



SPOTLIGHT FOR APRIL/MAY 2006:

**Blessed with a difficult task:
Refugee youth and the transition to adulthood**

It's bad enough for teenagers to just find out who they are living in one culture, but I have been blessed with the difficult task of finding who I am with two cultures...I came to the beautiful realization that I am unique because my beliefs, ideals, values and behavior are a magnificent fusion of the two cultures. [youth from South Asia] [1]

Many people have bittersweet memories of adolescence: the excitement and opportunities of youth mixed with the difficulties and awkwardness of becoming comfortable in one's identity. For refugee and immigrant youth, this period of transition from childhood to adulthood has the added complexity of simultaneously navigating two cultures. Numerous writers have addressed the challenges for young people transitioning to adulthood, but fewer have examined the added complications for refugee and immigrant youth.

Certain life skills are necessary for all youth. According to one source, these typically include being:

- Prepared for work
- Prepared for intimacy and family life
- Prepared to participate in community life
- Prepared to manage personal health and well-being.[2]

This same source notes that teens making the transition to adulthood are most influenced by:

- Educational achievement
- Opportunities to work and learn work-related skills
- The development of an integrated, stable sense of identity
- Positive relationships and support from significant others
- Opportunities to learn civic skills
- Capacity for self-care
- Healthy learning, living and working environments. [3]

Like other youth in the United States, refugee youth must master life skills like those noted above in order to make a healthy transition to adulthood. But for refugee youth, additional challenges can complicate these tasks, including: [4]

- **Lack of parents or extended family in the U.S.** to serve as a support and safety net. This may mean less social and emotional support, or the effect may be in more practical ways such as no one to provide financial assistance with college or the purchase of a first car.
- **Balancing the demands and expectations of two cultures**, which may at times conflict concerning such major life decisions as acceptable career paths, individual interests versus family or community interests, lifestyle choices, and the role of parental or other family members' guidance in these decisions.
- **The need to work and go to school at the same time**, sometimes complicated by the need to also learn English. Many students balance work and school, but refugee students may also be dealing with acculturation, language acquisition, and being a cultural broker for parents as well as themselves.

- Many refugee youth experience **survivor guilt**, particularly those who have left family and loved ones behind. They may struggle with “why me” questions: Why did I survive when others did not? Why can I go to school when others cannot even eat? These questions lead some refugee youth to drop out of school and go to work in order to send money back to needy family members in refugee camps or the country of origin, forsaking their own advancement in the long-term in order to aid others in the short-term.
- Some refugees may have experienced **interrupted schooling**, going years without formal education due to flight or life in a refugee camp. These educational disruptions sometimes make refugee students more motivated to study, but sometimes they make the social and mental challenges of school more frustrating once formal schooling resumes.
- Some **refugee girls and young women** may have a more difficult time with adult transitions such as moving into the work force, particularly those who have experienced early pregnancy and parenting, those with heavier household responsibilities, and those who have had more limited educational opportunities before coming to the U.S. [5]

Making the transition from **being supported** by family to **helping support** the family is challenging but necessary. Many refugee youth expect, or are expected, to help support the family while also pursuing education, often a difficult balance. While U.S. culture tends to value independence over interdependence, many other cultures value interdependence over independence.[6] Refugee youth may feel conflicted about these divergent values, particularly in deciding whether to continue living with family or to move out on one’s own.

Refugee youth may also need assistance in exploring possible careers, understanding the education necessary for particular jobs, and entering the employment market. The [*“Refugee Youth Employment” manual*](#), published by Refugee Works, addresses the particular employment needs of this age group, with examples of successful youth employment programs.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) also offers a number of employment related resources of potential interest or relevance to newcomers:

- [Bureau of Labor Statistics Career Information Page](#)
- [DOL Resources for Young Workers](#)
- [DOL Resources for Parents of Young Workers](#)
- [DOL Youth Rules \(preparing America’s youth to enter the workforce\)](#)
- Fact sheet on “When and where is your teen allowed to work” available in [English](#) and [Chinese](#)

JobCorps has also been a route to education and employment for numerous refugee youth. A residential vocational training program for youth between the ages of 16 and 24, JobCorps also offers high school and ESL education at some of the 120 sites nationwide. Information is available in both [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

Refugee youth in the U.S. without family to care for and guide them confront additional hurdles in becoming self-sufficient. One promising program model in Michigan matches refugee youth in foster care with adult **mentors** from the community. Staff at Bethany Christian Service’s Refugee Foster Care Program felt that youth in their refugee foster care program needed additional adult support in making the transition to independence, so they have begun assigning each refugee youth in care an adult mentor to assist with life skills development, guidance and emotional support. Read more about such creative approaches in this month’s [“Promising Practices” sidebar](#).

Attention to the needs of foster care youth transitioning to adulthood has increased dramatically since passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999.[7] There are few written resources specifically addressing the needs of refugee youth leaving foster care or the care of relatives. However several mainstream resources may be relevant, including:

- [CWLA Standards for Transition, Independent Living, and Self Sufficiency Services](#)
- [Programs and Resources for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care](#)
- [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#), a program focusing on “helping youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood”
- [Guide to Federal Funding Sources for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and Other Youth Initiatives](#)

- *It's My Life* series, by Casey Family Programs
Created by, for and with youth, this framework is designed for professionals guiding and supporting teens as they prepare for adulthood.
 - [*It's My Life: A Framework for Youth Transitioning from Foster Care to Successful Adulthood*](#)
 - [*It's My Life: Employment Guide*](#)
 - [*It's My Life: Housing*](#)
 - [*It's My Life: Postsecondary Education and Training*](#)
- [*Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessments*](#) (ACLSA) ©. Online assessments to evaluate the life skills of youth and young adults, free and available in English and **Spanish**.
- [Independent living curricula](#), funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, to train staff helping adolescents transition to independent living.[8]

Some youth struggle more than others with the simultaneous tasks of balancing two cultural identities and balancing the transition from childhood to adulthood. These struggles may manifest themselves in more strained relationships with parents and, in more rare and heartbreaking situations, thoughts of suicide. [Information sheets](#) on "*The Teenage Years: Making Them Easier for Parents and Young People*" and "*Preventing Youth Suicide*" have been translated into **sixteen languages** by the Edmonton Mennonite Center for Newcomers.

Refugee youth transitioning to adulthood in the U.S. often experience a more complex set of challenges than do their native born peers. Despite the fact that entering adulthood with the heritage of two cultures can be a difficult blessing, it is a blessing nonetheless. The same can be said for those parenting, mentoring, and providing services to these youth: although it is a difficult blessing to help young adults appreciate the bicultural foundation on which they can build their adult lives, it can be a profoundly enriching experience for all involved.

More resources on the unique challenges faced by refugee youth transitioning to adulthood can be found in this month's [featured search](#). The featured search lists the most up-to-date and useful resources on this topic available for free download. For a more detailed list of resources, search the BRYCS Clearinghouse using the following term(s): "transition to adulthood", "emancipation of minors", and "youth independence."

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 - Saili Moni talking about her experience with South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!), as quoted in: "Creating Successful Programs for Immigrant Youth," Practice Matters (December 2004). ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence. <http://www.cwiq.albany.edu/IWcreatingSuccessful.pdf>
- 2 - Growing Healthy Canadians: A Framework for Positive Child Development, Transition 4. Coming of age in Canada: Adolescents who make a healthy transition to adulthood are... <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1659>
- 3 - Ibid.
- 4 - Some ideas for this list are taken from Chapter 4, "Needs in Context," of the following document: National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (2002). Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist refugee young people in transition to independence. Published for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme by the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies Hobart, Tasmania. [http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/VJA/youthpubs/\\$File/wealth-of-all-nations.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/VJA/youthpubs/$File/wealth-of-all-nations.pdf)
- 5 - Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2006). "Adolescent girls affected by violent conflict: Why should we care?" <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4481>
- 6 - Ibid, Footnote 4.
- 7 - To read the text of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 go to: http://www.ssa.gov/legislation/legis_bulletin_112499.html. Three "Frequently Asked Questions" documents about the Foster Care Independence Act are available on the website of the National Foster Care Coalition: <http://www.natl-fostercare.org/>. Each state's "Chafee Plan" for implementing Foster Care Independence programming can be located at: [NCWRCYD - State by State](#)
- 8 - Among these curricula, Module 2 of Boston University's "Integrating a Youth Development Perspective into Transition Planning" specifically addresses the integration of culture into casework and a youth's identity.