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# **“Growing up in Aussie” Refugee young people and their parents talk about sex education**

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# outline

- 1) Quotes from refugee parents & young people
- 2) Reflections for workers
- 3) Suggested strategies



# i. quotes



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# attitudes of parents

- Parents want schools to educate their kids about sexuality, relationships and health (Bass Coast report, 2004)
- In focus groups for subsequent projects following the Bass Coast model, CALD parents were no different.
- Melanie (FPV) “parent data served as a powerful change agent”
- In our focus groups, Iraqi parents did have concerns, but Afghan parents didn't.



# African young people

## HIV/STI knowledge

- You get it from ‘strippers and hoes’
- HIV is not common in Australia, because you never see billboards about it here
- It’s natural (“of course”) that sexual activity could harm your health, and one believed two people without HIV could infect each other by *“doing the thing”*.
- Some believed the ‘injections’ (vaccination) they received in Year Seven offered protection against HIV.
- To prevent infection, participants said *“just looking after yourself”* (which seemed to mean girls resisting the pressure to have sex), *“going to the doctor and take a test before you have sexuality with a guy”* and *“using protection”*.



# CALD young people

## Living in two cultures

- African participants agreed very strongly with the idea they were living in two cultures at once. *“It’s completely different. Cos, Aussie’s kinda boring. (laughter) Compared to our culture – our kids, we play around everywhere. Sometimes, I walk from my house – there’s no-one in the street. But over there—beautiful! It would be like, (shouts) ‘hey bruv, how you doing?’”*
- Afghan female participants had experienced problems at school with being harassed by other students for being culturally different. They said their parents understood their lives “sometimes”, but requested clarification of the language ‘social life outside school’, and advised that after school, they go home and just stay there, or any time spent with friends after school was arranged or closely supervised by their parents anyway.



# Iraqi & Afghan adult female

- The Afghani women were not aware about sex education and in their culture saw this as a topic for parents to educate their children about, but did not want to find out more about the sex education curriculum in schools.
- Iraqi women said they had learned in schools in Iraq about women's health and anatomy, and said if they knew more about what the Australian sex education curriculum included, they might agree more to send their children along.
- Around men's health, they wanted to know if it was in general, or educational, or 'something else' – "*our children don't tell us exactly what.*" They said "*We don't mind if it is education in general, but not if it is showing them how to 'turn on'.*"
- Both interpreters commented they thought it was good to provide this information, but in a culturally appropriate way, at the right age and in same-gender groups.



# Iraqi & Afghan adult male

- Afghan—*“provision of information about sex is not suited to our culture, but we feel it is very useful, because it helped avoid unwanted pregnancy, or a sexual disease.”*
- Iraqi—*“In fact, although the school provides such information, sexual sessions, we are quite concerned about the nature of this information, and we have no idea – we never involved in order to determine the level of propriety of this information, and we would like in fact to educate our children about those sexual matters our own way and introduce it gradually our own way.”*



# African adult female

- When asked, they said sex and relationship education was very important for the children – but it should be based on the age of the children, and focus on the fundamental principles, not how to practice it!
- The unauthorised interpreter relayed that one woman said “*she don’t want – for example – to teach the children... their own sexuality*”.
- A woman noted that parents are informed because their kids bring home a subject list saying what they will study, “*but the problem – many of the kids here are in a Catholic school, so the Catholic school doesn’t agree with homosexuality or ‘one sex’ sexuality, so that’s the problem.*”



# African adult male

- They described a conflict between what they perceived sex education covers and their Christian cultural values. One man said he said a daughter and he could not accept the Australian teenagers' boyfriend-girlfriend lifestyle. *"We discover in Australia there's freedom at sixteen to become independent and start your own life."*
- The men perceived this lifestyle, and sex education in schools, as *"breaking the link between children and their parents"* – the relationship through which a parent will guide a child through finding a life partner and learning about sex and child bearing after marriage.
- *"In our culture, a couple must have trust/respect for each other, so we do not have casual sex. We educate our young people not to expose themselves to others."*



# African adult male

*“I have four sons and four daughters, and we have another culture. There is a **fight** between me and Australia about my **own children**. When they go to school they have another information, and the TV is the worst! In your (Australian) TV you cannot watch for long – (without seeing) only sex, sex, sex, sex! Kissing in public too – in our culture it’s an abomination. But how can you prevent your children from seeing – who would you complain to? We are not here to educate the whole of Australia; we take the good with the bad. But our children are copying Australian culture – all those things attract them. We have to teach the difference between ‘love’ and ‘like’. ‘Like’ is not in African culture! Neither is ‘cute’.”*



# African community family roleplay

- Scenario: Dad sees his daughter hugging a male classmate good bye when he picks her up after school, and there is family conflict about whether this is acceptable.



# Iraqi community family roleplay

- Scenario: Muhammed wants to go to his best friend's party but his parents have heard there will be alcohol at the party.
- The roleplays barely worked, because the idea of kids disagreeing with parents was unfamiliar.
- Iraqi and Afghan parents take an explicitly pedagogical approach to their kids' upbringing.
- The major differences from school-based sexuality education are around (1) timing (ie. curriculum) and (2) gender separation.
- “We see Shepparton as a stronghold”  
→ implicit: sense of “culture under attack”



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## ii. reflections



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# reflections

- Focus groups with parents are “asking permission” (once-off) and they are a useful way to overcome the reluctance of your own internal gatekeepers (principals, school boards).
- That reflects our own crisis of legitimacy about doing sex education with CALD young people.
- “Do it, don’t problematise it.” But do it smart...
- With CALD communities, you actually need to build relationships, ongoing and over time, with community leadership (changing!) and parents.
- Use the common ground (experiences of “living in two cultures”) between parents and kids.
- Iraqi parents are not saying sex education is “taboo” – they just **differ** on the who, what, when, and how.



## **iii. suggested strategies**



# suggested strategies

- Community engagement (MFB model)
- Careful use of interpreters
- Gender separation is essential
- Compromise on age (informal curriculum)
- Culture clash is your common ground!
- But 'information is neutral'



# references

- Leahy, Horne & Harrison (2004) *Bass Coast Sexuality Education Project Needs Analysis and Professional Development Evaluation Report*, Melbourne: Deakin University.  
[www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/.../basscoastfinalreport.pdf](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/.../basscoastfinalreport.pdf)

