors, had also recognised that issues were beginning to emerge that needed new programs.

The Sudanese community involved in the Edmund Rice Centre's activities helped identify the issues.

Community consultation

The Centre conducted community consultations in 2002 and 2003 with community members from the Horn of Africa, government agencies, such as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Western Australian Government's Office of Multicultural Interests, non-government agencies, such as St Vincent de Paul, community nurses, and some schools and real estate agents to document issues faced by newly arrived humanitarian entrants during their initial settlement period.

Some major issues emerged from the consultations. One was the lack of awareness about some aspects of nutrition, given the vast array of unfamiliar products in shops. Some families were sending children to school without lunch as they were unfamiliar with the idea of 'packing' a lunch. Others were sending nutritionally unsuitable lunches for their children and teachers were becoming concerned.

Supermarkets can be bewildering to newly arrived refugees with poor language skills and a lack of awareness about the different types of food and drink available in Australia. Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, Brother Steve Bowman, said:

Many humanitarian entrants were unfamiliar with what to do in a supermarket. Some mentioned that they didn't want to buy specials because they assumed it meant the items weren't good. As some refugees have little knowledge of a number of different kinds of fruit and vegetables on special in peak season, this was quite understandable. Many also didn't want to buy green apples as people assumed they weren't ripe.

Other issues identified were difficulties negotiating rental tenancy agreements, lack of experience in budgeting, and a lack of knowledge about tenancy obligations. In addition, once a rental property had been found, the new arrivals often had difficulty using electrical appliances, which were unfamiliar to them. At times some of them overused water and electricity because they had little knowledge or experience of paying for such utilities.

The Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Western Australian Government Office of Multicultural Interests provided funding for the initial community consultations. These organisations also collaborated to fund the first nine months of the program when the educational material was developed. The partnership continued for another 21 months when the program was first trialled.

The program

The first nine months of funding covered the employment of a professional educator to develop the program. Research data from the consultations informed the development of 10 modules covering topics including:

- the right foods to eat and drink, school lunches, cooking simple and cheap meals
- rental accommodation issues
- using household appliances
- safety at home and at the beach
- looking after the house and garden
- hospitals, doctors, pharmacy and medical benefits.

Each module has a nutrition component. The first two or three modules explain the types of fruits and vegetables participants might see in shops and supermarkets. The students are given an opportunity to taste the food and advice on how to cook and prepare foods that may be unfamiliar to them. Early in the program, there is a visit to a local supermarket to explain the different foods available and food labelling.

A teacher, working with bilingual workers, delivers the 10 modules over 20 weeks in a culturally sensitive way. Program modules are held three times a week in different locations in the Perth metropolitan area.

Participants are able to start the program at any time and at any stage of the 20-week period.

This flexibility was needed to accommodate a constant influx of new arrivals and also accommodates participants attending English classes. Classes are held weekly at the Centre as well as at two other locations. The Centre has a bus that can be used to transport participants to some activities.

A project coordinator was employed for three days a week to work on the project once it had begun with continued funding from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. A teacher assists for two days a week, a bilingual worker for 11 hours a week, and a casual bus driver assists with activities outside the Centre as required. Four volunteers are also involved in the project. All the volunteers and the bilingual workers at the Edmund Rice Centre are given formal training in cross-cultural communication, boundary setting with clients, presentation skills, self care and working with people who have suffered torture and trauma.

Originally, community nurses and Intensive English Centres referred participants to the program. Due to its ongoing success, there are now many word-of-mouth referrals from past participants.

Funding for the program is now provided solely by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship under the *Settlement Grants Program*. Centrecare and Communicare are partners in the project.

Achievements

The greatest achievement for the program has been an increase in participants' sense of self-worth and empowerment.

One woman who attended a nutrition and cooking session, said her son asked her to send a chocolate cake to school to be shared for his birthday since 'that was what other children's families had done'. She had no idea how to cook a chocolate cake and so she was given a recipe. Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, Steven Bowman, said:

She was so thrilled when her son could take it for school. She then taught her friends how to make the chocolate cake. This shows that refugees are eager to try to fit in!

A newly arrived refugee from Iraq, Haleema, said she had learnt a lot about better eating habits from the program, such as the need to use less salt, sugar and oil in her cooking. She also appreciated learning about running a house in Australia.

Key factors in the program's success

The *Life Skills* program has a memorandum of understanding with its two partners in Perth, Centrecare and Communicare. The Centre felt it was very important that such an agreement be signed to ensure that the program details were clear and transparent.

It was important to ensure that all the bilingual workers employed in the program were accepted by all clans or tribes within their community.

The lessons should also use English as a Second Language principles, with an approach that is interactive and pictorial. The lack of English has not been a particular problem in the classes as there has usually been one participant who could translate for fellow classmates.

Challenges

One of the biggest obstacles is transport for program participants. Although the Edmund Rice Centre provides a bus to pick up participants where possible, punctuality can be an issue because of cultural differences.

Many of the women need childcare and the ideal solution is to have a professional childcare centre collocated with the venue for the classes. Although this was achieved at Communicare, volunteer child minders or crèches located elsewhere were needed for the other classes.

The program needs to attract more male participants, especially younger men who tend to move out of the family home with little or no life skills experience. Workshops have commenced for some senior male students at one neighbouring secondary school and more are planned. There is a need for ongoing support for the program so that it can be adapted and made available for this group.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar program

Participants benefit most from the *Life Skills* program if it is implemented as soon as possible after arrival in Australia. In this way, their settlement can be a smoother and more positive experience.

Arranged childcare and transportation need to be provided and should be sorted out before commencement of the program.

Volunteers recruited for the program need to be given good training and support.

A flexible and open approach is required. The staff employed in such a program need to want to assist refugees for the right reasons. *Life Skills* program coordinator, Ros Trestrail, said:

You need to proceed slowly, listen to communities and be willing to change and adapt. Staff should not 'push their own barrel'. They need to be prepared to be flexible and very adaptable.

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Profile > Henriette

Henriette is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and has been living in Australia since 2003. She came to Australia with her husband and five children.

Henriette heard about the *Life Skills* workshops through her husband who had been attending computer classes at the Edmund Rice Centre. She said the program was good for her family's health. Her children's favourite dishes are now salad, pasta and healthy hamburgers.

Haleema is an Iraqi but was born in Kuwait. She fled to Iran where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees granted her refugee status. She was then given the opportunity to resettle in Australia with her family.

Haleema and her family arrived in Australia in 2002. She had been coming to the Edmund Rice Centre for two years when interviewed, and had just started to attend *Life Skills* workshops again after the birth of her fifth daughter.

She has greatly benefited from the workshops and now uses less salt, oil and sugar in her cooking. She is more aware of how to use banking services and how Perth's water, electricity and gas utilities function. She is also more confident in her approach to accessing community services that can assist her.

photo > Pe from Burma and Henriette from the Democratic Republic of Congo