

Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children and Family Reunion in Australia

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1 Introduction

Armed conflict, violence, natural disasters, discrimination or even extreme poverty can all lead to separation of family members. Children and young people thus separated from family engage too often in difficult and dangerous journeys to seek asylum in another country. After arrival these young people continue to face many challenges transitioning into a new environment – social, cultural, linguistic and emotional.

For children and young people from refugee backgrounds it has been recognised that access to timely family reunion is an important protective factor and a vital part of their settlement process (Fazel et al, 2012). The importance of family is recognised in all cultures and traditions and is acknowledged in international human rights law. Denial of family reunion has been identified consistently as detrimental to the wellbeing of children, impeding development of personal and social skills (Berman, 2001).

This chapter looks at children and young people who have arrived in Australia as refugees or asylum seekers and their options to seek family reunion. No reliable statistics are available concerning either the number of family reunion applications made by refugee children, nor the rate at which such applications succeed. It is our experience as clinicians that only a small percentage of child refugees do, in fact, apply for family reunion.

Whether a child or young person will be reunited with family members is determined by law and policy (Crock, Kenny and Allison, 2011). The surge in the number of asylum seekers seeking to enter

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