



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services



SPECIAL  
FEATURE

## BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Tou and Mee, Hmong Parents

*On December 21, 2006, Tou and Mee met with BRYCS staff to talk about their life and experiences as Hmong refugees from Laos now raising a family in the United States.*

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### Background and Family:

*Husband:* My name is Tou. I was born in Laos in 1968, the second child born in my family, with three brothers and two sisters. My family went to Thailand in 1982, where we stayed at the Wat Tham Krabok. I married my wife in Thailand in 1993. We arrived in the U.S. in March 2005.

*Wife:* My name is Mee. I was born in 1977. I have two brothers, one older and one younger. Both of them still live in Thailand because they had already moved away from the Wat Tham Krabok when the refugee processing began.

*Husband:* My wife and I have two children – one daughter who is five and another daughter who is two. Both girls were born in Thailand. When our older daughter, Pa, was about eight months old, she was hospitalized for swelling of the brain caused by a high fever. Her development slowed down a lot after that.

From the time she was eight months old until we left the refugee camp about three years later, she was in and out of the hospital in Thailand. She was cared for by the public hospital in Thailand. There was no insurance, so we had to pay for her care and take her food to eat at the hospital. If we could not pay for her care then she would have to come home until we could pay for her care again. Over there, we did not have much opportunity to talk with the doctor; we did not understand very much about what was going on with her care.

*Wife:* We felt like the doctors treated us differently because we were not Thai citizens. For example, a Thai family whose child had similar problems to ours would be treated first before our child. When we took our daughter to the hospital initially, it took five weeks before the doctors performed surgery, which seemed like a long time. There were other families in the refugee camp who also had children with similar problems, but there were no resources available in the camp, only the support of immediate family.

*Husband:* When it came time for us to resettle in the U.S., the doctor who examined us requested that our daughter's medical records be sent to the U.S. About four to five pages of medical records were sent with us to the U.S.

## Coming to the U.S.

*Husband:* Initially we resettled in Wisconsin, but after several months we moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to be closer to our extended family. Now we live with the parents of my wife's sister-in-law, although my wife's brother and sister-in-law still live in Thailand.

We first heard through a Hmong radio station about the possibility of receiving help with the care of our disabled daughter. The Hmong language radio announcer talked about personal care attendants for the elderly and for people with disabilities. Later on, we learned from an extended family member that our daughter might be eligible for special educational services.

*Wife:* Our daughter is now registered through Ramsey County for waiver services through Consumer Directed Community Supports so that we receive a grant to be the caregivers for our daughter.<sup>[3]</sup> We were required to take classes on caring for her, and managing services for her, so that now we receive financial assistance as her primary caregivers, rather than hiring a personal care attendant. She is unable to walk or care for herself in anyway. She can be strapped into a wheel chair, otherwise we move her from her bed to the couch in the house. When we come by and talk to her, or whistle, she will smile at us.

## Schooling and Housing

*Wife:* Pa started school full-time this year at a school serving children with developmental disabilities. We have noticed that she is more responsive since she began attending school. In the refugee camp there were no school opportunities for the children.

*Husband:* Pa now takes the bus to school everyday. We must carry her down a stairway to the bus stop, since the house is built on a slope. We tried carrying the wheelchair out to the bus first and then carrying our daughter out to the bus, but the bus driver said this takes too long. So, now we carry her down to the bus in her wheelchair. Housing is the biggest challenge for us. We would like to have wheelchair accessible housing, but it is too expensive.

## Parenting

*Husband:* Both of our children were born in Thailand. Our younger child was born at our home in the refugee camp. We would like to have more children someday. Since we have two daughters, we would also like to have a son. I don't know what my community thinks about children with disabilities, but I am proud to be my daughters' father.

At present we are not employed beyond caring for our children, but our childcare preference would be to have one parent work and one stay at home with the children.

We heard back in Laos that parents in the U.S. cannot spank their children to discipline them. We have heard that you can teach your child, but you cannot punish her when she misbehaves. One difference in the U.S. that we find surprising is that if your daughter grows up to be a teenager and she gets into trouble with the law, then the parents may have to go to court. So it seems like a system where parents are not able to control their children but then parents are blamed if the children misbehave.

We dream for our children that they would attend college and receive more education than we did. For Pa, we dream that she would overcome her condition so that she can do things for herself, so she can let us know her needs and wants. Sometimes now it is very hard for us to understand what she needs.

*Wife:* Our concerns for our children include not wanting them to hang around with people who smoke, or do drugs, or run away from home. I worry that I will not be able to control the children.

## New Values in the U.S.

*Husband:* Values that I appreciate in the U.S. are doing things for yourself, going to school, and becoming a productive person. Depending on one's opportunities, a person could become a senator or representative.

*We appreciate the interpretation assistance of the Pacer Center (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) staff in conducting this interview. The mission of the Pacer Center, a national center based in Minnesota, is to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and their families, based on the concept of parents helping parents. For more information go to: [www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org). To view Pacer Center materials translated into Hmong, Spanish and Somali, go to: <http://www.pacer.org/translated/translated.htm>*

## Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. What guidance or information would you offer this family regarding discipline practices in the U.S.?
  - o BRYCS resource: *Raising Children in a New Country: A Toolkit for Working with Parents*
2. Given their daughter's disabilities, what preparations and services should be considered in resettling this family:
  1. Regarding needs such as housing, medical care and assistance, appropriate educational services, etc.?
  2. Regarding support services for family caregivers?
3. What resources or services would you recommend to this family to assist in the care of their disabled daughter?
  - o Resource: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' Refugees with Disabilities Technical Assistance Services; Dawn Blankenship at [dblankenship@uscriddc.org](mailto:dblankenship@uscriddc.org) or 202.347.3507, x 3006.
  - o If parents notice their child is having developmental or learning problems, following are some options:
    - The family doctor should be consulted by the parents about their concerns.
    - If the child is younger than five, parents may request assistance from the local school district for early intervention assistance to assess the child's needs and develop a plan for helping the child and parents.
    - If the child has a known disability, the family may contact the local county social service office to request information about services available.
  - o To learn more about caring for a child with a disability, each state has at least one Parent Training and Information Center, like the aforementioned Pacer Center. They are available with training, advocacy and resources in the family's local area.
4. What type of programming might help these parents, and other refugee families like them, feel more confident in parenting their children during the teenage years? How are service providers in your area addressing the needs of newcomer youth?
  - o BRYCS Resource: *Growing Up In A New Country: A Positive Youth Development Toolkit for Working with Refugees and Immigrants*
5. How can refugee serving agencies in your area ensure that secondary migrants, like this family (secondary migrants = families who move away from their initial resettlement community) do not fall through the cracks?