



FEBRUARY 2004 SPOTLIGHT:

Helping Refugee Parents Adjust to Life in the U.S.

Refugees overcome tremendous challenges before resettling in the United States: fleeing their home country due to war or fear of persecution, being separated from or losing family members, witnessing violence, and waiting, usually for years, in refugee camps. If they are lucky enough to be resettled, refugee parents often face difficulties in their roles as parents in a new country. Their identity as parents may not have the same clarity it did.

Service providers can help, if they understand the concerns of refugee parents. All refugee parents have survived hardships, but their new life in the United States poses significant challenges to their strength and resiliency, as they adapt to pressures on their family structure.

Parental Authority

Refugee parents arrive from an increasingly diverse range of cultures, with a variety of different parenting styles. Acceptable methods for disciplining children in their home country may be unacceptable in the United States. Parents may feel uncertain how to discipline their children, and struggle to assert their authority.

Language Barriers and Role-Reversals

Many refugees being resettled in the United States now are not native English speakers. Nevertheless, English is vital for employment, for communicating with teachers and doctors, and for accessing services of all kinds, public and private. Since children tend to acquire language quicker than adults, parents may feel obliged to rely on their children to interpret, not only the language, but how systems work. This can compromise the parent's authority, instigating a role-reversal between parent and child.

Intergenerational Gap

Children tend to acculturate faster than their parents, taking on attributes of the culture of their host country. This can be especially strong in teen-agers, as they seek the acceptance of their peers in school. Refugee parents may be concerned their children are not keeping up the traditional customs of their home culture, instead becoming "Americanized," and feel they are losing their children. This can lead to tensions and miscommunication between parents and children.

Roles in the Family

Family structure can change dramatically once the refugee family resettles into their new community. Parents may not be able to obtain employment of the status they once had, and may be at a disadvantage because they don't speak English. This can lead to significant role changes in the family: the mother seeks outside employment for the first time; the father may not be the "breadwinner" anymore; childcare becomes a necessity, but is unfamiliar to the children; teens are unsupervised after school while both parents work. If children are taking the lead in interpreting and navigating the culture for parents, this role reversal can place adult pressures on children and diminish the authority of parents. New roles can create tremendous stress on the family, as parents and children try to understand their place in the new system.

In addition, refugee parents are often without their accustomed kinship networks, and the assistance or guidance extended families formerly provided.

Strengths of Refugee Parents

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind recent studies overwhelmingly show the more hierarchical family structures most refugees bring with them provide the first generation with a strong source of support and values. Parents often focus on helping their children succeed in school, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. Understanding and supporting these cultural values while also helping parents become more competent in their new culture tends to be the most effective approach to serving families.

Tips for Service Providers Working with Refugee Parents

In spring 2003, BRYCS completed the manual *[Strengthening Services for Refugee Parents: Guidelines and Resources](#)*. It brings together lessons learned from interviews with 28 agencies across the United States, regarding services to refugee parents. We found that agencies serving refugee parents offer a wide array of services: basic cultural orientation, case management and referral, parenting classes, advocacy and leadership development, ESL-based parenting classes, individual counseling, informal support groups, and formal and informal parenting classes. It is important to view the entire continuum of services, and how they all influence the success of refugee parents' transition.

This transition is a lengthy process; it can take many years. In thinking about how agencies provide services to refugee parents during this time, it is critical to think about the effectiveness of service provision. Consider the following recommendations in guiding the development of programs for refugee parents:

- Consider the full context of refugees' lives
- Clarify your goals and the capacity of your organization
- Research the needs and resources of your service community
- Recruit and train staff for cultural competency
- Collaborate with established organizations
- Make schools essential partners
- Include evaluation from the beginning
- Prepare for advocacy
- Ensure administrative support for programs
- Include parenting of adolescents
- Work with agencies that resettle refugees