



## **BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Dina, an Iraqi Mother**

*In February 2008, BRYCS staff spoke with Dina about her life and experiences as an Iraqi parent now living in the United States. Dina has two children; her husband was killed before the family was resettled in the US.*

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### **Family Background**

I came to the U.S. in September of 2007, along with my two sons, ages 11 and 12, and my mother. We were resettled out of Amman, Jordan, where we had lived for about four years.

After the fighting began in Iraq, we moved into my parents' house in Baghdad. We had been living there for several months when we found a threatening letter outside our garage that one of our children would be kidnapped. We didn't know who sent the letter. We were scared and stayed indoors for about a month after that. Then we all left for Jordan. This was September of 2003.

While we were living in Jordan, my father got sick and died. He was 82 years old.

My husband was a businessman, in the import / export business. He would come to Jordan for a month at a time to be with us, and then he would return to Baghdad to sell goods from Jordan. He went back and forth like this for about two years. Then we got a call from someone in Iraq that my husband had been killed. We don't know much about the circumstances—why or how; this happened about two years ago.

### **Jordan**

Life in Jordan was good, but difficult, especially after my husband died. I lost everything, and life became very difficult. I now have a big responsibility without him.

Housing in Jordan is good, as long as you can pay for it. We had an apartment. While my husband was alive, the boys were able to attend private school in Amman, but after he died I had to transfer them to public school because there was no one to pay their school fees. They were treated fine in the public schools, but it is not easy for Iraqis to attend the Jordanian public schools, because the government only funds it for Jordanian citizens. If you have residency, or if you know someone who can help you get in, you can enroll your children in public school.

The Jordanian government did not recognize us as refugees, and we did not receive help from the United Nations, except for resettlement. The resettlement process took about six months.

There were a lot of Iraqis in Jordan, but they seem to only resettle special cases—people with family in the U.S., widows, single mothers with children, or young single girls. On the flight from Amman to the U.S., there were about 25 Iraqis, but we were being resettled all over the country.

I left Jordan with nothing. The only family members I have in the U.S. are my mother and my two sons.

### **Dealing with Husband's Death**

At the beginning I did not tell the boys that their father had died. I said he was in the hospital, in a very dangerous situation. As the days passed, I told them that he had passed away. It was very difficult, because they were quite attached to him.

Here in the U.S., it is very difficult for them on occasions like birthdays, because they wonder why he is not here with them; or they see other children with their fathers, and they wonder how come our dad is gone?

Back home in Iraq, their father had helped to fill their bedroom with toys and things they enjoyed. But here, their rooms do not have much in them, so they notice the difference.

I try to provide everything I can, so they won't feel their father's absence so much, but there is only so much I can do.

### **Religion**

I am Muslim. My family is Sunni, and my husband's family is Shiite.

We talk about these differences now, but before—no. My best friend was Shiite, my neighbor was Shiite...

Iraqis do seem to bring their differences here, but they're not able to say as openly here that they don't like someone else because they believe this or that. But in Iraq, they can simply express their feelings.

I know of a mosque here, but I have not been there yet because it is far away – it takes three buses to get there.

### **Marriage**

I was 23 when I married my husband, and he was 35. We had no prior relationship with each other. He just saw me somewhere, and then he went to my family and proposed.

### **Education**

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, but I did not work outside the home in Iraq. I studied some English in university, and I am studying English through an adult education program here, but I have more of a British accent. I also like to help my children with their homework, and I learn some English from them. I plan to attend community college this summer. I want to study education so that I can get a job working in the schools—I like school so much.

## **Schooling in Iraq and the U.S.**

It is different here: in the U.S. the schools focus more on the students, they value the student; but in Baghdad the education level is higher. In Baghdad they don't value the student, but they teach them very well. Here, children are allowed to use calculators and computers, but in the Middle East you have to use your brain without the help of a mechanical thing, so here it seems the children are not learning to depend on their brain.

My sixth grader is learning things he already learned in elementary school. If he spoke English better, he would be first in his class.

My younger son has had some difficulty with the language, but he is getting lots of help.

## **Making Friends**

My youngest son has had some difficulty making friends at school. When he would try to play with some kids on the playground, they would say, "Here comes the suicide bomber," and they would run away from him. I went to talk with his teacher, and she talked with the student who started this teasing, so now it has stopped.

I just think my son has not met the right person yet. He does not have a best friend yet.

## **Discipline and Reward, Chores and Responsibilities**

Discipline methods in Iraq depend on the family; parents discipline in several ways. Some parents might hit the child; some might send the child to his room. In my case, I might say, "You are not allowed to do this or that." It just depends on the family.

Usually, I will take something away, if I need to discipline my sons. In Jordan, we would go out to play on the weekends, so if they misbehaved we would not go. Here, I may take away computer time or video games, or sometimes I won't talk to them for an hour or two if they misbehave.

Their hygiene and homework are their main responsibilities. They don't have specific chores, but sometimes they'll help me with something if I'm busy—like cleaning their room. But in Iraq, I was home all day to take care of the house, so that's what they are used to.

## **Family in Iraq**

My relatives in Iraq say that life there is still very difficult.

When I talk with them, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is that life is difficult here. This is surprising to them. They assume that once you get out of Iraq everything will be better, so it is shocking for them to hear that life is also difficult here.

## Employment

In Jordan, I didn't work, but through my husband's employment we could live very comfortably. After he died, I was not able to find out what resources he had, so we were left with nothing.

Here I have been able to buy some things, but not as much as what we had before, so this is an adjustment for our family.

I have gone to some job interviews, but I have not found a job yet. I wish I could find a job in a school, but the job interviews I have gone to have been at restaurants or stores.

The reception in the U.S. has been good, but it is a difficult life. I must work, when I did not work before, so that is causing me a lot of tears. In Iraq, most women's lives depended on the men, but here I have my children and my sick mother dependent on me.

## Parenting in the U.S.

In Iraq, I spent more time with my children; now I cannot. It seems that children have too much freedom here. In Iraq, children have limited freedom. They are expected to listen to their parents, to not talk back, but here I see children talking back to their parents and the parents don't do anything about it.

## Taking care of herself and her family

I don't have much time to think about myself, between my mother who is sick and my boys. By the time I am done with everything at the end of the day, I have time to watch a little TV, take a shower and go to bed.

My mother has pernicious anemia, so she has to go to the hospital every other day for about five hours. She has been receiving good treatment at the hospital.

## Values

I want my children to be honest, trustworthy, and to have a positive perspective on life. I want them to do what God would see as the right thing to do.

## Adjusting to the U.S.

The idea of living in America is still very exciting to my sons.

One thing that struck us funny was seeing other boys wearing saggy pants; why would someone wear their pants hanging down?

## Concerns, hopes and dreams

My kids have high hopes that they will be able to complete their education and graduate. My worries are that they won't be able to achieve their dreams. My hopes for them are the same—that they will graduate, and that they will be good men. I came all this way for them, to help them be better people.

## Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies

1. What do you know about the processing of Iraqi refugees for resettlement in the U.S.?
  - a. From the U.S. Department of State / Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration, page on [Iraqi Refugee Protection and Assistance](#)
  - b. From RCUSA,
    - i. Compilation of recent [Summaries, Reports and Backgrounders](#) on Iraqi refugees
    - ii. Compilation of recent [U.S. Government Statements and Policy Announcements](#) related to Iraqi refugees (includes information on “Special Immigrant Visas”)
2. What resources does your agency know of for helping refugees deal with loss and trauma?
  - a. From the Refugee Mental Health Program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “[Points of Wellness](#)” products
  - b. From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, page on [refugee mental health](#)
  - c. *The Refugee Experience: Psychosocial Training Module* (includes [Understanding the Psychosocial Needs of Refugee Children and Adolescents](#) and [Non-western Concepts of Mental Health](#))
3. How would you advise a refugee parent whose child is being bullied at school? What resources could you recommend to area schools to combat bullying of newcomers?
  - a. See page 5 of [Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools](#) for a box on “Resources for Addressing Bullying in Schools”
4. What advice do you give new refugee families about discipline methods in the U.S.?
  - a. BRYCS' resource, [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#)
5. What do you know about the situation of women in Iraq?
  - a. BRYCS' highlighted resources on [Iraqi refugees](#)
  - b. From Human Rights Watch, [Background on Women's Status in Iraq Prior to the Fall of the Saddam Hussein Government](#)
  - c. From Congressional Research Service, [Women in Iraq: Background and Issues for U.S. Policy](#)
6. For what medical care and federal benefits are refugees eligible, and for how long?
  - a. RCUSA Web page “[Post Arrival Assistance and Benefits](#)”
  - b. USCRI [Resource Guide for Serving Refugees with Disabilities](#)