



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Anna, a Russian Mother

On February 13, 2007, Anna, met with BRYCS staff to talk about her life and experiences as a refugee from Russia, now raising a family with her husband in the United States.

Family Background and History

My name is Anna, and I come from Balakovo, in the Saratov region of Russia. I was born in a small village, but from age three I lived with my family in Balokovo, a city of about 300,000 along the Volga River.

It was a difficult decision to come to the U.S., because I was leaving everyone in my family, but my husband could join his brother's family here. I have one brother and two sisters, who remain in Russia. My husband comes from a family of 12 children. This is very large for a Russian family, but Baptist families tend to have more children than average since they do not believe in birth control or abortion. Now family size is changing, with many Baptist families having only about three children. Adoption is also quite popular. In Soviet times, Baptists would not have been allowed to adopt children, but this has changed. For example, my sister-in-law has adopted five children; another sister has adopted three children; and the pastor of our church in Russia just adopted a child.

The Russian Baptist Church

During Soviet times, Baptists were treated as a cult by the government. Although Russia has changed, these attitudes are difficult to change quickly since religion was prohibited for 70 years. The Baptist church I attended in Russia was made up of about 60 families, but here we are part of a Russian Baptist church that has about 600 members and more than 1,200 people attend. The services are in Russian, but there are some English speakers who attend and are helped by an interpreter. The church has been wonderful for us. Other people who are new to the U.S. suffer because they don't have a community like this. We go to the church about five times a week—twice on Sundays, Friday services, for youth choir and adult choir. The church here is very similar to our church in Russia. There are about five other Russian churches in the area.

My mother was raised in a Baptist family, but my father was not Baptist. My father was always opposed to the Baptist church, because he viewed it as a cult, so there was always this friction between them. My mother had stopped attending the Baptist church, but she began attending again after my grandmother died. When I was around 12 years old, my father applied to the authorities to have my siblings and me removed from my mother's care because she would take us to church with her. He wanted the court to prohibit my mother from taking us to church. At the court hearing the officials said they would not remove us from my mother's care because she was a good mother. I think it is also because people in the church were praying for my mother.

My father would also beat my mother when she took us to church. Because of this, my younger siblings are not part of the church. They stopped attending because they knew it would result in a beating for our mother. There were periods when my father would leave to go live with a brother, and then he would come back to us. Over a period of five years he was coming and going. At one point we thought our mother and father were done with each other, but they probably loved each other in some strange way.

Marriage and Family

My father is still opposed to the Baptist church. My husband and I married at age 23, but my father did not want me to marry him because he is Baptist. Now, my father loves my husband very much. My father keeps telling me that there have been three times when I went against his wishes: first, when I studied to become a nurse, but he wanted me to become a rural doctor; second, when I married a Baptist; and third when I came to the U.S. My father is now 72, and we realize that we will probably not see each other again.

My relationship with my husband is completely different from my parents' relationship. My upbringing affected me in many ways. We fight sometimes, but it is different from my parents. We pay much more attention to our children, and with our children we have participated in family activities organized through a social service center near our former home in Russia. We would also go on camping trips with the youth from our church. Many people were surprised that we would take responsibility for so many children on these camping trips.

Housing

My family and I came to the U.S. in September of 2006. We currently live in the home of my husband's brother. They agreed to house us for one month, but we have been there for five months. We are 11 in the household. It is very difficult for all of us to live there, but they are very patient. We have been waiting since October for subsidized housing in a nearby town, but the apartment is being renovated and each month the move-in date gets pushed back further. Now they are saying it will be ready in April, but we think it will get pushed back again. We have also looked at a three-bedroom townhome nearby, but a maximum of six people can live there and our family is seven, so one of our children would have to continue living with my brother-in-law. It would also be a financial struggle for us to afford it.

Children and Schooling

My husband and I have five children—three boys and two girls. Here in school they are in 7th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade, and the two eldest are in 11th grade. Our eldest son is 19 and was born with a mental handicap. I was surprised when he was accepted into the 11th grade here. In Russia, he stayed at home and never went to school. He was eligible for in-home tutoring, but after two years the program staff decided that he was not performing well enough and they discontinued services. I was also surprised that mentally handicapped children attend the same school as other children, since in Russia they are sent to separate schools. His teachers say that he is picking up English words everyday, and he is very happy to be going to school. It is also unusual to be able to attend school until age 21. In Russia, children can only attend school until age 18.

Our other children seem to be adjusting fine. I had not heard them speak English before, but the other day I heard them speaking English to their teacher. There are other Russian speaking youth in their school, but they are also making friends with youth who speak English and Spanish.

It seems like there are less school conferences here than in Russia. Also, in Russia the children would bring home a journal everyday with behavior marks and grades from the teacher, and the parent would have to sign it everyday. Here there is also less homework, and the level of some subjects—like math—is higher in Russia.

Teens, Values

For adolescents, the biggest problem in Russia is army service. For boys this is compulsory at age 18 for two years, so mothers worry about this. Men can still be called to serve up until age 27. Mothers are also concerned about drugs like marijuana and hashish. Here, I am very concerned that my children don't get involved with the wrong people—such as boys who smoke. We are also very much against alcohol, but the environment is very good for us here, since most families we meet through the church. In Russia, parents were planning an end of the year celebration for 9th graders. These parents said they would serve alcohol to the adults, as well as to the youth. We were surprised; we try to protect our children from that. There is a law in Russia that you must be 18 to drink, but it is not enforced much. In Russia the law is 18 for everything—drinking, driving and marrying.

Core values that I want pass on to my children include speaking Russian; that they would keep their eating habits so they don't forget Russian food and the Russian way of eating; but mainly we hope they will continue being part of the church.

Learning English, Employment

My husband and I take English classes every morning for three hours through a public school program. I had some English in Russia, so I am in Level 2. My husband had not studied English before, so he is in Level 1. I enjoy learning English.

My advice to other refugees would be to learn the language. If we have any problems, it is because we don't speak the language.

In Russia I worked as a nurse at a government run health clinic. I started out working in a maternity ward. I remember that I cried when I found out I would be working with babies, because I was so afraid I would drop one. After three years in the maternity ward, I went to work in the health clinic, where I worked for 20 years. I was surprised that here doctors do not make house calls, but in Russia this is very common. Also, here people do not get many injections, but in Russia most medicine is given by injection. My primary responsibility as a nurse was administering injections. Some people would have to come in for weeks in order to get regular injections. I think injections are used more in Russia because they think it is more effective than oral medication.

My husband was an electrician in Russia. When we first arrived in the U.S. we got a job cleaning a factory at night. We began taking the children to work with us—we could get the work done in two hours rather than four—but when the American employer found out, they terminated the contract. That job was perfect for us, because we could study English in the morning and work in the evening. My husband is now applying for a different job.

Childcare, Nutrition in Russia

In Russia mothers are paid to stay home with their children until they are a year-and-a-half old. From one-and-a-half until age seven, children go to "kindergarten," although it is different from American kindergarten. Russian kindergarten is a government run early childhood program that is used like daycare is used in the U.S. When my children were small, kindergarten was inexpensive, though now it is becoming more expensive and difficult to get into. Children go for a full day, usually 9 or 10 hours a day, while their parents work. These programs are run separately from the schools, in a separate building, with separate oversight and specialized training.

Children begin potty training around one year old. By one-and-a-half to two years, most Russian children are potty trained. Breastfeeding is encouraged. If a mother is not able to breastfeed, there are breastmilk banks. People would only use formula if they did not have their own milk or did not have access to a breastmilk bank. Babies are generally breastfed for about one year.

Hot, home cooked meals are common to Russians. My children are used to this, so they won't eat school food. The first thing they do when they come home from school is to eat. They are not used to packing a cold lunch for school; they want something hot. In Russia, lunch is the big meal of the day. Children would be given porridge in the morning at school, and then a large meal for lunch.

We have all gained weight here. We eat more meat, there is more variety of food, and also we don't move as much. In Russia, you walk everywhere—especially since we did not have a car. Here, I was surprised that you don't see people walking. We used to eat a lot of fish because we lived along the Volga River, but we've been told that people don't eat as much fish here.

Since we have a large family, we expected the children to help with responsibilities at home. My oldest daughter has been cooking since she was eight years old. And since our oldest son was mentally handicapped, we would leave some of the younger children with her, beginning when she was about eight also. The children would also help tend our summer garden.

Discipline and Reward

For discipline in Russia, small children would stand in the corner, or they would be spanked with a belt. I know that corporal punishment is not in favor in the U.S., but God's word says that this is permitted—not severe beatings, but corporal punishment. Our children figured out even before we came that corporal punishment is not favored in the U.S., and they said that once we got to the U.S. we could not use physical punishment with them anymore. Affection is shown through lots of hugs and kisses. Russians are affectionate. Children love to have their parents say something nice to them.

My husband is more strict. I am more easy going, but they seem to listen to him more. He is encouraging me to be more strict; the children behave better when we are more strict. Our parenting patterns are different because our families were different. His family was more strict than mine.

Care for Disabled Son

In Russia, my mother would help to care for our son who is handicapped, but when she died my father refused to help because he thought our son should be in an institution. So sometimes when I worked I had to leave him home alone. For a long time I wanted to quit my job because I had no peace of mind about leaving my son alone, but since I worked in healthcare, I got paid more reliably than my husband, and we could not afford for me to quit my job.

My son has a passion for flooding toilets; one time he flooded our neighbor's house; another time he made a hole in a wall of the house. His intentions are good but he just doesn't understand, so it was hard to leave him alone. When my oldest daughter was in 8th grade, she had to stay home from school for a while due to scoliosis of the spine. She was tutored at home and had to sit or lay down all day. I also thought about quitting my job at this point, but the children all helped out.

People told me that it would be hard to move here, but it has been wonderful for my disabled son to go to school. It is a gift. I am surprised at the patience of the teaching staff. I thought they would get tired of him, but I am impressed with the staff. They have even made an effort for him to find work. Two job possibilities did not work out, but one job—packaging things—is still a possibility.

I hope for my children that everything will be all right. The two girls want to go on for higher education. My eldest daughter now wants to be a pediatrician. My middle son just wants to start working. He just turned 16 and he loves cars. We did not have a car in Russia, but here we do, so he keeps begging to learn how to drive. We will figure out our housing situation first, and then think about letting him learn to drive.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. How would you work with Anna's family on their housing issues? What housing resources are available in your community for a family of this size?
 - Resource: [Mercy Housing](#)
 - Contact: Scott Robbins, (303) 830-3449
 - ScottR@mercyhousing.org
2. What resources or training programs might be available to help Anna re-enter the healthcare profession in the U.S.?
 - Resource / Example: International Institute of Minnesota, Medical Careers for New Americans, www.iimn.org
3. How could your agency connect or collaborate with the Russian Baptist church of which Anna speaks? How does your agency work with ethnic houses of worship?

4. What issues are raised by parents taking their children to work with them, as mentioned by Anna? How can employment counselors address these issues before they arise, and how can they respond after the fact?
 - Resource: Refugee Works, the National Center for Refugee Employment and Self-Sufficiency, www.refugeeworks.org
 - Contact: Cheryl Hamilton, (410) 230-2751
 - chamilton@refugeeworks.org
5. What services would you seek out on behalf of this family's mentally disabled son? What relevant resources are available in your community to assist this family and their son?
 - Resources: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' Refugees with Disabilities Technical Assistance Services;
 - Contact: Dawn Blankenship, (202) 347-3507, x 3006
 - dblankenship@uscridc.org
 - Refugee families like Anna's, that are resettling in the U.S. with children with disabilities under the age of 21, should contact their local school district to enroll their children.