

# Promoting sports participation for refugee-background young people

The Jack Brockhoff  
**Child Health  
and Wellbeing  
Program**

Research partnerships  
working for every child

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### BACKGROUND

Sports participation confers a range of physical and psychosocial benefits. For refugee and migrant youth, it also has the potential to be a critical mediator for achieving positive settlement and the capacity to engage meaningfully in Australian society. Participation in organised sports increases physical activity levels and physical health, and is also associated with lower levels of depression and suicidality; greater levels of psychosocial maturity, self-esteem, social connectedness and social competence; reduced involvement in antisocial activities; and higher academic outcomes. Refugee and migrant youth have low participation rates in sport however, and identified barriers include costs, discrimination and a lack of cultural sensitivity in sporting environments, a lack of knowledge of mainstream sports services on the part of refugee-background settlers, lack of access to transport, culturally determined gender norms and family attitudes.

### PHASE 1 - ANALYSING EXISTING MODELS FOR PROMOTING SPORTS PARTICIPATION

The first phase of the study is complete. Data has been collected through interviews in a wide range of settings to examine the benefits, challenges and any shortcomings associated with different models being used in the community to encourage sports participation by refugee-background children and youth. Interview participants have been drawn from a number of NGOs providing sports participation programs or scholarships specifically for refugee and migrant youth; local governments; schools in suburbs with large numbers of recently-arrived migrant and refugee settlers; sports clubs – including elite clubs providing outreach programs and grassroots clubs attempting to integrate refugee-background young people into their teams.

Three distinct models of participation have been identified:

- Short term programs (often 6-10 weeks) for refugee-background children
- Ongoing programs specifically for refugee-background children and youth
- Integration of refugee and migrant youth into mainstream clubs

*“It’s good for me – for my body. You play sport – something like soccer – I feel happy. Also it’s good for my health. If I play I’ll be healthy [and] I’ll come together with someone else”*

(refugee-background student)



### Case study: A Cricket Club in the western suburbs of Melbourne

- The Junior club currently comprises 30-35% refugee and migrant background young people (South Sudanese, Afghan and Indian)
- Council and community grants assist with fees and uniform costs for players with refugee and migrant background
- Multicultural Sports Aides employed from the local community on a casual basis to liaise with families and to assist with transport and car pooling

While each of these models provide opportunities for young people to play sport, it is clear that the benefits, challenges and outcomes vary. Short term programs can provide an enjoyable introduction to sports but rarely lead to sustained participation for this population group. Low (or no) cost ongoing programs specifically for refugee-background children offer sustained participation but stop short of promoting wider integration and some of the social benefits that may be associated with inclusion in mainstream clubs. This latter model, offers the greatest potential in terms of broad social as well as physical and mental health benefits but can also be the most challenging to implement and sustain. The use of 'multicultural sports aides' in combination with relevant grants, as described in

the accompanying case study, appears to be a promising way of overcoming many of the barriers associated with integration into mainstream clubs and is proposed as the basis for the best-practice model to be developed.

## PHASE 2 -DEVELOPING, IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING A BEST PRACTICE MODEL

The second pilot phase of the study is currently underway. The aim is to develop, implement and evaluate the best-practice model in a minimum of two settings (at least one of which is to specifically include girls). An advisory group has been formed with existing and new community partners who have all expressed enthusiasm to work together to develop, implement and evaluate a best practice model for sports participation for refugee and migrant youth.

These partners include:

- o Merri Community Health Services
- o Fawkner Primary School
- o Hadfield Sports Club (Netball, Cricket and Australian Rules Football)
- o Brunswick Zebras Soccer Club
- o Moreland City Council
- o Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health
- o Arabic Social Services

In addition:

- A small number of additional interviews are planned with young people to identify preferred sporting codes for the initial trial and likely barriers and facilitators to participation.
- Additional consultations will be held with relevant sporting organisations and community groups to inform the planning and decision making with the Advisory Committee about the model/s to be trialled, the youth profile being targeted (e.g. age, gender and ethnicity), and the location.
- The following funding submissions have been made: NHMRC Post-doctoral fellowship (to cover salary for Karen Block); and a University of Melbourne Early Career Research grant (seed funding for trial). The results of these submissions are pending.
- Additional project funding will be needed. Submissions are planned for an ARC linkage grant; the Melbourne Social Equity Institute; and philanthropic donation.

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