

WHAT FACILITATES SUCCESS OF REFUGEE GIRLS AT SCHOOL?



the good starts
STUDY FOR REFUGEE YOUTH

This broadsheet provides descriptive information about 40 girls aged 12 to 20 years, from refugee backgrounds, in their first and second years of settlement in Melbourne, Australia. The information is drawn from the Good Starts Study of Refugee Youth.

Year One at English Language School

All girls attended an English Language School (ELS) in their first year in Australia. Girls valued their educational opportunities, enjoyed their time in the ELS, and reported high levels of satisfaction with their academic achievements. All planned to finish secondary school and they looked forward to their future in Australia after completing their schooling.

Girls liked their teachers, felt safe expressing their opinions in class, and felt that the teachers noticed them when they did something well. They also liked the other students in their classes, and even though about a third of girls reported being

bullied, the majority reported feeling good about their cultural background. They had a strong sense of belonging to their school, reported lots of chances to become involved in sports and other school activities and felt that they were partly responsible for making their school a good place. School was identified as important for helping girls cope with troubles in life and most reported having at least one adult in the school environment who they felt they could turn to for help.

The average number of days of school missed in the previous school term was two and the main reasons were not feeling well and having to help their family. All but two girls planned to attend secondary school in their second year with one girl planning to attend university and the other girl not sure about her plans.

Year Two at Mainstream School

In their second year in Australia, all the girls had exited from the ELS and all but one were attending mainstream school. Girls continued to enjoy going to school, they reported less bullying, they liked the students in their classes and continued to feel good about their cultural backgrounds. Girls still identified school as being important for helping them cope with troubles in their lives. Most reported a sense of belonging to their mainstream school and were still trying to do their best at school.

However, the number of girls who identified at least one adult in their school who they can turn to for help decreased. They reported feeling less

accepted by their teachers and that teachers were less likely to notice their achievements. Girls liked their teachers less in the second year at mainstream school. They reported feeling less successful and less satisfied with their academic achievements and were less proud to be part of their school.

The number of days that girls missed school in the previous term increased to five and the main reasons were not feeling well and having to help their family. An additional reason for missing school, not mentioned in year one, was not wanting to go to school.

There was a significant decrease in girls' plans to finish secondary school and a significant decrease in girls looking forward to their future once they finish school. ■■

FACTORS SUPPORTING GIRLS' SUCCESS

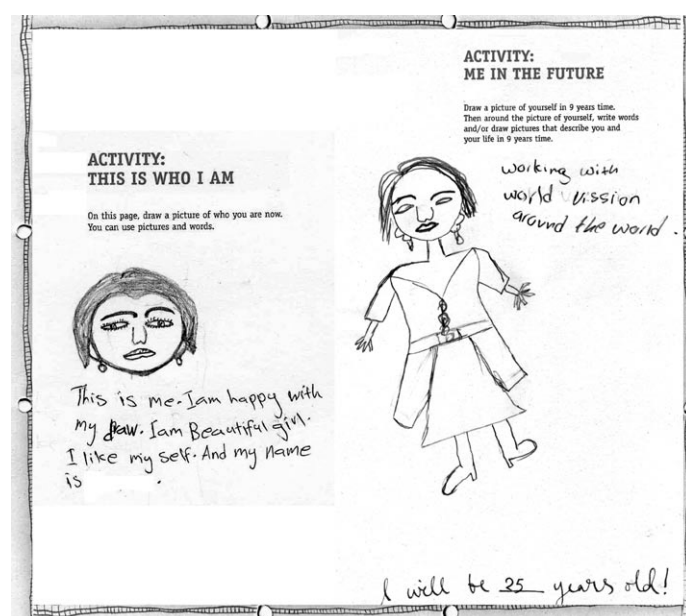
- Teachers who provide individual recognition of girls' achievements and successes in school.
- Having an adult in the school environment who girls can turn to for help and advice and who provides general support, positive interactions and encouragement.
- Having good peer relationships and supportive friends at school.
- Tutoring and educational support that is available during school hours, not only after school where family responsibilities may compete.
- Families that are supportive of girls' school attendance and find ways to help girls balance family and school demands.
- External support and resources for families so that girls are not overburdened with family responsibilities of caring for younger siblings or advocating for the family with regards to housing, health and other settlement issues.

Ayo's STORY

Ayo¹ was born in Sudan, lived in Egypt for over two years and had completed 5 years of schooling before coming to Australia at the age of 16 years. She is the eldest child in her family and arrived with her parents, four sisters and one brother. She spoke several languages but no English when she arrived.

Ayo was happy and confident in her first year in Australia. At home Ayo assumed a significant care-giving role to her younger siblings who are very important to her and when her father was in hospital she missed school for several weeks. Ayo had good relationships with a few close friends and teachers and she felt very positive about the ELS she attended, even though she experienced discrimination at school and did not feel accepted by all the students. She was looking forward to her new school and to meeting new friends and teachers. However she was worried about her English not being good enough and that she would not know anybody.

In the second year of the study Ayo was in year 10 at a secondary college close to her home where she was doing a bridging program with many other students she knew from the ELS. She was very happy at school and liked her teachers and friends and had not experienced discrimination or bullying at this school. She had missed only a few days of school because she was sick and



to help her family. She felt very successful and satisfied with her achievements at school and was motivated to learn more.

Ayo is now 18 years old and in year 11 at school. Her reading, writing and comprehension in English are very good and she speaks English at home with her siblings. She is well supported by two close friends and several teachers at school. She likes school because the different cultures represented at her school are 'like one culture'. She feels coming to Australia and getting an education has made her think about who she is and what she can do with her life. Although she has been in a serious relationship with a young man for the last

year, she wants them both to finish university before getting married. Unlike some of her friends, whose parents are arranging that they marry after Year 12, her parents also want her to finish studying. She is still very busy after school as her mother goes to language classes and she looks after her younger siblings. She continues to go to 'Saturday school' where she is tutored by a very helpful retired teacher.

Next year Ayo intends to do Year 12 and she is only worried about one particular science subject. She wants to study nursing when she finishes secondary school. ■■

¹Ayo is not her real name

LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

- Girls report a positive experience of school in their first year in Australia and they are optimistic about their future success in school and about their future once they finish school.
- Girls continue to enjoy school in the second year but they are less optimistic about their success in school and about their future.
- Although girls continue to feel safe expressing their opinions in class and report less bullying in their mainstream school, they feel less connected to their school.
- There are fewer opportunities for girls to become involved in sports and other school activities at mainstream school.
- In their second year, girls miss more days of school due to illness and having to help their families.
- School plays a key role in helping girls cope with problems they are facing in the settlement context.
- However, having an adult they can turn to in the school environment decreases significantly once girls transition to mainstream school.

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 in the study 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 began the study and had recently arrived in Australia.

For more information about the study see: www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html

For resources relating to refugee students see: www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/documents/broadsheet-1-web.pdf