



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

Child Welfare Standards with Relevance for Practice with Refugees

Refugee families resettled in the United States have many needs, some of which are specific to traumatic experiences with war, flight, displacement and resettlement. Other needs are shared with immigrants or other non-refugee newcomers to the U.S., such as the need for understanding and support as they adjust their family life to a new culture, and for assistance with communication, as English is new to many refugee groups. This paper addresses the extent to which standards and practices in the child welfare field speak to the needs of refugee families; it is based on research conducted over a six-month period.

Specialized resettlement services exist to assist refugee families upon arrival, most of which last for only their first few months in the U.S. When these services and financial support end, such families may encounter high levels of stress as they struggle to make ends meet in new work and home environments. In addition, trauma and associated family stress may emerge after the initial "honeymoon" period of being in a safe haven ends. Refugee families face other challenges as well, including major changes in roles and family dynamics as children learn English and adapt to U.S. systems more quickly than their parents.

For these reasons, public child welfare agencies may become the first point of intervention in some complex refugee family issues.

War and persecution can disrupt even the most harmonious family life. Such events cause separations, breakdowns, and fragile 'reunifications' between children and extended family members or other caregivers. Some refugee children are resettled with caregivers with whom they have no shared personal history or pre-existing bond beyond the critical connection of a shared culture, because there may simply be no one else to look out for their needs. In some cases, these arrangements do not withstand the pressures of integrating into the U.S.

There are many reasons why refugee children come to the attention of the public child welfare system—often for reasons other than abuse and neglect. This may call for different approaches to engaging families, as well as to the support and services offered to mend or prevent family breakdowns.

It is important to support positive practice with refugee families, as well as to change the perception of child protection services (CPS) within refugee communities. BRYCS' previous "Community Conversations" research shows that the concept of CPS has grown to mythic proportions in some refugee communities, contributing to increased parental stress in the struggle to adapt childrearing practices to meet American norms.

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Child Welfare Standards and Promising Practices: Research Findings

This section summarizes the results of research regarding existing child welfare standards with relevance for practice with refugee families.

1. A review of existing child welfare standards—such as federal and state law, policy guidance, licensing regulations, accreditation & other professional standards, and codes of ethics—shows that although many are relevant and useful for guiding practice with refugees, no single source is sufficient in and of itself. For this research, we defined ‘standards’ as mandatory standards such as law and licensing regulations, and those with broad leverage on agencies and individual workers, such as accreditation standards.

In general, no body of law or set of regulations seeks to govern child welfare services to refugees. Other standards and promising practices have the potential to fill in this gap, but only if applied thoughtfully and in a serious way. A partial exception to this rule of thumb is Executive Order 13166 and its policy guidance regarding service to Limited English Proficiency (LEP) clients, in accordance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibition against discrimination on the basis of national origin.

Useful existing standards include those pertaining to linguistic access to services, expansion of ethnically diverse foster homes, and cultural competency.

- Regarding linguistic access to services, federally funded family and children’s agencies are required to follow Executive Order 13166 and subsequent policy guidance from the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Civil Rights (OCR). An October 2001 memo from the Department of Justice confirms the validity of this Executive Order.
 - Oral language provisions of the OCR’s guidance are particularly important for practice with refugee families. Practice wisdom demonstrates that written translations are often not useful or sufficient, given low literacy rates in some refugee populations.
- Amendments to the Multi Ethnic Placement Act require states “to diligently recruit foster ... families that reflect the state’s ethnic and racial diversity” for the purpose of providing appropriate homes for children in need.
- With respect to cultural competence, as well as other issues, some standards distinguish themselves. These include
 - Accreditation standards of the Council on Accreditation (COA), which are mandatory for many private and some public child welfare agencies, include many cultural competence provisions. In particular, applying the community needs assessment/self study requirement to refugee communities may help agencies to improve their practice with these populations.
 - Standards of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), which often influence state law and regulations, are infused with cultural competence recommendations. Conveniently written to guide different aspects of child welfare practice, relevant CWLA *Standards of Excellence* exist for: *Services with Abused or Neglected Children and*

their Families, Kinship Care, Family Foster Care, and Services to Strengthen and Preserve Families with Children.

- The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* calls for workers to provide culturally sensitive services, according to their clients' needs.

2. *Certain needs of refugee children and families vis-à-vis the child welfare system may be addressed by promising practice recommendations and pilot model alternatives to conventional practice,* but not by mandatory standards such as law and licensing regulations, or other influential standards with broad leverage on agencies and individual workers. Through our research it was not possible to determine the extent to which these practices have been applied to refugee populations; no such evaluative sources were identified.

However, based on the philosophical underpinnings of some promising practice recommendations and of piloted alternatives to conventional practice, as well as on their successes with other populations, it seems that they may be usefully applied to refugee populations. For example, given the importance in many refugee cultures of family and community involvement in childrearing, working with these domains is likely to be essential for effective and culturally competent engagement of refugee families. Thus, certain promising practice recommendations may be promising for use with refugees for the same reasons that they seem to work with American-born clients—they empower and draw upon resources within the community and family.

Many promising approaches exist. The following five examples have been identified in our research. These approaches often overlap in practice and, in some cases, may be practiced in accordance with standards listed above.

- Culturally competent practice, which is defined in many ways around the country and which also includes recommendations regarding ethnic identity development, such as those developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Community-based, collaborative approaches such as those supported by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Family-centered practice, as described in materials by the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, for example
- The Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) approach and its variants, as documented by efforts such as the American Human Association's National Center on Family Group Decision Making
- Kinship care, which has various manifestations across the country

3. *The field of child welfare could benefit from promising practice recommendations developed in the mental health field, as workers attempt to serve the unique and most essential needs of refugee families.*

For example, it is essential for child welfare interventions to address the interplay of trauma, dislocation, and adjustment on refugee family bonding, dynamics and child well-being—as well as on their strengths and unique resources. This can only be accomplished following detailed assessment of a family's history in their native country in times of relative peace, as well as during persecution, flight, transitional

periods in overseas camps, resettlement, and integration into new communities in the U.S.

Family members may experience such a journey alone, before joining members already in this country, or together, as a group. Either way, each member will be uniquely affected by the experience. Such an assessment of a family's "refugee journey" is essential for understanding the true needs of children and families vis-à-vis the child welfare system.

Our research found no guidance regarding assessments of this "refugee journey" in child welfare law, licensing regulations or accreditation standards. However, an expanding body of literature in the mental health field addresses this subject.

Improving Practice with Refugees: Broad Needs

Based on our research findings, an attempt to improve child welfare practice with refugees would address the following range of need. Such an effort can only be realized through a collaborative process involving child welfare agencies and refugee service providers.

Our research has identified the need to

- Identify and address gaps in existing standards
- Recommend a combination of existing relevant standards which can be used to influence child welfare practice with refugees
- Guide agencies on how to apply such standards to refugee populations
- Explore methods to put standards into agency operations, and monitor implementation according to outcome measurements
- Develop connections between existing promising practices and the standards that guide child welfare practice with refugees

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