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# Cultural considerations to support children from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Liz Gordon and Julio Alejo

CFCA Emerging Minds Webinar 13 May 2020

*This webinar is coproduced with Emerging Minds. They are working together as part of the National Workforce Centre for child Mental Health, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth mental health program.*

Please note: The views expressed in this webinar are those of the presenters, and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the Australian Government.



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# Learning outcomes

This webinar will assist practitioners whose work includes responding to families from migrant and refugee backgrounds through:

- Describing some of the **challenges** that children and families who have settled in Australia experience, both pre- and post-settlement
- Considering the extent to which practitioners need to develop **'expert' cultural understandings** to work effectively with families from cultures other than their own
- Exploring the extent to which practitioners need to have an **awareness of how their own beliefs, values and assumptions** are shaped by culture in order to work effectively
- Describing how engaging in **respectful, collaborative and curious conversations** with children and families can help them **reconnect** with skills and wisdoms linked to their community and cultural traditions.

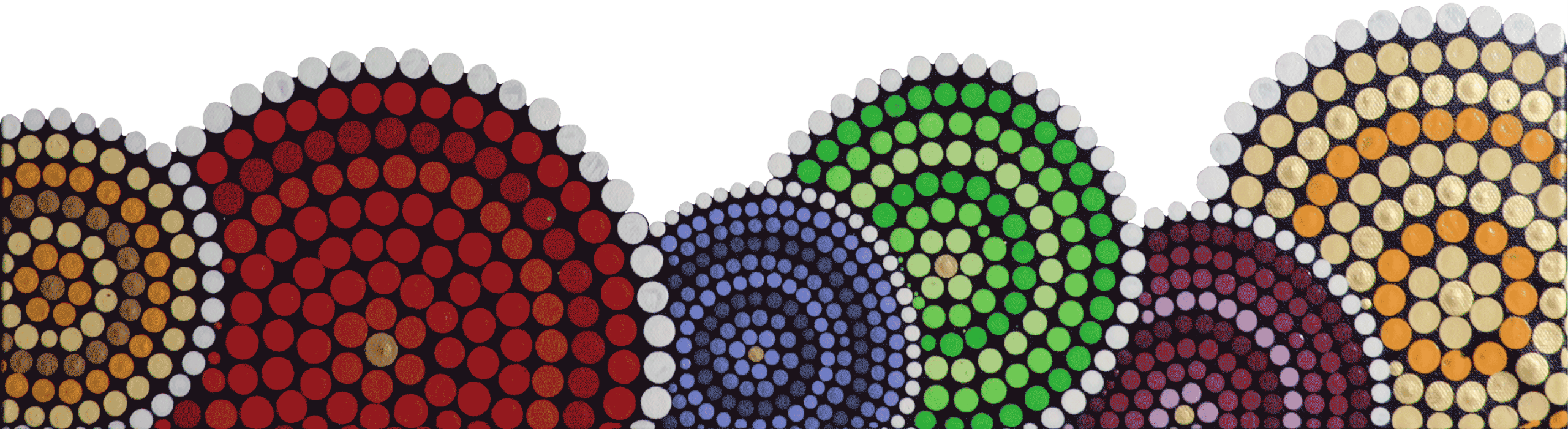


# Acknowledgements

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Emerging Minds and CFCA wish to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia upon which our webinar presenters and participants are located.

We wish to pay respect to the Elders past, present and future for the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Indigenous Australia.



# Webinar series

2019/20 Emerging Minds series: *Focus on infant and child mental health.*

## Upcoming webinar:

- Responding to Aboriginal children and families in contexts of family violence

## Previous webinars in this series:

- Supporting children after natural and human-induced disasters
- Working with parents affected by alcohol and other drug use: Considering the needs of children in practice
- Parent–child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children
- What is child-focused supervision in adult-focused services and how does it work?

# Housekeeping

- Send through your questions via the chat box at any time during the webinar.
- Let us know if you **don't** want your question published on the online forum following the presentation.
- All our webinars are recorded.
- The slides are available in the handout section of Gotowebinar.
- The audio and transcript will be posted on our website and YouTube channel in the coming week.

# Presenters



**Liz Gordon**  
Clinical Supervisor &  
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**Julio Alejo**  
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**Chris Dolman**  
**(Facilitator)**  
Senior Workforce  
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Emerging Minds





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*‘Before the war my life was like a vase that was then broken when the war came, never to be repaired.*

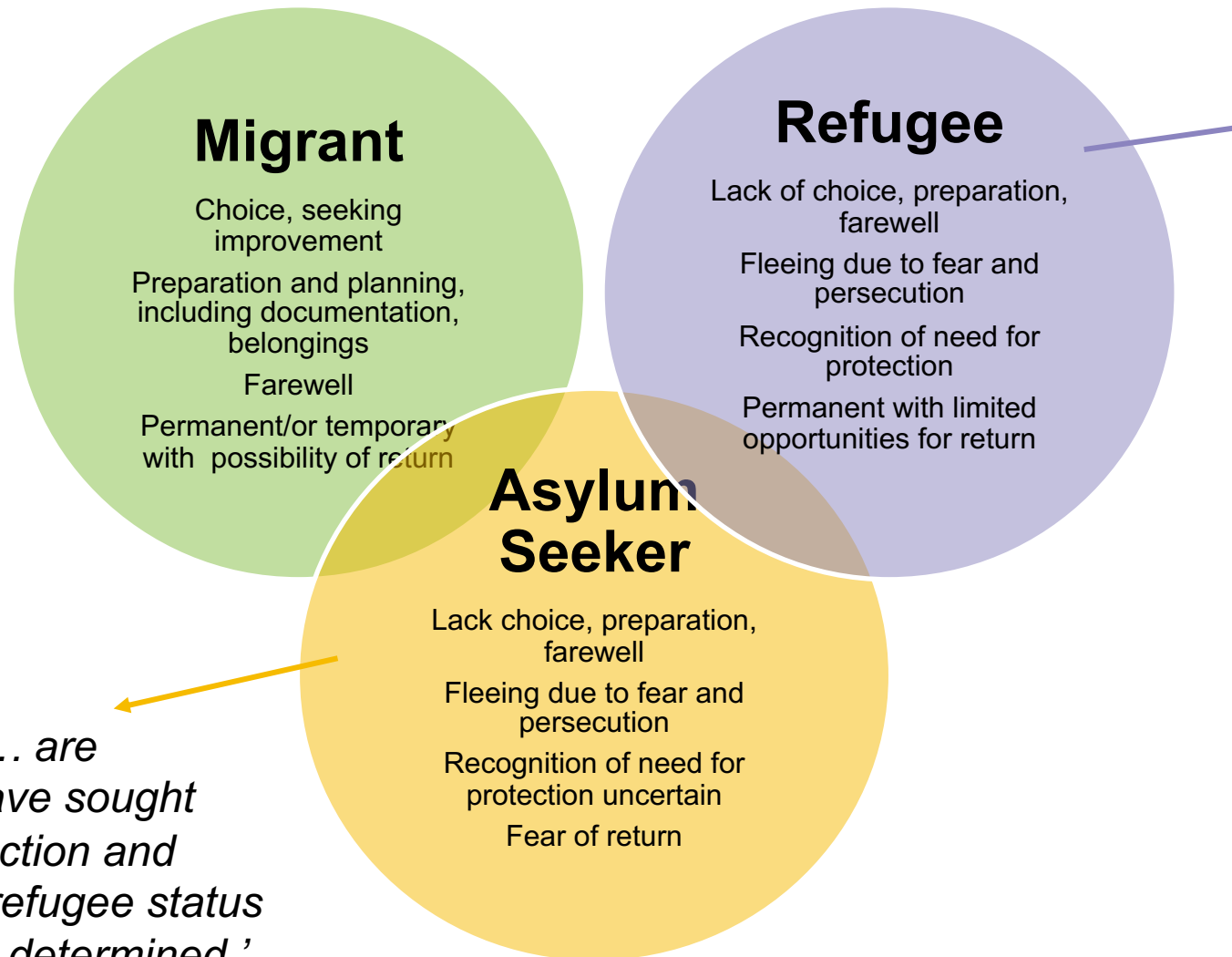
*But instead of trying to mend the vase, so that it looked like it did in the past, it can be made into a mosaic, which is still beautiful’*

Torture and trauma counselling client  
from refugee background



# Journeys of migration

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*Refugee: 'Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'* (UNHCR, 1951)

*Asylum seekers '... are individuals who have sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined.'*  
(UNCR, 2014)

See also Refugee Council of Australia

# Challenges experienced by children and families pre- and post-settlement

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# The refugee experience (Country of origin)

- Persistent and long-term political repression, oppression and intimidation
- Deprivation of human rights and harassment/intimidation
- Threats to life and safety of self and others, assaults, witnessing harm and killing of others
- Torture - intentional and sanctioned infliction of harm for gain
- Separation from and loss of family members, home and culture
- Forced displacement and extreme deprivation
- Deprivation of education, social interaction and psychological development for children

# Strengths in families from refugee backgrounds

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- Resilience and resourcefulness
- Adaptability
- Strong commitment to the family and values of the community
- Strong desire to achieve educationally and economically
- Desire to contribute to new country
- Broad international experience, multilingual and awareness of many cultures



# Some challenges for families from refugee backgrounds

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- Changes in power dynamics, roles and responsibilities in families:
  - intergenerational conflict
  - family violence
- The impact of intergenerational trauma and persecution on parenting, children and parent–child relationships
- Grief, guilt and fear related to family remaining overseas, re-traumatising events in country of origin
- Impacts of mental and physical health difficulties





# Some challenges for families from refugee backgrounds

- Limited access to traditional supports and cultural practices
- Loss of belonging in new communities
- Prior professional qualifications and skills not recognised
- Unfamiliarity with social expectations, institutions and potential supports
- Experiences of racism and discrimination
- Impaired trust in services



**To what extent do practitioners need to:**

**... develop 'expert' cultural understandings?**

**... have an awareness of how their own beliefs, values and assumptions are shaped by culture?**

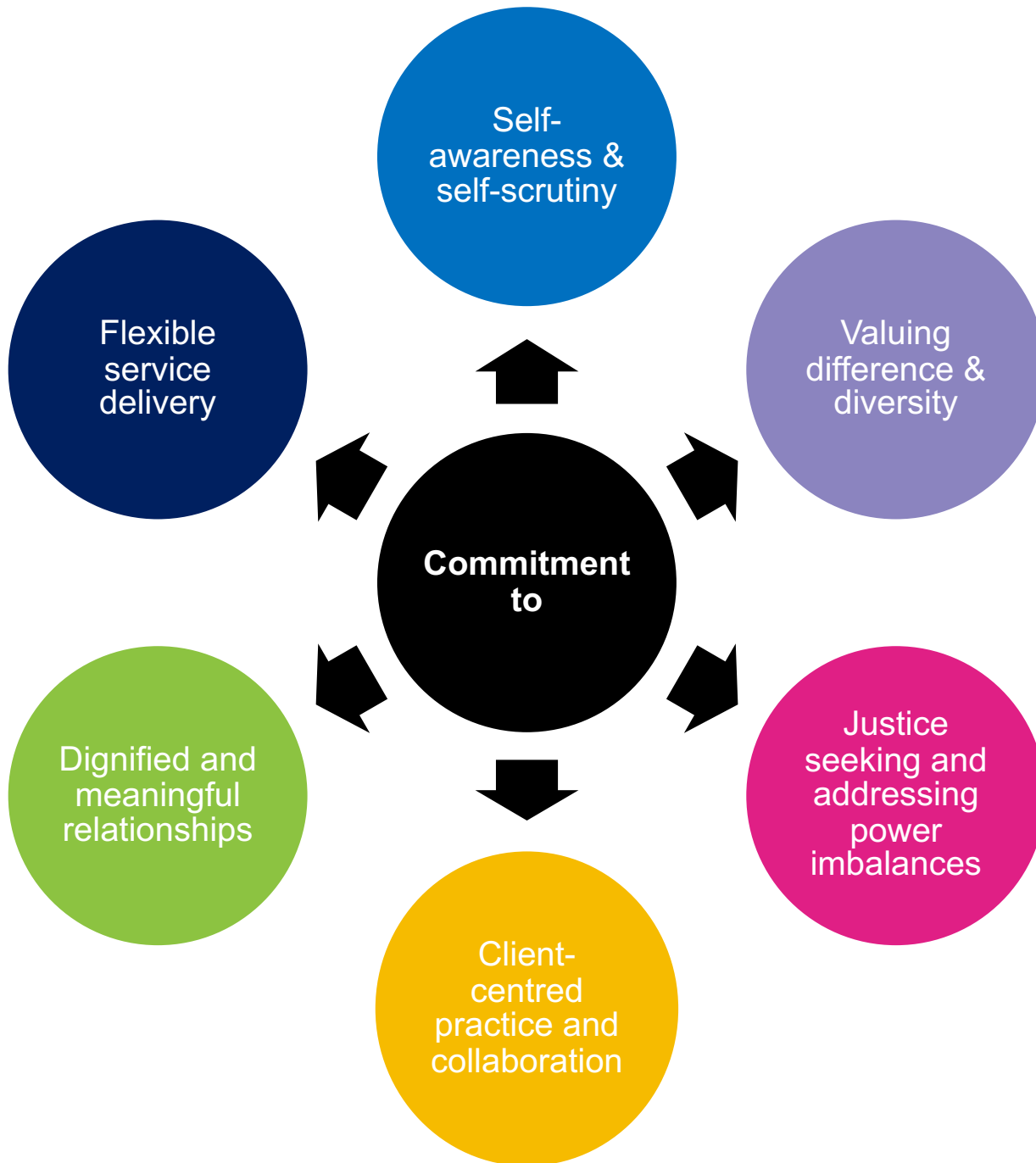
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# The importance of ethical practice



*'I believe that if we are able to enact our ethics, we can be sustained in the work. When we are not able to enact our ethics, we experience spiritual or ethical pain.'*

V. Reynolds



## Iceberg Model of Culture



# Cultural knowledge for working with families from refugee backgrounds

- Conceptual understanding of culture (rather than expertise in specific cultural practices)
- Culture is protective for trauma survivors; however, refugee experience often involves destruction of culture
- Some country knowledge is useful (e.g. key language/s, key religion/s, access to education, health care, conflict?)
  - Held lightly and checked with child/family

# Cultural humility

*‘Respecting and engaging with the Other’s life-world through a process of empathy and awareness of power.’*

(Cleary and Schweitzer)

*‘Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its participants.’* (Hall)

*Client is the expert of their experience*

# Cultural humility

## Self-knowledge

- Interrogating and understanding of own cultural identity, values and beliefs
- ... and how this intersects with other aspects of identity (gender, sexuality, class, ability, profession)

*Where are my points of privilege and blind spots?*

*How do they impact on safety for the client and my relationship with them?*

*How may I be perceived by client?*

**Importance of supervision**

**Learning to manage**

- **Uncertainty**
- **Discomfort**
- **Not knowing**



# Engaging in respectful, collaborative and curious conversations with children and families

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# Cultural safety with families from refugee backgrounds

*'An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.'*

(Williams in Cleary and Schweitzer)



# Cultural safety with families from refugee backgrounds

## Cultural formulation in assessment

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Curiosity about:

- Cultural identity
- Cultural understandings of the issue/challenge
- Cultural attempts at coping
- Stigma?
- Impact of culture on therapeutic relationship.

## Cultural lens to family functioning

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- How are family routines, patterns and roles shaped by cultural values?
- How do family practices adhere to (or differ from) cultural norms?

# Cultural safety with families from refugee backgrounds

## Explore the family's cultural transition

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- Changes in cultural family practices may be a source of conflict, confusion, grief or opportunity for different family members.

## Broad definition of family

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- People decide who and what constitutes their 'family'.
- Consider biological family members, guardians/carers, extended family members, important community members and/or family members who are deceased, disappeared and/or physically distant.



# Cultural knowledge for working with families from refugee backgrounds

## Structuring safety into sessions

- Appropriate interpreters
- Clarifying and explaining role and process  
e.g. counselling, confidentiality
- Therapeutic presence
  - Open, Grounded, Focused & Interested
  - How can you address any power imbalances?*
- Choice and consent
- Maintain clear boundaries
  - Consistency, Predictability & Reliability
- Repair relational ruptures
  - Acknowledge, Check in & Address
- Make tentative offerings of earned expertise  
e.g. normalising reactions, psychoeducation, knowledge of Australian systems and available support

**Don't underestimate the value of an authentic, empathic & empowering interaction!**

# Applying a cultural lens to family practice



- Gentle, gradual pace
- Holistic interventions beyond an individual focus
  - e.g. group work, community development, systemic advocacy and capacity building
- Organisational processes for client involvement and feedback regarding service delivery and program development

# Q & A Discussion

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# Continue the conversation



Do you have any further questions?

Please submit questions or comments on the online forum following today's webinar:

**[aifs.gov.au/cfca/events/cultural-considerations-support-children-migrant-refugee-backgrounds](https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/events/cultural-considerations-support-children-migrant-refugee-backgrounds)**