



**SPRING 2007 SPOTLIGHT:**

**INVOLVING REFUGEE PARENTS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION**

*In our culture [Somali], you send the kids to school and they are the school's responsibility... Sometimes the teachers have a problem understanding the mothers, I help them by translating for them. The first thing the mother will ask is, "What is she complaining for? Isn't that her job? Isn't she the one who is supposed to fix the child? Why is she telling me?" [12]*

Many teachers and administrators across the United States are confused and concerned when they host parent-teacher conferences, "Open Houses," or other events for parents and find that few of their refugee parents attend. Sometimes, repeated failed efforts result in teachers and administrators concluding that the refugee parents in their district "just don't care." [11] Yet, that is rarely the case. Research consistently shows that refugee parents do care about their children's education a great deal. Yet, as the above quote demonstrates, there are often a number of cultural issues at play.

**Defining Parent Involvement – Whose Definition?**

American-born educators, administrators, and researchers have yet to decide upon a clear definition for "parent involvement" since it encompasses so many things, but a general understanding of the term includes activities such as:

- Volunteering at school
- Communicating with teachers and other school personnel
- Attending school events, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences
- Assisting with academic activities at home [8]

If we take a close look at this list, the first three items involve "showing-up" activities that teachers often use to gauge a parent's level of support. Americans often emphasize parents' presence at their children's schools, more so than anything done at home. Yet, refugees' ideas of what it means to be involved in their children's education are often different. For example, a focus group of Somalis in Minnesota revealed that many help their children with their homework, read to them, take them to the library, and involve community members whenever their children need extra help. In addition, many of these Somalis considered "peripheral" activities – such as feeding their children, buying them books, and making sure they get to the school bus on time – as being involved in their children's education. Yet, the majority of these parents did not visit the schools; therefore, many of the local teachers had made the all-too-common conclusion that "they didn't care." [12] In addition, some cultures do not distinguish between education as schooling and education as upbringing, so some refugee parents may feel that they are involved in their children's education when they teach them social skills, such as how to be respectful. [22] Before examining other cultural misunderstandings related to parental involvement, it is important to take a look at why this topic is important.

**Why All the Fuss?**

Numerous studies have shown that parent involvement is associated with children's academic success. Studies usually demonstrate this in the short-term, but some studies have also shown the benefit of parent involvement in the long-term. Data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study indicated that parent involvement in elementary school was significantly associated with academic success in high school. [3] Due to the consistent research findings in this area, schools are now required to involve parents in their children's education through the No Child Left Behind Act. [23]

"Between 1979 and 2004, the number of school age children (ages 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 to 9.9 million, or from 9 to 19 percent of all children in this age group..." [24, p. 34]

For refugee families, this topic is even more important for a number of reasons:

- Education is closely linked with refugee families' integration. The Migration Policy Institute stated, "Schools have served as critical engines of integration, enabling children to master the core curriculum and both parents and children to acquire language and civics skills." [7, p.3] For a figure that illustrates how parent involvement is related to integration, see page 101 of *Investing in Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration* by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR).
- Teachers who are culturally different from their students are less likely to know their students/parents than are teachers who share the cultural background of their students; furthermore, teachers who are culturally different than their students are more likely to believe that they and their families are disinterested or uninvolved in schooling. [6]
- Teachers and administrators often have lower expectations for immigrants and children of color. [17]
- Refugee parents often have extraordinary strengths and the capacity to educate their children, and their classmates, in numerous ways. Yet, unfortunately, differences in culture are often considered a deficit rather than an asset in schools. "...Low-income, urban parents who speak English as a second language...are portrayed as empty containers, which need to be filled before they can give anything of value to the schools or to their own offspring." [11, p.93]

## Involving Refugee Parents in Activities at School

### Cultural Considerations

- As explained above, many refugees may be unaware that, in the United States, involvement in children's education includes visiting their child's school for various meetings and events. Many refugee parents may hear that they are supposed to visit their children's schools and may be vaguely aware of expectations, but they are often not sure what those expectations are. [12]
- In many – perhaps even most – cultures, teachers are highly respected and considered to be experts in their field. Teachers may be viewed as being of a higher status and as always right. In these societies, it is often disrespectful to question a teacher or interfere in their work in any way. Thus, in many countries, parents rarely visit their children's schools or talk with their teachers. This is one of the primary reasons that foreign-born families find their new role as the teacher's "partner" confusing (see, for example, the opening quote for this Spotlight).
- Many cultures are relationship-oriented and it is important to gain someone's trust before "doing business" or discussing problems. Some refugee parents have suggested that the development of informal relationships with their children's teachers, prior to hearing "bad news" from them, would help tremendously.
- When discussing the child's progress with his/her parents, teachers need to be aware that certain behaviors that are viewed as positive in American society might be considered negative in other cultures. For example, families from collectivistic (group-oriented) societies are likely to be uncomfortable with teachers who praise their students individually because it singles them out from their classmates or because it is interpreted as spoiling them. Furthermore, in cultures where elders are highly respected, parents might be upset to learn that their children are "speaking up" and sharing their ideas with the class. [22]
- It can be challenging for refugee parents to learn how to discipline their children in their new context. Misinformation about acceptable parenting practices and discipline techniques carries over to education as can be seen from this quote:

*My mum didn't have any education but she encouraged me to do my homework. This is why I graduated university [in Somalia] in 1985. I couldn't lie to them. In this system [United States] I can't punish [my children]...if they lie to me. [12, p. 89]*

- People from around the world have different orientations to time. Many refugee families are not used to making appointments weeks ahead of time, keeping a calendar, or showing up to meetings “on time.”
- In many countries around the world, individuals do not have the power to change the infrastructure of established systems. The idea that parents can potentially create change in their children’s schools may be unfamiliar. [1]

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### BOX 1: CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Orientation for Refugee Parents:** Provide refugee parents with some type of orientation to the American school system, including a clear explanation of expectations related to parental involvement. [20] Models are available for how to conduct orientations; for example, the [LEP Parent Involvement Project](#). Also, the [Adult Learning Resource Center](#) in Illinois conducts trainings around the country on starting up parental involvement programs in schools. Sample pages of their curriculum, [Parents as Educational Partners \(PEP\): A School-Related Curriculum for Language Minority Parents](#), are available. Some school districts are using videos to accomplish this such as [Minnesota](#) and [Illinois](#).
2. **Observation:** As a part of the orientation, invite refugee parents to observe their child’s class for a couple of hours. Some have reported that even non English-speaking parents benefit from this experience. [15]
3. **Cultural Liaisons:** Consider hiring cultural liaisons to bridge the gap between refugee communities and the local schools. Many programs use such liaisons; for example, see the [Refugee Family Services School Liaison Program](#) in Stone Mountain, Georgia.
4. **Tips for Initial Meetings with Parents:**
  - Begin by establishing a relationship with the family and gaining their trust before urgent behavioral or academic matters arise.
  - Next, use the opportunity to ask questions about refugees’ cultures and views on parental involvement. See the Iowa Parent Information Resource Center’s [sample questions](#).
  - As much as time allows, explain the type of behavior that is expected and encouraged in American classrooms.
5. **Parenting Education:** Develop or locate parenting classes for refugee families. See [BRYCS’ Parenting Toolkit](#) as well as [Module 4 from the LEP Parent Involvement Project](#). Rather than operating from a deficit approach, be sure to build on the families’ strengths. For ideas, see [Reassessing Parent Involvement: Involving Language Minority Parents in School Work at Home](#).
6. **School Staff Training:** A large percentage of teacher training programs do not include coursework on parent involvement or much information on the cultures of the students they are teaching. [5] In addition, the majority of American teachers is white and speaks only English. [21] Therefore, schools need to provide teachers with cultural competency training, including information on how to translate this knowledge into practice. [9] It is also a good idea to include other school staff in these trainings, since refugee children interact with a broad range of staff. See BOX 6 for ideas and materials.

## Language Considerations

- All schools receiving federal funding are required to provide interpreters for parents to facilitate communication according to [Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#). In addition, the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) states that communication with immigrant children's parents should occur in their native language. Many immigrant parents experience communication as an insurmountable barrier.
- Children are unfortunately often used as interpreters, which gives them an inappropriate amount of power and can negatively affect family roles and relationships. According to the focus group of Somalis in Minnesota:  
Children were reported as acting as translators and interpreters of all communication, including any letters from the school. Because they controlled the communication between the household and the outside world, the children were said to act like they are the heads of households and their parents are inferior to them. [12, p. 87]
- Recognize that some parents who need an interpreter will not ask for one. For some, it may be embarrassing to ask for an interpreter due to a fear that they could be viewed as "ignorant." Others might not want to go through the all-too-typical hassle of waiting for one to be located. Still others might simply want to use the opportunity to practice their English.

### RECOMMENDATIONS BOX 2: LANGUAGE CONSIDERATIONS

1. **"I Speak" cards or posters** can be used so that refugee families can communicate the language of interpretation they need.
2. **Translate/Interpret:** Translate as many documents as possible, keeping in mind the literacy level of the parents, and provide interpreters for parents who need them. Consider partnering with [refugee resettlement agencies](#) or refugee-led organizations to accomplish this. Have a process in place for obtaining interpreters and translators in all languages – not just Spanish. For example, the Minnesota Department of Education keeps an [interpreter database](#) to help with this process.
3. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** For all refugee parents, there is much to consider, beyond the level of English, for successful communication. See [Working on Common Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges](#) for tips. And for the parents who choose to speak English, be patient! If you have ever tried having a conversation in another language – not to mention a conference with a teacher – you can imagine how difficult this might be.
4. **Choose Vocabulary Carefully:** Certain words, such as "OK," mean different things depending on one's tone. [12] Furthermore, new English speakers might not know technical terms such as "curriculum." [18]
5. **Written Communication:** Recognize that refugee parents with a higher level of formal education might prefer written communication, such as email or letters, because of having a better understanding of written than spoken English.

## Literacy and Education Level Considerations

- Many refugee families come from parts of the world where education is a luxury or has been interrupted due to war and/or the migration process. Research shows that parents' confidence in their own intellectual abilities significantly affects their involvement in their children's education. [8]
- Due to the difficulties that preliterate parents face, many family literacy programs have been developed by schools and community organizations. To read an overview of what family literacy is and how it benefits multilingual communities, see [Family and Intergenerational Literacy in Multilingual Communities](#). Family literacy programs have been shown to increase parents' involvement in their children's schools. For an example of an effective program, read about the [Hmong Literacy Project](#).
- Unfortunately, some family literacy programs focus on the deficiencies of families and utilize narrow definitions of literacy that promote "only school-like literacy interactions." More recently, educators are realizing the importance of strengths-based literacy programs that incorporate activities that are relevant to the lives of their students and their families. [14]

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### BOX 3: LITERACY/EDUCATION LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Family Literacy:** Develop family literacy programs using a strengths-based perspective. Begin by asking parents questions about their perceptions and expectations on the uses and functions of literacy in their lives.
2. **Literacy in Native Language:** For adults who are literate in their native language, but not necessarily English, encourage them to read to their children in their native language. As one literacy expert stated, "The greatest contribution that refugee parents can make to their children's success is to ensure they maintain fluency and continue to develop the home language." [As cited in 14]
3. **Beginner Literacy Skills:** For adults with some literacy skills in any language, expand your definition of literacy and promote activities where parents assist their children in developing literacy skills from familiar life events. Teachers can create reading and writing assignments around the families' interests such as hobbies, sports, and cultural events. [14] For other ideas, see BRYCS' description of [World Relief Chicago's Family Literacy Program](#) as well as *Model Strategies in Bilingual Education: Family Literacy and Parent Involvement*.
4. **Preliterate:** For parents who are unable to read or write in any language, recognize the role of oral language development as a precursor to early literacy. Parents should be encouraged to engage their children in rhymes, songs, riddles, oral history, poetry, proverbs, and folklore. In addition, parents can also share wordless picture books with their children to teach early literacy skills such as predicting, story sequencing, and identifying key story elements and main characters. [14] Dispel the myth that they cannot help their children in school just because they do not speak English!
5. **Verbal Communication:** As much as possible, speak to the parents of your students (in-person or on the phone) and reduce the number of letters and notices sent home.

## Logistical Considerations

- Many refugees cannot take time away from work to come to their children's schools.
- Transportation is often a very realistic "excuse" as many American cities have limited public transportation and refugees often must depend on friends or family members with cars.
- Parents are often responsible for younger children, and may need child care in order to come to schools.
- Poverty affects American-born parents' participation in schools; likewise, it will affect the participation of many refugees who are struggling to make ends meet in addition to adjusting to the culture.
- Whether due to pre-migration trauma or stress from adapting to the United States, some refugees experience what is typically known in America as depression and/or anxiety. Research shows that parents' mental health can influence their involvement. [8]

### RECOMMENDATIONS BOX 4: LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Timing:** Vary the times of meetings and events at your school and be creative. For example, some social workers have found that meeting with refugee parents for breakfast, after they drop off their kids at school, works well.[16] Furthermore, be as flexible as possible! When making an appointment with a parent, remember that not all cultures value being on time and it will take refugee families a while to adjust to this.
2. **Transportation:** Whenever it is possible, provide transportation to events for refugee parents. See how the schools in [Manchester, New Hampshire](#) are doing it. Or, help facilitate the creation of a carpool for parents who want to visit the school.
3. **Child Care:** Do not overlook a parent's need for child care. One solution is to recruit a volunteer to watch the children. For ideas regarding larger groups of children needing childcare, see how the [Manchester School District](#) is doing it.
4. **Meeting Location:** Ask refugee parents where they are comfortable meeting. Consider meeting with refugee families in their homes or other informal locations, where they would be more comfortable.

## Welcoming Refugee Families - Considerations

- Many refugee parents have reported not feeling welcomed in their children's schools, feeling that their cultural background is viewed as a "deficit" rather than a strength.
- For other parents, not feeling welcomed may be related to certain security measures as this quote demonstrates:

*Parents are always being told, "Please, please, come in to the school," but then as soon as you come in the school, the next thing is, "Well, wait a minute. You have to write your name down, give you a badge...and then we have to get security to escort you." Or, "You can't go anywhere. We have to call your children from the class."* [12, p. 94]

- Minority parents may be criticized for not being more involved in their children's schools. However, some research has shown that this is the result of resignation, caused by school staff misunderstanding parents' beliefs and practices, rather than parents' disinterest in being involved. [10]
- Some immigrant and refugee parents report not feeling welcomed by other parents. As one parent stated:

*I think the relationship between American and Korean mothers is like that of oil and water, which cannot ever mix. Whenever I participate in PTA, I feel I am left out.* [18, p. 129]

### RECOMMENDATIONS BOX 5: WELCOMING REFUGEE FAMILIES - CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Develop a Plan:** It helps if schools have systematic plans for engaging refugee parents. Iowa has developed a Toolkit for Educators called *REACH Out to Parents for Student Success*, which includes information on planning, conducting needs assessments, incorporating research-based practices, evaluation, and sustainability.
2. **Everyone is an Ambassador:** Recognize that everyone in your school from the security guard to the principal contributes to helping refugee families feel welcome! In addition, hire more teachers and personnel from the cultural backgrounds of your students. When parents see teachers who look like them and speak their language, they will feel more comfortable.
3. **Outreach:** It is extremely helpful to involve community leaders from the various refugee groups. Be creative and try neighborhood walks, different media outlets, or videos. [19] To help refugee parents feel welcome among other parents, create a program that offers mentors or "buddies" to befriend new parents. [2]
4. **Facilitate Visits:** Eliminate unnecessary procedures – especially written ones – when parents visit the school.
5. **Focus on the Parents:** If your first contact with a family is through a refugee resettlement caseworker or church co-sponsor, be sure to focus on the parents and communicate directly with them, rather than with the other service providers. [4]
6. **Reflect:** Take a look at your own views about child development and education and reflect on how they are influenced by your culture. Think critically about your own level of cultural competence and how immigrant-friendly your school is. Rate yourself with the Self-Report Cards on pages 55-56 of *Improving Education for Immigrant Students*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS BOX 6: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### For School Personnel

#### **Cultural Competency**

1. See BRYCS past Spotlights on our [publications page](#).
2. The Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Orientation Resource Center's [Culture Profiles](#).
3. *Welcoming New Learners: A Professional Development Tool* from the Illinois State Board of Education (online video)
4. *Understanding Your Refugee and Immigrant Students: An Educational, Cultural, and Linguistic Guide*, by Jeffra Flaitz.
5. From the Iowa Parent Resource Center, there are Culture Summaries on Education in [Bosnia](#), [Mexico](#), [Southeast Asia](#), and for [refugees](#) in general. Also see their publications on cultural competence for [administrators](#), [teachers](#), and [parents](#).
6. See the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Building Culturally & Linguistically Competent Services to Support Young Children, Their Families, and School Readiness](#) for personnel providing services in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Settings.

#### **Family Literacy with English Language Learners**

1. The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition has a whole section on [Family Literacy and Adult English Language Learners](#).
2. The National Center for Family Literacy has a *Practitioner Toolkit for Working with Adult English Language Learners*.

### For Parents

#### **Cultural Orientation**

1. *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees* by the Center for Applied Linguistics is given to nearly all refugees before departing for the United States and includes a chapter on education.
2. *Welcome to the United States: A Guide for New Immigrants* from USCIS is available in numerous languages and includes a chapter on education
3. [A Guide to Your Children's School: A Parent Handbook](#), from the Adult Learning Resource Center in Des Plaines, Illinois, is available in English, Arabic, Bosnian, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.
4. *School Success Tool-Kit* from People for the American Way Foundation.
5. *Understanding American Schools: The Answers to Newcomers' Most Frequently Asked Questions* by Anne P. Copeland and Georgia Bennett.
6. *A Toolkit for Hispanic Families* from the [U.S. Department of Education](#).
7. *In Our Country* (online video) from the Illinois State Board of Education.
8. *You Can Help Your Child in School* and *You Can Talk to Your Child's School* from Minnesota's bookstore (videos).

#### **Family Literacy**

1. The [International Children's Digital Library](#) with online books for FREE in a variety of languages including Arabic, Swahili, Farsi, Spanish, French, and more!
2. [Somali Bilingual Book Project](#) is working to publish Somali folktales.

*For further descriptions of these useful resources and more like it, please see the [Highlighted Resources List](#).*

**REFUGEE CHILDREN  
SCHOOL  
IMPACT GRANTS**

Both of the "[Promising Practices](#)" highlighted are funded by [Refugee Children School Impact Grants](#) from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which cover some of the costs of educating refugee children incurred by local school districts in which significant numbers of refugee children reside. Funding is currently provided for 35 states.

**OTHER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

The [Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning](#) is a nonprofit training and consulting corporation dedicated to demonstrating that national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences are assets that foster understanding and cooperation. The Institute has been designated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement as their technical assistance provider in the area of English Language Training. Their publications include *Refugee Children with Low Literacy Skills or Interrupted Education: Identifying Challenges and Strategies* and *Mental Health of Refugee Children: A Guide for the ESL Teacher*. All three publications can be ordered by phone: 303-863-0188, fax: 303-863-0178, or [email](#). The Spring Institute has also provided workshops to schools impacted by large numbers of refugee children and is available to provide these workshops free of charge.

*BRYCS' Spotlights and other publications are written for practitioners. All of the information and recommendations above are based on the references below. In places where there is not a specific reference listed and you would like to know the source, please [contact us](#) and we would be happy to provide that information.*

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