

# PRACTICE GUIDE

## Working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

The term 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (often referred to as CALD) is commonly used to describe people who have a cultural heritage different from that of the majority of people from the dominant Anglo-Australian culture, replacing the previously used term of people from a 'non-English speaking background'.

### Culture and cultural identity

The definition of culture is 'an integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group'<sup>1</sup>. There are a number of **important considerations** that need to be kept in mind in relation to 'culture' and 'cultural identity', including:

- everyone has a cultural identity, however it is not always recognised or defined by the person themselves - sometimes, culture is seen simply as 'just the way we do things'
- culture and cultural identity are dynamic and constantly changing
- while culture plays an important role in influencing beliefs, values and behaviour, there are a number of other factors that are also important
- given these other factors, there are differences within any culture
- people may be influenced by and identify with one or more culture or cultural group
- it is the choice of the individual as to which culture they identify with regardless of their cultural background.

### Definitions

#### Migrant

A migrant is someone who voluntarily chooses to leave his or her own country and make a new life in another country<sup>2</sup>.

#### Asylum seeker

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for recognition and protection as a refugee (in Australia, this means a Protection visa applicant) but has not had their application for refugee status finally decided. Some people seek asylum having arrived in Australia on a visitor's visa or student visa, while others arrive without an authorised entry visa.

Asylum seekers who are found to be owed Australia's protection under the Refugees Convention, and who satisfy health, character, and security requirements, are granted a permanent Protection visa. Not all asylum seekers will ultimately be recognised as refugees.

## Refugee

The United Nations defines a refugee as a person who '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 (or her) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country...'<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike migrants who have chosen to leave their country of origin, refugees are forced to flee in order to survive. Furthermore, refugees do not have the same opportunity or time to plan for their move to Australia that migrants have and may never be able to return to their home country.

## Unaccompanied minor

An unaccompanied humanitarian minor is a person under 18 years of age who has been granted a visa under Australia's humanitarian program and who does not have a parent to care for them in Australia. An unaccompanied humanitarian minor is not an Australian citizen and may have entered Australia as either a refugee or asylum seeker.

The Department of Home Affairs, under the *Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act 1946*, automatically assumes guardianship responsibility of unaccompanied humanitarian minors, and will formally request that Child Safety accepts the delegated powers and functions of guardianship of the child.

Child Safety will formally respond to the Minister for Home Affairs either accepting or refusing to accept the delegated powers and functions of guardianship of the child. Case management of these minors is undertaken by a designated adoption officer from Adoption and Permanent Care Services.

## Considerations for enhancing practice

### People from CALD backgrounds are not all the same

Develop a working knowledge of the individual culturally and linguistically diverse person's experience. There are many different cultural and ethnic groups and considerable diversity within each of these groups, where a person may also have a bicultural or multicultural heritage. While a person's cultural, ethnic, or religious identity is likely to have a significant influence, either conscious or unconscious, on their beliefs, behaviour, values and attitudes, there are a range of other factors that are relevant. These include:

- the person's age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status
- the person's level of proficiency in English
- the reason for migration and how long they have been living in Australia
- whether the person is a first, second or later generation Australian
- the extent to which they identify with a particular cultural or ethnic group
- the person's level of acculturation into the dominant Australian culture
- other individual factors.

## Develop a working knowledge of difference

There are several ethnic community organisations and service providers with strong links to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds throughout Queensland. Establishing links with these services can assist you to develop your knowledge about working with diversity, as well as the particular needs of children and families. Establishing such links could lead to useful opportunities for working collaboratively to support children at risk and families and facilitate appropriate referrals to relevant services. When responding to specific child protection cases, ensure that the child and family's privacy are protected and that informed consent is given for the involvement of an ethnic community organisation or service provider in each case.

While culture should not be seen as an excuse for child abuse or neglect, it is important to recognise that approaches to parenting may vary considerably across different cultural groups. It is important that when responding, practitioners seek out information about traditional cultural practices, consider intergenerational issues and their impacts, be aware of barriers to identifying and reporting child abuse and understand the impacts of racism, discrimination, and systemic bias.

There are several factors that may be relevant when responding to child protection concerns relating to domestic violence in families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some people who have migrated may have come from countries and cultures in which gender roles and expectations differ from those that are widely accepted in Australia. Exposure to Australian social values which are supportive of the rights of women can lead to many women and girls challenging traditional gender roles.

## Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is a concept that emerged in the late 1980s as a framework for the delivery of more appropriate health services for the Māori people in New Zealand. More recently it has become recognised that the concept is useful in all human services settings. A commonly used definition of cultural safety is:

*'An environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically 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 together.'*<sup>4</sup>

Culturally safe practices include actions which recognise and respect the cultural identities of others, and safely meet their needs, expectations, and rights.

## Access and equity

Access refers to the principle that services should be available to everyone who is entitled to them and should be free from any form of discrimination regardless of a person's country of birth, language, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual or gender diversity, therefore removing all barriers to access.

Equity is about ensuring that all people are given the opportunity to access and participate fully in programs and services and to achieve equitable outcomes. It is not about treating all people equally or the same, as this would not necessarily lead to equity in access or outcomes.

## Valuing and respecting diversity

Child Safety is committed to the principle of valuing cultural diversity and every opportunity to value diversity in all areas of the department's business is promoted. This includes valuing diversity in the workplace, valuing and respecting the positive parenting practices of people from other cultural backgrounds and valuing the contribution of carers from diverse backgrounds.

## The welfare and interests of the child are paramount

All Australians, irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, race, religion, or language are expected and required to adhere to Australian laws. While culture is not to be used as an excuse to override the rights of the child, some newly arrived migrants and some members of established communities may be unfamiliar with aspects of Australian legislation, including legislation relating to child protection.

There may also be different views about what constitutes child abuse and neglect in their country of origin. The safety, wellbeing, and best interests of the child (both now and for the rest of the child's life) are paramount in all decisions and differing approaches to parenting and a lack of understanding or appreciation of the norms and standards expected in Australia could be factors that are encountered and need a response.

## Collect and record accurate information

The identification and collection of accurate and complete information about the cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of children and families is critical to ensuring that the needs of the child can be appropriately met, as well as providing an important resource for service planning and for identifying any possible gaps in terms of access to child protection and family support services by parts of the community.

## Develop effective cross-cultural communication skills

Non-verbal communication can vary significantly across different cultures and may sometimes even have an opposite meaning. For example, maintaining eye contact is valued during interpersonal interactions in most Anglo-based cultures, and is seen as conveying trustworthiness and sincerity. However, in several cultures, making eye contact with someone in authority is seen as a sign of disrespect, and in some cultures eye contact between strangers may be considered shameful. Similarly, smiling or laughing in some cultures may be used when describing an event that is confusing, embarrassing or even sad.

There are also cultural differences relating to physical proximity and social distance; touching and other physical contact; physical postures and gestures. Nodding a head is generally taken as a sign of understanding or agreement in mainstream Anglo-based cultures, however in some other cultures it may only signal an acknowledgment that you are speaking without implying either understanding or agreement. While it is not reasonable to expect anyone to know the range of non-verbal communication patterns across cultures, it is important to be aware of the potential for misunderstanding in these areas. In some cultures, there is a strong imperative to avoiding a display of disagreement and conflict. Individuals may appear to agree to a plan of action to avoid what they experience as an embarrassing or challenging situation, with no real capacity or intention to comply with the plan.

Interpreters are to be engaged in any situation where a child or family member has difficulty communicating in English. The use of an accredited professional interpreter when a person is unable to communicate effectively in English, is an effective means for cross-cultural communication. Accredited professional interpreters operate under a code of ethics and have been trained in areas such as maintaining confidentiality and accuracy. The use of other family members or friends of the family as interpreters is problematic and needs to be avoided. Some of the problems with using family members or friends as interpreters include the potential for embarrassment for all parties, and the increased risk of miscommunication and lack of privacy.

Information about the different languages is available on the [Other languages](#) page of the Queensland Government website.

## Check biases and assumptions

It is critical for staff working with children and families from a culture or ethnic group different from their own to recognise the uniqueness of all people and avoid stereotyping or making assumptions based on a person's ethnicity, religion, culture, or language. It is also important to be aware of the potential sensitivities around the use of some terminology.

As authorised officers under the *Child Protection Act 1999*, Child Safety staff hold an immense amount of power and a position of privilege. It is important to remember this power may contribute to families feeling as if they have no control, are powerless in this instance and leave them distraught. Many refugees come from countries where those who hold power and authority are to be feared or considered dangerous to the family and community.

The process of recognising, understanding, and appreciating our own cultural heritage and cultures other than our own is outlined by the *Working with and Across Difference* theories and principles. We will exhibit modern 'isms' (such as racism, sexism) which come from our place of privilege, which are:

- usually 'well-intentioned', sometimes subtle behaviours that continue the historical power imbalance
- used by those with privilege and power and continue the denying of equal access to opportunity.

Avoid making assumptions by:

- asking for clarification when needed
- checking that what has been discussed is properly understood
- acknowledging limited understanding and asking for assistance to increase understanding.

Through the use of a working knowledge of difference and by valuing and respecting diversity here are some examples of modern oppression behaviours and the alternative behaviour that will be helpful when engaging and partnering with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

### ***Modern oppression behaviours and alternative behaviours from a place of privilege***

Oppression Behaviour	Alternative Behaviour
<b><i>Dysfunctional rescuing</i></b> - doing 'to' not 'with' the family, taking the expert role away from the family, for example, making decisions about those you are working with on how things will work or happen.	<b><i>Functional helping</i></b> - doing 'with' the family, acknowledging the family are the experts, for example, ask the people you are working with what will work for them, allow them to guide the actions.
<b><i>Blaming 100% of challenges</i></b> on the oppressed and unable to self-reflect, for example, 'you have a plan, why aren't you following it?'	<b><i>Problem solving / 50% responsibility</i></b> - for example, when there are barriers to overcome or when things have gone wrong, be honest and transparent with the family.
<b><i>Avoidance of authentic contact and Content</i></b> - for example, don't want to address/ discuss the issue or content.	<b><i>Make mutual authentic contact</i></b> - for example, make contact, ask questions, name your difference, don't be naïve and believe your solution will work for the family or the same solution will work for all families.

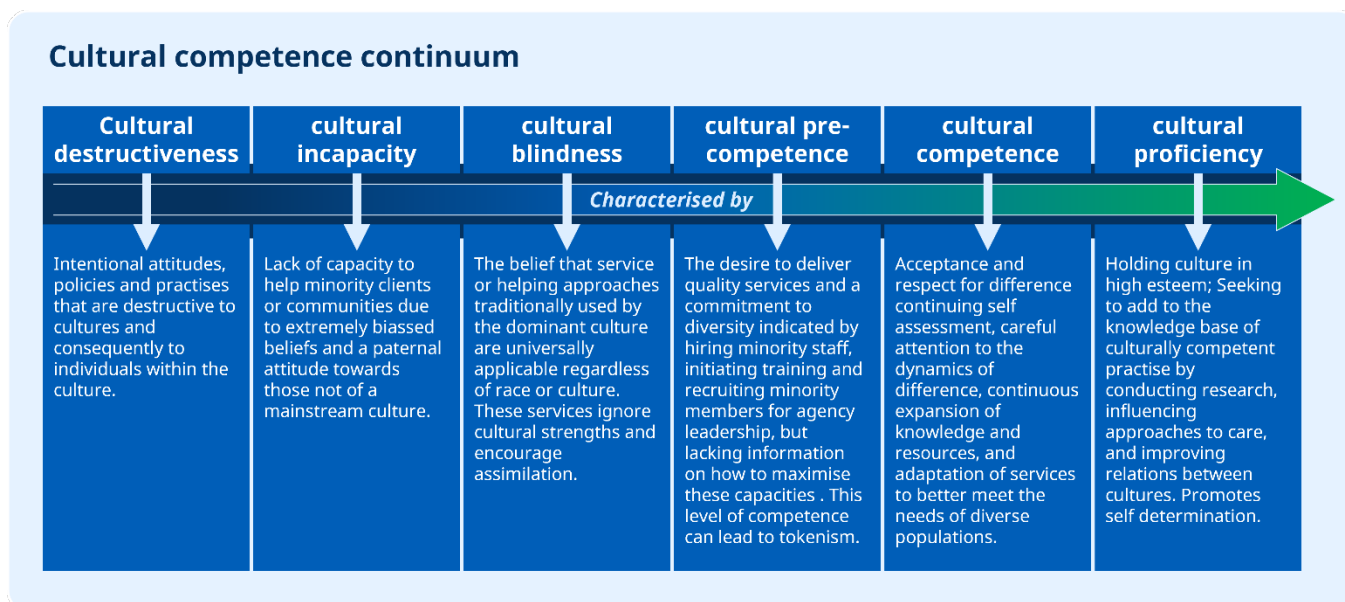
Oppression Behaviour	Alternative Behaviour
<b>Denial of differences</b> 'Colour Blind' - for example, 'We are all the same', 'I don't see any difference'.	<b>Notice differences</b> (in yourself and others) - for example, interplay, notice differences, it's our responsibility from our position of privilege to name up the difference, respect the differences and talk about the differences.
<b>Denial of the impact</b> of the fiscal, emotional, psychological, physical, political, etc. and the significance of the differences of those experiencing oppression.	<b>Learn, ask about, and notice the impact</b> , for example, develop your emotional muscle, name it up and notice the impact.

## Develop cross-cultural competence

The term 'cultural competence' is increasingly being used in relation to working effectively with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There are several different definitions provided for the term which typically include reference to organisational systems, policy, and practice, as well as to individual workers.

Cultural competence at a personal level encompasses the practitioner's attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and requires an acceptance that long-term, ongoing and persistent development is required. There are three key elements that are commonly identified in the development of cultural competence, which include:

Below is a continuum detailing the stages from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency, to assist understanding around how to increase cultural competence when engaging and partnering with culturally and linguistically diverse families<sup>5</sup>.



## References

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2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d., *The 1951 Refugee Convention*. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>, accessed March 2026.
3. Williams R, 1999, *Cultural safety – what does it mean for our work practice?* Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23(2), 213-214. Retrieved from [http://www.intstudentsup.org/diversity/cultural\\_safety/](http://www.intstudentsup.org/diversity/cultural_safety/) accessed March 2026.
4. Victorian Government, 2008, *Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework*. Retrieved from: [https://deadlystory.com/icms\\_docs/275944\\_aboriginal-cultural-competence-framework.pdf](https://deadlystory.com/icms_docs/275944_aboriginal-cultural-competence-framework.pdf), accessed March 2026.

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