

POSITION STATEMENT

Asylum Seeker Children and Young People's Health

BACKGROUND

Children and young people need age-appropriate and specialised healthcare, access to education and developmentally appropriate play, family support and a safe environment to reach their full potential. Children seeking asylum in Australia should have the same rights as any other Australian child [1].

Children and young people seeking asylum arrive in Australia as unaccompanied children/young people or as part of a family of asylum seekers. Australian Government policy is that asylum seeker children and young people will not be held in immigration detention [2]. Despite this policy, asylum seeker children and young people are held in on and off shore detention[3]. The health status of children and young people arriving as asylum seekers is not well researched[4], but there is evidence of the effect of detention on children and young people.

What is known is that children have often been exposed to violence and trauma in their country of origin and during their journey to Australia, including witnessing and/or experiencing sexual and physical violence [5, 6]. These events affect physical and mental health, with a direct link between traumatic experiences and conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, depression and behavioural problems [7-9]. Furthermore, there is a strong association between immigration detention and poor child mental health [10]. Being held in detention contributes to depression and impacts on children's development resulting in speech and language delay and regressive behaviours such as bedwetting, biting and head banging [3, 8, 11, 12]. Frequent relocation from centre to centre also exacerbates mental health problems in children [13, 14]. Additional stressors including family separation, parental hopelessness, depression and anxiety, uncertainty and exposure to traumatic events within detention are compounded by the lack of access to education and activities needed for healthy childhood development [6, 10, 15-17].

Unaccompanied minors are entitled to special protection and assistance under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [18]. Unaccompanied minors in immigration detention are extremely vulnerable, particularly those held in offshore centres [11].

Services that meet the health needs of children and young people are not routinely available in immigration detention in Australia[19]. This situation is magnified in off shore facilities where there are additional health risks, such as infectious and tropical diseases; no immediate access to tertiary health care; inadequate antenatal care; and a lack of paediatric-trained clinicians leading to inadequate management of acute and chronic childhood illnesses [11, 20].

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BELIEVES THAT:

- Early childhood experiences impact on an individual's life long emotional, psychological and social development
- All children and young persons have the fundamental right to be supported and protected so they can grow and develop to their full potential



- All children and young persons should have access to age-appropriate healthcare services to maintain their health and wellbeing
- No child or young person should be discriminated against due to their refugee status, race, religion, or for social or political reasons
- The best interest of the child and young person should be considered in all decisions related to their care
- Maintaining children and young persons in the family unit is essential for their social and psychological wellbeing and development

RECOMMENDS THAT NURSES:

- Advocate for families to stay together at all times and for parents/carers to maintain responsibility for their child's daily care and be involved in all decision making regarding their child.
- Ensure when caring for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum that the nurse has knowledge of the assigned independent legal guardian who ensures their ongoing health and wellbeing
- Advocate for women who are pregnant or post-partum to be given access to comprehensive ante-natal/post natal care.
- Advocate for children, young people and their families to have access to facilities that ensure their ongoing health and wellbeing. This includes: clean water supply for drinking and hygiene; protection from the elements; privacy; a safe sleeping place; access to food and meal preparation areas; culturally appropriate food
- Promote an environment that supports children and young people to have access to age-appropriate play and leisure activities and for school age children to have access to full time education.
- Advocate for children and young people to receive a comprehensive health assessment and follow-up care including: nutritional assessment; immunisation; dental health; developmental screening; identification of acute or chronic health conditions. Health care provision needs to be appropriate and include mental health services for children and young people who have witnessed trauma and or violence.
- Only use professional interpreters for all interactions with healthcare professionals

RESOLVES TO:

- Seek opportunities to promote positive health and education environments for asylum seeker children and young people.
- Advocate for children and young people to be maintained in family groups whilst waiting assessment.
- Seek opportunity to influence Government policy to ensure the rights of children and young people who are asylum seekers are met according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[18].

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