

Playing With CULTURE

It's a cold day in Melbourne's northern suburbs, and an icy wind whips across Holy Child Primary School in Dallas, where a Vietnamese playgroup is held each week for children up to five years of age. The cold hasn't deterred the children, who burst through the door with big smiles on their faces and head straight for the playthings. Train sets and dinosaurs attract the boys, while the girls veer towards the pencils, glue sticks and coloured paper.

This is one of many playgroups run by VICSEG (Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups) New Futures, a not-for-profit agency that has been helping recently settled migrant and refugee families for more than 30 years. VICSEG runs about 20 playgroup sessions a week in the north and west of Melbourne for a variety of cultural groups, including Arabic, Chinese, Assyrian, Sri Lankan and Pacific Islander.

Margaret Langdon reports on playgroups helping migrant families.

VICSEG playgroup program coordinator Jeanette Hourani says that while the groups are nominally culture-specific, they are open to everybody. "The importance of the playgroups is that everyone is welcome," she says. "It's putting all hands together for a better outcome and a better start for the children, and for the families to be connected to the community."

Many of the families attending the playgroups are migrants or refugees who have recently arrived in Australia. They come from all parts of the world, and share the common challenge of making a new life in a different culture. "Some people go through migration shock - cultural shock," says Hourani. "There are new rules, new information - even if we talk about parenting, the way we discipline our children and focus on education can be different."

VICSEG and the many organisations with whom they work, such as local councils, schools, community groups and health professionals, provide much-needed help to the families. The playgroups also benefit the parents. "They are socialising, meeting new people and forming friendships," says Hourani. "And they are learning additional information about services."

The playgroups foster child development through a variety of educational, physical and social activities and a focus on the importance of play. "The children are getting ready for school - learning basic language, colours and shapes and building their literacy," explains Hourani. "We focus a lot on literacy. They are communicating with other children, but it's most important for them to have lots of fun."



'Movement in Learning' at the VICSEG Samoan playgroup at Meadows Primary School's Early Learning Centre.

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The Vietnamese children are certainly having fun, and as more join the group, the room takes on a busy vibe of happy children and mothers enjoying a catch-up and some time to relax.

A few minutes' drive away in Broadmeadows there's a similar scene at the VICSEG Samoan playgroup, based in the community hub of the Meadows Primary School and Early Learning Centre. This group is a perfect example of the playgroups welcoming all children. It attracts a range of different nationalities including Sri Lankan, Arabic, Turkish, Pakistani, Filipino, Australian-born and, of course, Samoan. It's no surprise the group is so mixed. Coordinator Maureen Leahy says the school itself has students from 35 different cultural backgrounds. "That's more than 30 languages being spoken here. Think about what that's like when the children are all playing; that's how wonderful multiculturalism is," she says.

While different cultural groups may have different characteristics and specific needs, there's one thing in common. "The conversation starts when we talk about our values and love of our family – that is the springboard we all come from," says Leahy.

"We had a mum recently from Syria whose family was involved in a traumatic experience there. She was able to get empathy from those in the group who really understand. A lot of us can offer support, but we don't really understand what is happening there."

The Migrant Information Centre (MIC) Eastern Melbourne is an advocacy, information and referral service for migrants and refugees. It runs playgroups in Mooroolbark and Croydon for families from refugee backgrounds. "The predominant settlement trend in the outer-east region of Melbourne is refugees from Burma," says Niquita Meyers, co-facilitator of MIC's 'Come and Play' playgroups. The playgroups aim to reduce social isolation, facilitate learning and promote positive parent/child relationships. They provide activities such as music and dance sessions, arts, crafts and cooking, as well as the usual playgroup pastimes. Excursions have been held to local facilities such as the swimming pool, primary school, police station and library.

According to Meyers, children and mothers gain more confidence by attending the playgroups. "They can experience new activities in a safe environment and build connections with their local community," she says. "Our mums tell us they come to the group because they have fun and learn new things, and their children learn new things and love to come."

'One Place, Many Cultures' is the slogan of the Frankston Multicultural Playgroup in Melbourne's south-east. "We have families from a whole host of backgrounds," says playgroup facilitator Jo Waetford. "A lot are from Syria, as well as Greece, China, Malaysia and Japan. The playgroup gives those families

an opportunity to use their own language and also practise their English. Many still struggle with their English, even if they have been here a while." It's a mixed-generation group too, with several grandparents attending as well as parents and children.

Being able to talk to people from their own countries can be a great help for the families. "We had a mum recently from Syria whose family was involved in a traumatic experience there," says Waetford. "She was able to get empathy from those in the group who really understand. A lot of us can offer support, but we don't really understand what is happening there."

The children not only have a variety of activities from which to choose, but get to eat a range of food from around the world. Snack time at the Frankston playgroup is a truly multicultural event. After the customary fruit is eaten, the mothers share their offerings. "These families love sharing food," says Waetford. "Snack time often turns into a smorgasbord. We've had all sorts of different, delicious food brought in. It's fantastic." ●

For More Information:

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