

## WHAT KEEPS REFUGEE BOYS IN SCHOOL



the good starts  
STUDY FOR REFUGEE YOUTH

This broadsheet provides descriptive information about 48 boys from refugee backgrounds at the end of their second year of settlement in Melbourne, Australia. The information focuses on boys and schooling and is drawn from the Good Starts Study of Refugee Youth.

### Year One at English Language School (ELS)

All boys were attending an ELS in their first year in Australia.

School is important to boys and they begin their schooling in Australia with high levels of enjoyment and satisfaction, they trust their teachers and fellow students, and they have a strong sense of belonging to their school. Most boys feel that school can help them with their troubles in life and most say that there is at least

one adult at their school who they can turn to if they are troubled. Boys say that there are a lot of chances to become involved in school activities and the majority say they care about other students in their school. They are proud of their school, feel that they play a part in making school a good place and they feel that their school welcomes their parents. Boys feel free to voice their opinions and although about one third report bullying, most say they feel like they belong. Refugee boys are trying to do their best and are optimistic about their future school achievement.

### FACTORS SUPPORTING BOYS' SUCCESS

- Strong supportive family (especially a parent) and positive ways to deal with family conflict.
- Stability of housing.
- Family employment.
- Teachers who care about them and are helpful and supportive.
- Having an adult mentor or role model in the school environment that boys can turn to for advice.
- Opportunities to become involved in school and community activities including sport and arts, and safe places to “hang out” with friends.
- Achievement of English language and literacy.
- Being able to participate in, feel part of, and feel valued by the wider Australian community.

### Year Two at Mainstream School

In their second year in Australia, the boys had exited from the ELS and all but 7 were attending a mainstream school (4 were in the workforce and 3 were attending TAFE or AMES). They report similar levels of bullying in their mainstream school. Boys say they still have at least one adult in their mainstream school who they can turn to for help. However, although most still enjoy coming to school, they rated their enjoyment less than in the first year and are less satisfied with their achievement. Boys feel significantly less successful at their subjects in year 2 in

Australia compared to year 1. Boys are less likely to like their teachers, they don't feel as accepted by their teachers and they feel that both they and their parents are less welcome at school. They are less proud to be part of their school, they care less about people in their class, and they don't feel as responsible for making their school a good place as they did in their first year. Boys reported that there were fewer opportunities to become involved in sports and other school activities and the number of boys who reported missing school increased.

Overall, boys report they are trying to do their best, they remain optimistic about their future in school and plan to finish secondary school. ■■



# Peter's STORY

**P**eter<sup>1</sup> is a 15 year old with a big smile. He loves to play soccer, is into video games, likes riding his bike with his friends and hanging out with his family. Peter was born in Sudan and arrived in Australia at the age of 12 with his father and two brothers. Peter's mother died before they arrived and he does not like talking about this. When Peter and his family first arrived, they lived with his father's sister and her large family. The first year was difficult because they did not have their own home and his father was not able to find employment. Despite the challenges, school was a positive experience for Peter and being at school helped him to adjust to his life in Australia and imagine a good future for himself. Peter had many friends at English Language School and was friendly with everyone. He had high self-esteem and was optimistic about life in general. Peter became literate in English quickly because he had seven years of education before arriving in Australia and was literate in another language.

In his second year in Australia, Peter left his English Language School and, despite moving house twice, settled well into a mainstream secondary school. He continued to see himself as a popular boy having many friends. He reported getting good marks at school, was keen to talk about his family and their future and felt that life was much better now that they had found a big house to live in and that his father and older brother had found employment. He was looking forward to a family holiday interstate where they would meet up with friends.

In his third year of settlement, Peter is proud to tell us that he has become an Australian citizen. He is now in year 10, says he continues to get good marks and really likes his teachers and the other students. He admits to having worries about his school performance as he has high aspirations for his own achievement and future. Peter explains that he has been in a few fights with other boys because they were being racist and said bad things about his family. But these fights weren't serious and his friends were there to assist him. He is a bit worried that his older brother has moved out of the

family home. But, looking back on this first three years in Australia, Peter says that even though he sometimes gets a bad test result, has an argument with a teacher or gets

into a fight with another boy, that life is good and getting better. ■■

<sup>1</sup> Peter is not his real name.

## KEY FACTORS

### THAT HAVE ENABLED PETER TO DO WELL

- He has a close connection with his father and siblings and there is no serious conflict in the home.
- His father is strict but fair and with age has given him more freedom.
- His older brother is very supportive of him and buys him things he needs.
- His father and brother are employed.
- The family has stable housing.
- Friends have been an important part of his settlement since the beginning. His friends are both from his own cultural group and from other cultural backgrounds.
- He had intact schooling before arrival and his English developed quickly and to a high standard.
- He has enjoyed school since arrival and is very motivated to do well. This has helped him to cope with any conflict he experiences with teachers and other students.
- His younger age on arrival has allowed him to enter the mainstream education system with peers his age, and to develop his English and 'catch up' well before year 11 and 12.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The Good Starts Study is a five year study following a group of 120 refugee young people to identify the social determinants of wellbeing and to inform policy and practice about how to support good settlement outcomes for refugee youth. The study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to gather information about settlement and wellbeing. The young people were born in Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Liberia, Uganda, Burundi, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Croatia and Bosnia. They were between 11 to 19 years of age when they entered the study and had recently arrived in Australia.

For more information see:

[www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee\\_youth.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html)

#### Resources relating to refugee students

VFST Inc. (2007). School's In for Refugees Whole-School Guide to Refugee Readiness. <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/publications.php>

VFST Inc. (2007). The Education Needs of Young Refugees in Victoria. <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/publications.php>

CMYI (2003). Educational Support Issues for Refugee and Newly Arrived Young People. <http://www.cmyi.net.au/AllCMYIPublications>

## LESSONS and INSIGHTS

Boys arrive in Australia with much hope and optimism for their future. This is reinforced in English Language Schools which are experienced as positive, supportive, diverse and enjoyable places to learn. Most boys go on to enter secondary school or TAFE where they continue to be positive about education although they find it much more difficult and challenging. However there are fewer opportunities for social participation, boys feel less accepted by teachers and they are less proud to be a part of their school.



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The Refugee Health Research Centre – A Partnership between LaTrobe University and Foundation House.  
For more information about the Centre visit [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/)

