



FEBRUARY 2005 SPOTLIGHT:

Developing Culturally Competent, Effective Parenting Programs

My children no longer know much about our culture or language—they just want to be like their friends at school, and they do not study and do not respect their elders. We sacrificed so much to survive and escape our country, to give them a chance here, and now we are losing them...

My parents are so weird—they don't speak much English, they wear old clothes, and do not know how to do things in this culture. I have to translate and explain basic stuff to them. They don't understand the things I go through at school or what my life is like here—they act like we are still in Laos.

I love my son very much, and try to be patient and teach him to behave well. But there are times he just won't listen to me—in Somalia, I would hit him to let him know I'm serious, but they tell us that is not allowed here. I do not know what to do, and his behavior is getting out of control.

My daughter was so angry at me for not letting her go out with friends, even though it was 9:00 at night. So she called 911 and told the operator that I was beating her. When the police came, my wife and I were humiliated, even though they found we did not do anything wrong.

In our work around the country, BRYCS has listened to refugee families talk about many of the challenges they face in raising children in a culture vastly different from the one in which they grew up. Over and over again, service providers working with refugee families hear expressions of frustration similar to the ones above.

Challenges

Although the majority of refugee children eventually do well here and go on to be successful adults (some extremely successful), there is also much pain and struggle in many of these families. These struggles are similar to the ones all parents face, but may be compounded by the circumstances under which families fled their country, the traumatic experiences and separations endured, and the often major changes in family roles and expectations that accompany life in a new culture. Since many newly arrived refugees are from cultures and circumstances quite different from those in this country, these changes can be dramatic indeed (see, for example, BRYCS' publication on [Somali Bantu refugees and childrearing](#)). In February 2004, BRYCS' Spotlight featured "[Helping Refugee Parents Adjust to Life in the U.S.](#)", which describes many of the challenges that refugee parents face once they arrive in the United States

In addition, some parents may be raising the children of their relatives, friends, or those they began to care for in a refugee camp, and some children have been separated then reunited with parents several years later adding additional challenges to their adjustment as a family (see BRYCS' paper on "[Separated Children](#)").

Strengths

In serving refugee parents, it is critically important to recognize and approach them from a strengths perspective. Refugees bring many unique assets with them to this country. First, those who take the initiative and survive the journey to another country for resettlement have demonstrated their perseverance and strength. Refugees may have a strong religious faith, political beliefs, or pride in their ethnic heritage that brings the family together, sustains them, and gives them strength and direction. Values that stress the welfare of the family as a whole, hard work, and education lead parents to focus on helping their children succeed in school and in careers. Although they may be in a new environment,

refugees have a great deal of their own parenting knowledge and skills to draw upon, and are more likely to engage in a parenting program when this is recognized and when they are involved as much as possible in the design and carrying out of the program.

Building on Strengths to Address Challenges

Most researchers believe that key to refugee children's success in this country are strong family and community ties that support their cultural heritage. At the same time, it is important that both children and their parents are "empowered" by learning skills that enable them to engage in and be successful in this society. Both parents and children need to know and understand each other's cultural contexts so that they can continue to empathize and support each other as they acculturate in different ways and at different rates. Developing and maintaining a strong relationship and good communication patterns when children are young can help prevent problems later on when children reach adolescence, and can provide teens with a stronger sense of positive identity.

A broad range of approaches address parenting issues, including those aimed at helping build refugee communities, strengthen families, and improve parent-child relationships. Many agencies have developed "parenting education programs," including formal and informal classes and support groups, and there are some very successful models. Effective programs tend to share the following characteristics:

- Parents are involved in all program phases, including planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Respected community leaders are engaged at the beginning of the project to ensure it meets the needs of the community and to provide legitimacy to the effort.
- Potential barriers to attendance are addressed, such as transportation, location, time of day, child care, culturally-appropriate food (parents may bring food to share).
- Culturally competent practice that starts "where the client is." Staff get to know and appreciate the refugees' own approach to parenting, address the parents' "felt needs," and work diligently to be aware of their own biases. Lessons are linked to cultural beliefs and values.
- Concrete and experiential methods are used to teach about childrearing in the United States. Topics usually include local child protection laws, developing daily household routines, alternatives to physical punishment, and how to interact with the schools. Methods may include role plays, demonstrations, and "homework" assignments.
- Parental authority is reinforced, and parents are provided a supportive atmosphere where they can admit mistakes and try out new behaviors.
- Programs focus on skills that strengthen the parent-child bond and decrease the "acculturation gap," such as literacy and English as a Second Language classes that parents and children attend together. This has the added benefit of meeting the concrete needs of parents, and helps build trust and increase engagement.

Refugee Parenting Program Resources

For an overview of refugee parenting programs, read BRYCS' [Strengthening Services for Refugee Parents: Guidelines and Resources](#). Another helpful resource for program development is the book [New Beginnings: A Guide to Designing Parenting Programs for Refugee and Immigrant Parents](#), that describes the steps involved in developing refugee parenting programs at three sites, including outreach, curriculum development, implementation, evaluation, and lessons learned.

A number of parenting curricula for refugees have been developed that can be adapted to specific populations and programs, and several are available online. One of these was developed by a program highlighted in [New Beginnings](#), called [Parenting Teens for Cambodians: A Model Curriculum](#). Other very useful curricula include [Family Talk Time: A Curriculum for Refugee and Immigrant Parents](#) developed by the Refugee Women's Alliance, and [Journey of Hope: Cultural Orientation for Refugee Women in the United States](#), available through USCRI, which has one module (13 sections) devoted to parenting issues.

One innovative application of a model that involves improving language skills of both parents and children and addresses the “acculturation gap” is the Family Literacy movement. A good general resource on this topic is [The National Center for Family Literacy \(NCFL\)](#). The NCFL model “integrates adult education, early childhood education, parent and child together time and parent groups into one comprehensive program.” The Center for Applied Linguistics has several online resources devoted to family literacy and refugee and immigrant families, including [Questions and Answers on Family and Intergenerational Literacy in Multilingual Communities](#) and a description of trends and best practices in [Family Literacy and Adult English Language Learners](#).

For assistance in funding parenting programs, see our special features on [Fundraising for Refugee-Serving Agencies](#).