

Refugee Families from Burma

This resource provides general cultural information, while recognizing that every family is unique and that cultural practices will vary by household and by generation. Several Burmese community leaders were interviewed for this background. While general information is provided here, it is best to get to know each family and learn their unique characteristics; wherever possible, ask members of the community about different cultural practices.



Background

Burma, a large country located in Southeast Asia, has been officially called Myanmar since 1989, but the name change is disputed by those who do not recognize the legitimacy of the ruling military government. A former British colony, the country has experienced a long-running civil war. In recent decades, due to government repression and persecution, tens of thousands of people, mainly ethnic minorities, have fled their homeland. Most of these refugees live in neighboring countries, such as

Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and India. Since the late 1990's, and increasing in 2007, the United States has resettled about 100,000 refugees from Burma (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

Culture and Religion

While there are eight main ethnic groups within Burma, and over 130 sub-groups, the largest groups of refugees from Burma in the U.S. are Karen and Chin (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). There are significant differences among these ethnic groups, including different languages, cultural practices, political histories, and religions. Refugees from Burma may be Buddhists, Christians, animists, or Muslims; they may be from rural or urban areas. While some speak Burmese, the Karen, Karenni, Chin, and other ethnic minorities speak languages specific to their ethnic group. Some may not speak Burmese fluently, if at all. It is likely that refugees from Burma will need an interpreter.

Practice Tips:

- Refugees from Burma may avoid direct eye contact, considering it to be impolite.
- In Burma, distinct clothing is one way to distinguish an ethnic group. However, the "Longyi" (a long cloth worn by men and women) and "Hta mein" (woman's skirt) are common across many groups.
- Some refugees may be reluctant to ask for what they need. Try anticipating their needs and asking open-ended questions, multiple times if necessary, ideally through an interpreter (Karen American Communities Foundation, n.d.).

Due to the years of internal conflicts in Burma, in which different ethnic groups may have found themselves on opposing sides, one should not assume that all refugees

from Burma will be comfortable with one another. It can also be problematic to use members of one ethnic group as interpreters for members of another ethnic group (Karen American Communities Foundation). In particular, ethnic minorities from Burma may feel uncomfortable with a Burmese interpreter (from the Burman ethnic group).

The term "Burmese" is generally used to describe people of the Burman, majority ethnic group in Burma. As such, ethnic minorities prefer to be referred to as a member of their particular ethnic group (Karen, Chin, etc.) and not referred to as "Burmese" or "Burmese refugee."

Family and Community

- Men are traditionally expected to work outside the home and financially support the family.
- Women care for children, take care of household chores, and control the family budget. In Burma, husbands and wives worked together in the fields.
- Families tend to be closely knit, and respect for elders is important.
- Mothers in both Karen and Chin communities are particularly committed to caring for babies and toddlers and are reluctant to work in jobs that take them away from small children. Rather than using outside early care and education, many parents find other family members or members of their own ethnic group to care for their children.

Practice Tips:

Given the use of family, friend, and neighbor care for children, there may be interest in receiving training to become license in-home family child care providers within the community.

"We don't have daycare in Thailand and Burma. You leave your children with older siblings, or with a friend, but mostly mothers stay at home with the children. If I needed help with harvesting, I would ask a neighbor for help, and then I would help them in return. We do not pay each other money." (BRYCS, Parenting Conversations: Karen Father)

Practice Tips:

- Many Karen refugees typically had only one name or a nickname. However, most were given, or chose for themselves, first and last names while in refugee camps, or as part of the resettlement process.
- Some refugees divided their names into a first and last name, or have the Karen words for "Mr." or "Mrs." as a first name. Families may not share a last name.

Child-Rearing and Child Development

Child rearing among refugees from Burma may vary in some ways from typical child-rearing practices in the U.S.

- Mothers usually feed children by hand up to school age. When children begin to feed themselves, they tend to use their fingers.
- Children may be assisted with dressing by parents and older siblings beyond toddlerhood. Families may find potty training a challenge because they are not used to high toilets, and children are used to using the outdoors. Introducing low potty seats for children may help.
- The floor or ground may be a preferred place for feeding, lounging, and sleeping.
- Some families, despite having multiple bedrooms, may choose to sleep together in one or two rooms, with young children often sleeping in bed with their parents.

While families value their children, they may not show affection in demonstrative ways such as hugging. Rather, they may show affection by giving a small reward, such as sweets, or by indirect praise, i.e., the parent will share praise with a relative or friend.

Guidance and Discipline

Parents in Burma, while loving, may use their hand or a small switch to discipline children. However, most refugees know that use of a switch is generally not acceptable in the U.S. and no longer do so. Suggestions for positive discipline may be welcome, as families may struggle with methods to replace spanking.

In their home villages, or in refugee camps, families raised their children in a safe place where it was expected that all community members would look after each other's children. In the U.S., families may have trouble adjusting to the expectation of and need for more direct supervision. For instance, young children may be allowed to leave their apartment to visit friends in nearby apartments, or to play outside without direct adult supervision. They may also have the freedom to eat what and when they want to and to resolve problems on their own.

School and Education

Refugee families from Burma are generally very supportive of schooling for their children, though some may prefer to keep babies and young children at home until they are school age. Families may be more receptive to the home-based model. There may be the perception that schooling is done solely by the child's teacher. Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) programs may need to actively encourage family engagement in program activities with their children. Many families may welcome the EHS/HS adult educational opportunities as well. Programs may need to utilize alternative forms of communication, as parents may not understand English.

Practice Tips:

- Encourage children to maintain their cultural style of eating while introducing them to U.S. eating utensils, as children may be seen at lunchtime eating rice or other daily staples with their fingers.
- Confidentiality regarding personal matters may be a new concept for some families from Burma and may need to be explained.

Health and Mental Health

- Several community leaders interviewed for this backgrounder believe that refugee families could benefit from greater education about nutrition.
- Many families will have been exposed to Western medicine. However, some also use traditional remedies. Preventive medicine (such as well-child visits) may be a new concept.

- Among Chin refugees, the traditional healing customs of cupping and coining are sometimes still used. In both practices, heated elements such as hot oil are placed on the skin and may cause bruising or burns in children (Scarlis, 2010).
- Some refugees may also use the traditional healing practice of binding a finger or tongue and pricking the skin to release a small amount of "bad blood" (Scarlis, 2010).

Practice Tips:

- Refugee families from Burma may be unfamiliar with U.S. health and safety practices.
- An EHS/HS program in Syracuse, NY, collaborates with a nurse who brings basic home medical supplies to refugee families and teaches about preventive medicine. The nurse attends open enrollment sessions to meet with mothers.

Community Leadership

EHS/HS programs may find it helpful to build relationships with leaders from Karen, Chin, and other ethnic groups. Some tips for doing so:

- Identify leaders, ask community members who they trust.
- Include knowledgeable community members as interpreters or liaisons in enrollment sessions and other meetings with families from Burma.
- Contact the state's [Refugee Coordinator](#) who can provide contact information for ethnic-based community organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, and other helpful local resources.
- Educate community leaders about EHS/HS so that information can be disseminated within the community by word of mouth.

Practice Tips:

- Many Karen refugees are shy and uncomfortable with the directness of Americans (Barron et al., 2007). Work with community leaders to broker conversations and soften some of the cultural communication barriers.

Resources and References

BRYCS

- Head Start Collaboration. <http://www.brycs.org/head-start-collaboration.cfm>
- Highlighted Resources—Refugees from Burma. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Refugees-from-Burma.cfm>
- "Parenting Interviews" [Klee Thoo, a Burmese Karen father]. <http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/Karen-interview.pdf>

Other resources

- Barron, S., et. al. (2007). Refugees from Burma: Their backgrounds and refugee experience. Center for Applied Linguistics. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/burmese>
- Center for Victims of Torture. (n.d.). Karen Refugees from Burma. <http://healtorture.org/content/karen-refugees-burma>
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- International Rescue Committee. (2006). Refugee children and youth backgrounders. http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/migrated/where/united_states_salt_lake_city_ut/refugee-backgrounders.pdf
- Karen American Communities Foundation. (n.d.). Considerations for individuals and agencies working with the Karen people of Burma in the United States. http://www.karensusa.org/resources_for_working_with_karen_final_nov_09.pdf
- New York State Department of Health. (2010). Working with refugees from Burma to prevent childhood lead poisoning. http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/lead/health_care_providers/working_with_refugees_from_burma.htm

- Neiman, A.; et. al. (2008). Karen cultural profile. Ethnomed. <http://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile>
- Scarlis, C.A. (2010). Chin cultural profile. Ethnomed. <http://ethnomed.org/culture/chin/chin-cultural-profile>
- U.S. Department of State, Refugee Processing Center. <http://wrapsnet.org/>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, links to State Refugee Coordinators and Mutual Assistance Associations. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>

Video / DVD:

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2010). A New Day, and Be Who You Are. <http://calstore.cal.org/store/p-194-refugee-families-youth-videos-a-new-day-be-who-you-are-dvd-in-english.aspx>

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