



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Farah, an Iraqi Mother

In December 2007, BRYCS staff spoke with Farah about her life and experiences as an Iraqi parent now living in the United States. Farah has three sons.

Family Background

My husband and I were married for 14 years, before he was kidnapped in Iraq in 2006. We have not heard from him since then. After that, I left Iraq with my three sons and fled to Syria, where we lived for a year before coming to the U.S.

When we were in Syria, I was emotionally exhausted, with my husband missing and all, so I sent my kids to school. I didn't want my kids to see me depressed and crying all the time. But only my eldest son stayed in school because the two younger boys were being picked on and beaten up just for being Iraqi. Once they were even threatened with a knife. After I took my two younger boys out of public school, I enrolled them in an Islamic school to give me a break.

My sons and I have now been in the U.S. for four months. My boys are 14, 12, and 9 years old (9th, 6th, and 4th grade), and all were born in Baghdad.

Religion

I am Shiite and my husband and children are Sunni, but we really were not very religious in Iraq. We had friends from all sects and religions and did not raise our kids to be fanatics.

The divisions between sects are actually more apparent to me in the U.S. than in Iraq—some people are bringing the results of the war here. For example, some Arab families in the U.S. have called to welcome us, and one of the first questions they often ask is “Are you Shiite or Sunni?”

Family Roles

I think women in Iraq have more responsibility for kids, work, and home, than here in the U.S., just because they are women. In Iraq, I took care of the house and the children and also worked outside the home. I was an elementary school math teacher for 11 years, and a principal for the last two years. My husband worked as an accountant for a government ministry. He did not help with the housework, because he spent so many hours at his job and came home late. But sometimes, he helped with the grocery shopping, like on his way home from work.

Child discipline, reward, affection and chores

In Iraq, I was primarily responsible for disciplining the children. I took care of everything so that my children only had to concentrate on their studies, so I expected good results. I always asked for more than 100% from my children, and so sometimes my children would fear me—they would fear showing any bad grades to me. I was very strict when it came to schooling. When the children got good grades, they were rewarded with gifts, such as books, and were allowed to play with the computer or video games. If I needed to discipline the kids further, sometimes I yelled. Parents in Iraq are also allowed to hit their children.

I showed affection to my boys by providing them with their needs, giving them gifts, and making them happy. We also give our children lots of hugs and kisses.

The only responsibility my children had was school and to do their homework—other than that, they had no chores in Iraq. But life is tough here, so now my kids have more responsibility—sometimes I send them to the store to get food. Sometimes, I have them make their own breakfast, too.

Schooling in Iraq and the U.S.

The conditions of Iraqi schools were not very good. During the days of Saddam, five kids could be seen sharing one seat in school. Some schools were rebuilt by the Americans, but not like the schools here. None of the schools in Iraq have water, and they are very cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Even as a principal, I did not have a computer or the equipment I needed.

As a parent and also a principal, I think that about 75% of the responsibility for schooling fell on the parents. Since it was a short school day with only 35 minutes for each class, the teachers didn't have enough time to do all they needed to do—so lots of work came home to the parents. Besides helping with homework, parents were able to go into school and follow-up on their children's grades and behavior. Parents could also advocate for their child to skip a grade, but the child had to take a test and get good enough scores to actually do so. My eldest son was a gifted student and went to the same prestigious school as Saddam Hussein's son. His classes were each one-hour long and his math and science courses were taught in English.

About 25% of the responsibility for schooling fell on the teachers. Besides teaching the material, teachers could also hit students to discipline them, but this often just creates more problems. If the teacher causes harm to the child—for example, if bruises are left—the teacher can be punished for it by the Ministry of Education.

I am trying to be involved in the schools here, despite the language barrier. My youngest son has an Arab teacher, which helps—the teacher sends notes home to me in Arabic and helps me out. My middle son's school enrolled him in the 6th grade, though I believe he should be in the 5th grade. His teachers and the administrators tell me he will catch up.

Childcare

When my kids were little, they went to “kindergarten,” which was a kind of daycare. Once they got a little older, like about six years old, I could leave them home alone. After school, they were allowed to go home by themselves, too. Sometimes, my mother helped out, like if one of the boys was sick and I needed to go to work. I could also rely on my neighbors. Even after the fall of Saddam, I would sometimes ask my neighbors to check on the boys with all the bombing going on. I have not yet had to deal with childcare here in the U.S., because I don’t have a job yet and my boys are in school.

In Iraq, neighbors have a role in your social life and kids play together. Here, it seems like people don't have time to do this, due to the style of life, but I don't mind and it hasn't affected my parenting.

Concerns for children

Before I came to the U.S., I was mostly concerned about exposing my children to drugs, alcohol, and sexual harassment or abuse. I always warn my kids about these things. These things can be found anywhere, including Iraq despite all of the taboos with these things. So here in the U.S., which is much more open, I think that children can be exposed to these things more easily. I am also worried about what my children will see on TV here. In Iraq, there is such strict censorship, but here it is very open.

Before coming to the U.S. I was also worried about people harassing me for my skin color and ethnicity, but now that I’m here, people have been very welcoming! I have not experienced any discrimination. In fact, when I say that I’m from Iraq, I often get more kindness. The local paper wrote an article about my family, which has resulted in invitations to Thanksgiving dinners and letters from strangers. Also, my landlord checks in on me knowing that I’m new to this country and a single mom. Everyone has been so kind!

Child Welfare in Iraq

I have never heard of the government in Iraq stepping in to do something in cases of child abuse, or of families filing complaints for family disputes. As I said, if a child is beaten too hard by a teacher, the teacher will be punished. But if a teacher sees bruises on a student that were likely caused by the child’s parent, there is nothing the teacher can do about it. There is no recourse or steps to take even if she wanted to help.

There are no laws to protect children or anything similar to “child protective services” that’s here. In Iraq, children without parents usually live with extended family, but I think that is where a lot of the abuse happens. At first, based on what I had heard about the U.S., I was concerned that the U.S. child welfare authorities might take my kids away from me, but now I understand what they do and know they are good.

Parenting challenges in the U.S.

I feel that I am losing control of my children, particularly with their schooling. Much of this is due to the language barrier, but also because I'm still learning how school works here. I was very in control in Iraq since I was a principal myself. Also, sometimes I am not sure how to handle their behavior. For example, I taught for a few days at a local Mosque and the children were misbehaving. I was at a loss for how to discipline them, so I just gave up!

It is also hard being a single parent—and in a new country. There are some things that are traditionally taught by the father, for example it is the father's job to teach his sons about sex. Now I have to do this, and it was embarrassing at first.

Also, my husband used to sometimes help me with the children in Iraq. For example, he would take the children out when I was doing housework.

And, financially speaking, it is very challenging. Our money was in my husband's name, and I am not able to access it. I can no longer give my children the lifestyle they are used to because we came with no money, and even when I get a job, that will still only be one income when we are used to two incomes. So in this way, we were better off in Iraq. My children are struggling to adapt to this. For example, I got my children some used clothes, but they refused to wear them, and so I ended up giving them to another refugee family. I hope that living in America will teach my children to be more practical.

I think I will just take this year as it comes and maybe next year will be better.

Cultural orientation

We had a three hour class, before coming here, on how to call "911," how to ride the bus, etc., but we had to leave so quickly that we were not able to attend the usual four day course.

I wish I had known how hard it is to find work. I tried working as a cook at a restaurant for three days, but then I quit. It was such hard work, and I felt humiliated! I was crying all the time and felt like I wanted to go back to Iraq. I called my parents and they convinced me to stay since it's not safe in Iraq, but they were also surprised to learn that I had to take this type of job here despite my professional background and teaching experience.

I also wish that there were different levels of help for refugees from different backgrounds, instead of the same types of services for all refugees. It is challenging because my family did not come from a refugee camp—we were upper-middle class in Iraq and, as I said, my children expect certain things that now I can't provide.

I also wish that the assistance provided to refugee families was longer—the five to six months of financial assistance we are receiving is not enough. In one month it will be gone, and I still can't find a job.

Hopes and dreams for children

I want my children to do something with their lives. I want them to take advantage of the free public education here. My eldest son wants to go to medical school. I hope that he will get a scholarship, since he is really smart, so he can become a doctor.

I would like my children to get involved in positive activities. They need a positive way to use their built-up energy inside. Right now, all they do is argue with each other. They are dealing with a lot, worrying about their father, and they need a way to express themselves. They also don't have a lot of homework yet since they are still learning English, so they have a lot of spare time. I got my children library cards and am encouraging them to learn to play an instrument in the band at school.

Passing on values

From Iraqi values, I would like to teach my children to have respect for their parents and to stay with the family—to have strong family ties.

I think that kids are too dependent on their parents in Iraq, but here in the U.S., kids are raised to be responsible and independent. I like this and hope to pass this on to my children.

I like the way kids are taught at school—there is no oppression in learning and people enjoy learning. I also like the way that people respect the law here.

Parenting advice for other refugees just coming to the U.S.

My advice is for new refugee and immigrant parents to pick and choose which traditions to keep. There are so many things that we do in our countries and cultures that don't fit here, but others that do. My family just moved from an oppressed society to an open society, and so we cannot apply the same laws and traditions as we did in our home country. It is not helpful for me to try to control my children or put pressure on them. I am letting my children make their own choices, but I am providing guidance and watching them closely.

I would remind families that it takes time to adjust to a new culture. I think in about two years I will be more adapted.

Conversation with Farah's family about schools in the U.S.

How is school in the U.S. similar or different from Iraq?

[Eldest son] School in Iraq is very similar to here, but in Iraq we stayed in the same classroom all day and teachers switched rooms. The subjects are similar here but the “extras” like art, sports, and music were not constant in Iraq. When I got here, I was really surprised to have entire classes devoted to these things. I was also surprised to be able to pick some of my own subjects.

What was it like on your first day of school?

[Eldest son] I got lost! The high school here is really big.

Has it been easy or hard making friends?

[Eldest son] It was easy. There are lots of Arab kids and so there isn't a language barrier. Although it was easier in Iraq because you never changed classes. Now I have to make friends in each class.

[Youngest son] It was easy.

[Middle son] It was half easy, half hard.

[Farah] My youngest son likes school so much, he wants to go on the weekends!

1 - Names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. What do you know about the situation of Iraqi refugees?
 - BRYCS' highlighted resources on [Iraqi refugees](#)
 - From the U.S. Department of State / Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration
 - [The United States Humanitarian Assistance for Displaced Iraqis](#)
 - [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program \(USRAP\) Frequently Asked Questions - Iraqi Processing](#)
 - From Refugee Council USA, see a compilation of recent [Summaries, Reports and Backgrounders](#) on Iraqi refugees
 - From Refugees International, [Iraq: The World's Fastest Growing Refugee Crisis](#)

2. What parenting advice or resources could you offer a refugee single parent in the U.S.?
 - BRYCS' [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook and Parenting Toolkit](#)
 - BRYCS' Spotlight, [Helping Refugee Parents Adjust to Life in the U.S.](#)
 - BRYCS' highlighted resource lists on [Family Strengthening](#)

3. How do you orient refugee families to the U.S. school system?
 - BRYCS' Spotlight, [Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools](#)
 - [Involving Refugee Parents in Their Children's Education](#)
 - From the [Center for Applied Linguistics](#), see two orientation videos (with contributions from BRYCS), 1) [A New Day: Refugee Families in the United States](#), and 2) [Be Who You Are: Refugee Youth in the United States](#)

4. Farah mentioned concerns for her children about drugs, alcohol, abuse, and TV exposure. What advice can you offer refugee parents about dealing with these issues in the U.S.?
 - From ["Parents. The Anti-Drug,"](#) see substance abuse information in Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, Korean and Vietnamese.
 - From the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), see information on their bilingual (Arabic/English) [substance abuse prevention program for youth](#)
 - From the American Academy of Pediatrics, see [recommendations on Internet and media use with children](#)
 - From the Federal Bureau of Investigation, see [A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety](#)

5. What after-school activities are available in your community for newcomer children? How does your agency help newcomer families to learn about these opportunities for children and teens?
 - o BRYCS' Spotlight, *Promising Practices in After-School Programming for Refugee Youth and Children*
6. What adjustment issues arise for resettled refugees who had higher professional or socio-economic status in their home country? How can refugee service providers help with these adjustment issues, while treating all clients equally?