

# Culturally appropriate mentoring for Horn of African young people in Australia

Over recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of young people from the Horn of Africa entering Australia. These young people face unique challenges as a result of their age, ethnicity, migration and direct/indirect trauma experience. Although governments are using mentoring as one source of support to help Horn of African young people, little is known about how to appropriately adapt mentoring programs for this group of young people. Using research with policymakers, mentoring providers and Horn of African young people, this paper aims to help mentoring providers appropriately tailor programs for Horn of African young people.

by Megan Griffiths  
Pooja Sawrikar  
& Kristy Muir

**R**ecently, there has been a significant increase in the number of young people from the Horn of Africa entering Australia. Horn of African young people face a unique set of challenges as a result of their age, ethnicity, migration and direct/indirect trauma experience. As a source of possible support for Horn of African young people, governments are using mentoring; however, little is known about how to appropriately tailor mentoring programs to ensure delivery is culturally appropriate and sensitive.

As such, the aim of this paper is to address this gap and assist mentoring providers to appropriately tailor general mentoring programs to be more inclusive of, and culturally appropriate for, Horn of African young people. To do this, this research uses literature on mentoring; interviews with mentoring services providers, policymakers and Horn of African community service providers; and focus groups with Horn of African young people living in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and South Australia (SA).

We describe three important considerations to address when providing mentoring to Horn of African young people: processes for recruiting, training and supporting mentors; practices for engaging and supporting Horn of African young people in mentoring relationships; and culturally appropriate organisational policies and practices. This paper adds to existing mentoring literature by recommending key practices and policies that will assist in the development and/or strength-

ening of mentoring programs for Horn of African young people.

## Horn of African young people in Australia

Over the last 10 years, Australia has significantly increased the number of humanitarian and refugee visas granted to Horn of African communities (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan), particularly in the period 2000–2005 (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2007). Most Horn of Africans enter Australia under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), and of those granted SHP visas during the period 1996–2006, 65% were 30 years or younger (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2007). There are also a smaller number of young people who form part of the newly emerging Horn of African community who have chosen to migrate to Australia and are not refugees.

Young people experience a number of important developmental challenges and milestones regardless of their cultural background. For example, some young people negotiate the conflicting needs of group belonging and individuality, negotiate interactions with the opposite sex, increase their reliance on friends for support, balance school and work with other competing demands, and consider the ways in which they will contribute to and participate in society.

Young people from ethnic minority groups may face additional challenges. These challenges may include negotiating a cultural identity that balances their conflicting needs for cultural preservation and for cultural adaptation, establishing a sense of belonging in Australia, coping with perceived or experienced racism and discrimination, culture clashes across generations, socioeconomic disadvantage and/or a lack of family, social and community supports.

As newly arrived migrants or refugees in Australia, some Horn of African young people may also experience mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can be as a result of geopolitical warfare and natural disasters in their country of origin,

loss of people and country, homesickness, or social isolation (Bagdas 2005; Refugee Council of Australia 2005; Cassity & Gow 2005a). Thus, Horn of African young people in Australia may face a unique set of vulnerabilities and challenges that arise because of their age, their ethnic minority status and/or their experience as a Horn of African in Australia.

## Supporting Horn of African young people in Australia

To address this unique set of issues, the Victorian Government is funding, and some non-government organisations are providing, mentoring as one source of possible support for Horn of African young people. Traditionally, mentoring is defined as “the formation of a helping relationship between a younger person (the mentee) and an unrelated, relatively older, more experienced person (the mentor) who can increase the capacity of the young person to connect with positive social and economic networks to improve their life chances” (Department for Victorian Communities 2005).

This definition reflects the traditional one-to-one model. However, there are other forms of mentoring including group mentoring: one adult mentor with a group of up to four young mentees; team mentoring: adult mentors working with small groups of young people, with an adult-to-young person ratio no greater than one to four; peer mentoring: one young person guiding/teaching another young person; and E-mentoring (also known as tele-mentoring): one adult connected with one young mentee via the internet (Herrera, Vang & Gale 2002; National Mentoring Partnership 2005; Blaber & Glazebrook 2006). In this study, we mainly focus on the one-to-one and group mentoring models.

Mentoring may be able to assist Horn of African young people to more fully participate in education, employment and community activities and opportunities. It may also increase their sense of belonging and socio-economic inclusion and thereby empower them to participate in Australian society. However, the extent to which mentoring helps to achieve these possible benefits cannot be determined until mentoring programs for Horn of African

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young people have been established and rigorously evaluated. Nevertheless, in the meantime, if mentoring is going to be offered to this group of young people, it is important for mentoring organisations and policymakers to be aware of how best to tailor their service delivery to meet the needs of Horn of African young people. Currently, there are no known research or practice guidelines on how to appropriately adapt mentoring programs to Horn of African young people. In fact, little is known about Horn of African people's unique needs, generally, as they acculturate in Australia (Field-Pimm & Ng 2003; Cassity & Gow 2005a, 2005b).

This research aims to contribute to the research and practice literature by addressing the need for knowledge about culturally appropriate mentoring service delivery for Horn of African young people. The results aim to assist mentors, mentoring program managers, mentoring policymakers, and other relevant service providers to inform mentoring policies and programs for this group of young people.

## Methodology

This research is based on policy analysis, a literature review and qualitative methods. Current Australian and international research and practice literature around mentoring was reviewed to ascertain what is already known about good practice mentoring for young people in general, and for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in particular.

Qualitative research was then used to identify the experiences, needs and challenges of mentoring services providers and Horn of African young people. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 13 key stakeholders in NSW, Victoria and SA.<sup>1</sup> This included three mentors of Horn of African young people (or refugees from other ethnic backgrounds who may have similar issues as a result of being an ethnic minority and/or a refugee in Australia<sup>2</sup>); four designers and/or implementers of mentoring programs for Horn of African, ethnic minority and/or refugee young people; four state or federal government policymakers involved in funding

mentoring programs; and two Horn of African advocates from community organisations. These interviewees volunteered from a group of 30 government and NGO stakeholders who work to address the needs of Horn of African, ethnic minority and/or refugee young people.

Finally, 33 Horn of African young people aged 16–25 years participated in six gender-matched focus groups in NSW, Victoria and SA. The focus groups included a mix of young people who had and had not been involved in mentoring. Participants were recruited using an arms-length approach through mentoring and community organisations involved with Horn of African young people, and via snowballing. It is important to note that the young people who participated in this research represented young people who were fairly well established, had high levels of English proficiency and had made Australia their permanent home. Only a minority were of Muslim background and/or were temporary visa holders or refugees.

## Results

This research found that if mentoring organisations are to offer services to Horn of African young people, three key areas need to be considered:

1. the processes for recruiting, training and supporting mentors;
2. the practices for engaging and supporting Horn of African young people in their mentoring relationship; and
3. the cultural appropriateness of organisational policies and practices.

Generally, as the literature demonstrates, these aspects are important for any mentoring program supporting young people. However, this research found certain additional criteria to be important for Horn of African young people.

### Recruiting, training and supporting mentors

The literature on good practice mentoring, regardless of the cultural background of the mentee, emphasises the requirement for mentors to be screened, well trained, supervised and committed to a mentoring relationship.

### **Screening of mentors**

Screening interviews, personality tests and police checks work to ensure that potential mentors are appropriate and match the needs and expectations of their mentees (Sipe 1999; Herrera, Sipe & McClanahan 2000). The screening of mentors also increases the chance of a trusting relationship developing between the mentor and mentee (Sipe 1999; Herrera, Sipe & McClanahan 2000). All of the stakeholders interviewed in this research perceived screening as essential.

### **Volunteer mentors**

The commitment of mentors to their mentoring relationship is essential to the success of these relationships (Spencer 2006). One way of ensuring that mentors are committed is by recruiting volunteers (Grossman 1999) and making it known to young people that mentoring is voluntary. Young people perceive their mentor's voluntary time as indicative of a genuine interest in assisting them, which in turn can facilitate the development of a trusting relationship<sup>3</sup> (Grossman 1999; Sipe 1999).

### **Training**

It is essential that mentors have the skills and training to support young people. For example, training can aid the mentoring relationship by providing mentors with "the information and strategies they need to maximize their chances of developing mutually satisfying relationships with youth" (Sipe 1999, p.18).

Cultural awareness training is also important for mentors who work with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds (Couch 2005). Jucovy (2002) suggests that all mentors can benefit from cultural awareness training because it helps them to recognise their own values, acknowledge and understand how their values differ from those of their mentees, and respect these differences. Stakeholders interviewed for this research also iterated the importance of cultural awareness training, but not all mentoring programs (even those supporting young people from ethnic minority backgrounds) were providing this training.

### **Relationship strengthening exercises**

Group exercises and activities that build and strengthen mentoring relationships are

important (Herrera, Vang & Gale 2002). Group activities facilitate the development of a trusting relationship between mentors and mentees and provide peer support networks. They also provide opportunities for mentors and mentees to have an ongoing dialogue about their experiences and challenges, and ways to overcome these challenges. Consistent with the literature, program managers in this study found relationship-building activities particularly important during the early stages of the mentoring process regardless of the cultural background of the young person.

### **Monitoring and supervision**

Providing support to mentors and mentees is crucial for effective service delivery. Mentoring organisations need to provide ongoing monitoring and supervision to ensure emerging issues, which could compromise the mentoring relationship, are quickly addressed (Clark 1995). Mentors who are provided with ongoing opportunities to debrief and to receive feedback, support and advice on their mentoring practice are more likely to continue the relationship (Sipe 1999; Parra et al. 2002).

### **Relevant organisation and service information**

In addition to support, this research found that mentors of Horn of African young people would also benefit from having a list of relevant organisations and services to support young people. This could include all resources or organisations that might be of assistance, such as English classes, trauma counselling and other government and community supports.

### **Engaging and supporting mentoring relationships: When to provide mentoring**

Individual differences mean that mentoring is going to be appropriate and useful for some young people but not others, regardless of their backgrounds. However, if mentoring is provided to Horn of African young people, the timing needs to be appropriate. This research found that newly arrived migrants or refugees, especially those not attending school, have very intense needs, which require a range of immediate and comprehensive supports. Mentoring may only be of benefit after these immediate needs have been met. As

such, mentoring should be offered after other intensive settlement supports start to wane; perhaps, as suggested by one policymaker, at least three months after arrival in Australia.

### **Mentoring models**

The type of mentoring model offered to any young person needs careful consideration, regardless of the mentee's ethnicity. Ideally, the model should best match the young person's needs and goals. The literature suggests that one-to-one mentoring is most effective because individualised attention accelerates rapport building and trust, which helps mentees feel connected to and understood and accepted by their mentor (Philip, Shucksmith & King 2004).

Consistent with the literature, the Horn of African young people who participated in the focus groups perceived one-to-one mentoring most favourably, especially for attaining support for their pursuit of educational and employment opportunities. However, the young people also believed group mentoring was beneficial, especially for Horn of African young people who need social support. Arguably, group mentoring may help facilitate a sense of belonging and the development of cultural or personal identity.

### **Race, gender and age matching**

To ensure culturally appropriate mentoring, it is also important for service providers to ensure a suitable match between mentor and mentee. Mentoring literature focuses on the importance of gender, race and age matching (for example, Jucovy 2002; Rhodes et al. 2002). However, this research found only gender matching to be essential for Horn of African young people.

To adhere to social, cultural and possible religious norms, gender matching should be regarded as essential for appropriate service delivery. Gender matching is considered good social practice in most mentoring programs that match young people with adults, regardless of religion or culture (Wilczynski et al. 2003). In this study, the majority of Horn of African young people were Christian.<sup>4</sup> Most of the focus group participants indicated that they would feel more comfortable matched with a mentor of the same gender. This trend in preference

may reflect age-related, social causes rather than cultural or religious ones. It is still important, however, to consider the possible role of religion when considering gender matching. For example, gender matching may be especially important for Muslim Horn of African mentees.

The mentoring literature indicates that there are arguments both for and against race matching. Rhodes et al. (2002) suggest that race matching or matching based on common experiences such as being a refugee or a newly arrived migrant can be beneficial in promoting trust and connectedness. Having a mentor of the same race can also help young people maintain cultural links and cope with loss and identity issues (Save the Children 2003). Further, race matching will help prevent mentors from imposing their own values and culture on the young person (Rhodes et al. 2002).

Matching based on race, however, can be difficult for mentoring programs when there are few race-matched mentors to draw on (Herrera, Vang & Gale 2002; Rhodes et al. 2002). This research did not find evidence for the effectiveness of race matching over non-race matching, and we argue that the individual needs and preferences of the Horn of African young person should determine whether race matching occurs. In fact, we found that non-race matches were also viewed positively because they may help prevent the mentee from becoming overly dependent on their mentor. Non-race matches were also useful in linking Horn of African young people with information, services and networks, and some participants actually preferred a non-race match because of the potential for interesting discussions and cross-cultural learning.

Most of the Horn of African young people in the focus groups did not consider age to facilitate or inhibit the development of an effective mentoring relationship. However, an older mentor might be beneficial for a young Horn of African mentee who has lost a parent or is separated from family.

### **Contract length, contact frequency and activities**

The length of the contract, frequency of contact, and type of mentoring activities also need to be considered. The literature indicates that, ideally, mentoring contracts are a minimum

of 12 months with the option to continue once the contract has expired, and that contact between mentors and mentees should be regular (Herrera, Sipe & McClanahan 2000; Grossman & Rhodes 2002).

The development of the relationship and trust is fundamental to the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (Sipe 1999; Jekielek et al. 2002; Philip, Shucksmith & King 2004). Short-term programs may not allow enough time for this development. This, in turn, can compromise the extent to which the mentee receives potentially long-lasting benefits associated with mentoring, such as increased confidence and self-esteem, increased awareness of and access to support services, improved educational outcomes and school attendance, and improved career opportunities (Sipe 1998; Lynn & Kelly-Vance 2001; Jekielek et al. 2002; Department for Victorian Communities 2005; Refugee Council of Australia 2005).

Both the stakeholders interviewed and the young people in the focus groups agreed that it was important for contact to be regular and for relationship contracts to be at least a year in length. They also reported that relationships were more successful when clear goals were set at the beginning of the program and mentees selected the kinds of activities they participated in. Importantly, these results indicate that the length of the contract and frequency of contact are not related to a young person's cultural background.

### **Family engagement**

This study also found that to engage Horn of African young people effectively in mentoring programs, it is important to engage their family. When family members are engaged, parents are more likely to consent to their child participating, this will also decrease the likelihood of the mentoring relationship breaking down. This finding contradicts typical mentoring programs, where engaging families is not common practice, and highlights the importance of tailoring programs to be culturally appropriate.

To engage Horn of African families it is important to explain up-front the concept and processes associated with mentoring, in particular the nature, scope and boundaries

of the relationship. To many Horn of African families the concept of mentoring may be foreign, which is why an explanation is key. Ensuring that documents (such as consent forms) are translated will also make the process more transparent, assist families to understand the purpose and nature of mentoring and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. Several young people also suggested that meeting the mentor is important for families and can be useful in developing trust. Overall, this demonstrates the need for program managers to be aware of the cultural needs of this group, and how best to address them when tailoring general mentoring programs.

### **Confidentiality**

Horn of African young people emphasised the importance of confidentiality in mentoring relationships. They discussed the need to be assured that any information disclosed in a group setting or to their mentor was confidential, especially in regard to their parents. Therefore, it is important to assure Horn of African young people that the role of the mentor is to be a trusting confidante who will focus on providing support and engaging in activities that facilitate their development, and not a parental "watchdog". As one policymaker said, "We try and educate family members ... that it's a special friendship, we try to keep what they share as confidential, and some parents struggle with that concept".

### **Cultural appropriateness of policies and practices**

In addition to supporting mentors and mentees, this research identified several organisational mentoring policies and practices that would increase the cultural appropriateness of a mentoring program for Horn of African young people.

### **Horn of African staff**

Recruiting Horn of African (or Arabic-speaking) staff or volunteers is likely to be beneficial (most Horn of Africans in Australia originate from Sudan, and most Sudanese speak Arabic). Stakeholders found that Horn of African staff/volunteers were more aware of the needs and issues for Horn of African young people and,

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One stakeholder in Victoria used the strategy of 'shadowing' a trusted person in the Horn of African community as a way of training staff in cultural awareness and settlement issues.

as such, could assist other staff/ volunteers by sharing their knowledge.

#### **Partnership with the local community**

It may not always be possible for mentoring organisations to employ Horn of African (or Arabic-speaking) staff. In these instances, partnerships with local Horn of African community members and/or their organisations would be beneficial. These partnerships can provide insight into the needs and issues of the Horn of African community and assistance with interpreting and translating. Partnerships with the local Horn of African community and organisations may also be used to gauge the effectiveness and cultural appropriateness of mentoring programs and service delivery.

#### **Cultural competency training**

As mentioned earlier, cultural competency training is important for all mentoring service providers, including staff and mentors, to help instil and maintain cultural awareness, understanding, acceptance and sensitivity. It is important to train all staff in the mentoring organisation around cultural awareness and settlement issues for Horn of African young people.

One stakeholder in Victoria used the strategy of "shadowing" a trusted person in the Horn of African community as a way of training staff in cultural awareness and settlement issues. A staff member from the mentoring organisation would follow a community member for a certain period of time and build trust and rapport. Staff and mentors then have a community member available who young people from the Horn of Africa can relate to and someone who can act as an interpreter. More broadly, this also assists in establishing rapport with this community, and can help address resource constraints when there are few race-matched mentors to draw on. Having culturally competent staff who are sensitive to the needs of young people from the Horn of Africa will assist in developing trust and meeting the young people's needs.

#### **Involving Horn of African young people**

Finally, involving Horn of African young people in the planning and design stages of a mentoring program may be beneficial. This inclusive

approach will help ensure that their needs are met and mentoring programs are culturally appropriate and sensitive.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this research are significant as they help inform culturally appropriate mentoring programs for Horn of African young people. These findings can be used by both mentoring organisations focusing on developing and implementing strategies for assisting Horn of African young people, and government policy-makers funding these programs. Importantly, this study provides practical ways, which are relatively easy to implement, for mentoring organisations to adapt their current models of service delivery to help meet the needs of Horn of African young people in Australia.

More specifically, this research found that culturally appropriate mentoring service delivery for young Horn of African mentees is maximised when organisations recruit Horn of African or Arabic-speaking staff, provide staff training in cultural competency, develop partnerships with the local Horn of African community and organisations, and consult with Horn of African young people on their needs and the effectiveness and cultural appropriateness of the mentoring program.

The needs of Horn of African young people should be assessed to determine whether and when mentoring may be most appropriate and which mentoring model and mentor (considering gender and race) is most suitable. Mentees' families should be engaged to an extent, but young people should also be assured of confidentiality. As with other mentoring programs, mentors with Horn of African mentees should be screened and trained to ensure an appropriate match, and should be provided with ongoing support and supervision.

It is important to recognise that mentoring is not appropriate for all groups of Horn of African young people. But, if mentoring is provided to Horn of African young people, mentoring organisations should consider the practices, policies and processes suggested to engage and support Horn of African young people and mentoring relationships.

If mentoring relationships are culturally appropriate and needs based, they may help facilitate the on-going process of acculturation and stimulate a sense of social inclusion for people from ethnic minority backgrounds, like the Horn of Africa, in Australia.

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## AUTHORS

**Megan Griffiths** is a research associate at the Social Policy Research Centre. Her research interests include poverty/inequality and child-centred methodologies with children and young people.

**Pooja Sawrikar** is a research associate and DoCS postdoctoral fellow at the SPRC. Her research interests include early intervention for at-risk children, increasing equity to sport participation, and mentoring.

**Kristy Muir** is a senior research fellow and the Evaluation Manager at the SPRC. Her research interests include mental health, war veterans, disability, families, young people, mentoring and resilience.

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## Notes

1. These states were selected because of the high proportion of Horn of African young people in these areas (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, <[www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)>).
2. The aim was to recruit three to four mentors of Horn of African, CALD and/or refugee young people. Not all of the mentors that we spoke to mentored a Horn of African young person.
3. Generally, most mentors are volunteers; however, some organisations have paid mentors (Mentoring Australia website: <http://www.dsf.org.au/mentor/index.htm>).
4. This is consistent with trends in Australia's wider population with most Sudanese in Australia being Christian.

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