How we treat refugees is one of the most polarising issues in Australia. It's clear that we need to create a more compassionate society. But that's no easy task. How often do discussions descend into arguments that end up reinforcing, rather than changing, people's negative attitudes?

The good news is that the human brain works in quite a predictable, if often irrational, way. With a bit of research it’s possible to identify the messages and arguments that influence people - and those that don’t. And our friends at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre have done just that.

By commissioning in-depth research with over 1,500 people they were able to identify the ‘words that work’ and we’ve shared some of them here. Read on to find out how to have discussions about refugees and people seeking asylum that persuade, rather than polarise.

3 ways to talk to others about the refugee crisis:

✔️ Lead with commonly shared values such as family, freedom and fairness, and treating others as you'd want to be treated.

✔️ Offer positive solutions and statements, for example: “Together we can create a fairer world”. Effective messages are two parts ‘solution’ to one part ‘problem’.

✔️ Seize the moral high ground by talking about what’s right. For example: “All people have the right to live in peace”.

3 arguments to avoid:

❌ Try not to lead with facts, figures or cost savings, unless you are directly responding to a question. People reject inconvenient facts that don’t match their worldview, and will then reject everything else you say too.

❌ Don’t reference ‘Australians’ but instead ‘us/we/people’. Tap into our shared humanity and values.

❌ Don’t talk about what people have come from – talk more about what they have come for. Mention that refugees are “seeking safety and to rebuild their lives” rather than “fleeing persecution, torture and violence”.

"Life was good and we felt comfortable and safe. We lived the most beautiful life and didn’t even consider this could happen. But when the war broke out we were terrified, our life was filled with pain and fear.”

Lilas, Jordan
Sample phrases you could use:

“We should treat others the way we would want to be treated. If any of us feared for our life we’d want to know that others would help us to safety.”

“Throughout history, people have risked everything in search of a better, safer life. We must help refugees to live a life free from danger.”

“When people are in harm’s way, we must do the right thing. We must treat refugees with dignity and respect, so they can get on with rebuilding their lives.”

“Refugees are seeking safety. They just want to rebuild their lives where it’s safe. Can’t we all relate to that?”

“Our governments and leaders have created this refugee crisis – this is a man-made problem, but together we can change things.”

Responding to the most common arguments:

“Refugees are a security threat and accepting them increases the risk of a terrorist attack.”
- Refugees are seeking a safe life and want to rebuild their lives.
- Just like us, they want to be safe, send their children to school and live a dignified life.

“Why would we support refugees instead of our homeless/elderly/disabled?”
- It’s not an either/or issue: we can support both.
- There are no limits to human compassion.
- We can agree that all these groups need our support.

“Refugees are a drain on our economy.”
- Helping refugees is the right thing to do. We have a moral obligation to support them.
- In the long-term, it has been proven that refugees make a positive contribution to our economy.

Tips for talking to people online:

- Be respectful at all times.
- Be constructive and positive, using the values-driven arguments we’ve mentioned.
- Try not to get angry or drawn into a lengthy debate – if someone clearly isn’t going to change their point of view, move on quickly.
- Always report abusive behaviour or offensive comments.

“What a humbling experience! Taking part in the Nation Challenge was a chance to be part of something bigger than myself.

I felt that I could finally be part of a community taking action against an injustice that I often feel helpless about and show refugees were with them, not against them.”

Jess, Maricaville