

## Section 2: Refugee Serving Agencies and the Child Welfare System

An East African family resettled in Texas left six younger children in the care of their high-school-age daughter, as was the custom prior to coming to the U.S. A three-year-old child slipped out of the family's apartment unnoticed and was found wandering around the neighborhood alone. A neighbor contacted the local child protective services, which removed all seven children from the home and placed them in foster care. The refugee agency helping the family engaged in vigorous advocacy with CPS, explaining the refugee family's cultural background and experiences. Due to advocacy by the refugee serving agency, the children were ultimately returned home and the parents were not charged with neglect.<sup>15</sup>

### *Helping Clients Who Are Reported to CPS*

Some refugee resettlement caseworkers have been contacted by clients after they have been reported to CPS for child maltreatment. Refugee resettlement caseworkers can play an important role as a cultural go-between for newly arrived refugees. The refugee family will likely feel confused, scared and angry, while the CPS worker may feel equally confused about the refugee family. Refugee resettlement workers can carry out several critical functions such as assisting the CPS worker in securing an interpreter for the family, providing information or training to the CPS worker on the newcomer's culture, and/or explaining CPS procedures to the refugee family. These actions can facilitate a more accurate understanding of the children's safety and the family's situation. For example, a CPS worker who understands that corporal punishment is traditionally accepted in a refugee's culture of origin may recommend parenting education so the parent can learn other discipline strategies, rather than a child's removal from the home.

Misunderstandings due to language or cultural differences can and do occur in CPS cases; at the same time, refugee families are capable of child maltreatment, especially when traditional practices are compared against current U.S. interpretations of abuse and neglect. Refugee resettlement caseworkers can play an important role in explaining each side to the other.

Resettlement caseworkers should remember that they are working with the whole family unit, not merely the parents. At times, the caseworker may meet separately with the children in the family, apart from the adults in the household, in order to check in about their adjustment to the U.S., school, neighborhood, etc.

Refugee families typically consider children their most valued treasure, representing all of their hopes and dreams for the future. To survive the chaos and tumult of war, persecution and displacement, only to lose their children to child welfare workers in their country of refuge would be a cruel irony, but this is unfortunately a real fear for many refugee families. Resettlement workers can play an important role in helping refugee families gain access to services in the U.S. that can help them stay together and thrive in their new country.

## ***Building Bridges between Refugees and the Child Welfare System***

The best way to understand your local child welfare system is to connect with it. Developing relationships between refugee serving agencies and the child welfare system can help refugee agencies to better understand local resources and supports available to help clients, while also helping child welfare agencies to better understand refugee groups in their community. Building these bridges can help to create more positive encounters between refugee families and their local child welfare systems.

Listed below are some concrete recommendations for developing connections with your local child welfare system:

- **Orient** new refugees to U.S. parenting practices/expectations, especially regarding child discipline and supervision; invite local child welfare staff to participate
- **Meet** periodically with representatives from your local child welfare system and representatives from local refugee groups or ethnic associations; this may be most effective and efficient with a coalition of refugee serving agencies
- **Share** cultural and background information about new refugee groups with child welfare agencies in your community or state
- **Organize** a “cross-service training” between refugee serving agencies and child welfare agencies; details can be found at:  
<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0701>.
- **Encourage** direct contact between refugee clients and child welfare employees to break down barriers and create goodwill before problems arise
- Overall, look for opportunities to **collaborate and coordinate** between child welfare and refugee resettlement systems; including other service systems—such as mental health, education and health care—may also benefit refugee clients.

## ***References***

*A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System*

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1682>

*A Family's Guide to the Child Welfare System*

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0983>

*Child Abuse and Neglect: General Packet Information*

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2891>

*Keeping Families Together and Safe: A Primer on the Child Protection—Housing Connection*

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2889>

*Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect*

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0207>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by Katie Richardson, Case Manager, World Relief, Nashville, TN

<sup>2</sup> For more on *parens patriae* and CAPTA, see: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Administration for Children and Families; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Children's Bureau; Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. (2003, June 25). *The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Including Adoption Opportunities & The Abandoned Orphans Assistance Act, As Amended by The Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003* (p. 4).

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1504>

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by Susan Oslund, Social Work Supervisor, International Social Service—USA, Baltimore, MD.

<sup>4</sup> For a more complete summary of federal child welfare legislation, visit:

[http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/federal/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/federal/)

<sup>5</sup> Some identifying information has been removed from this text for the sake of privacy. Copied from: Nardy Baeza Bickel, *Student from West Africa finishes third grade*, 7 August 2006, The Associated Press.

<sup>6</sup> See: The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Office for Children and Families (2005). *Child Abuse and Neglect: A Reference for Medical Professionals (Second Edition)*.

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2918>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Njeri Njoroge, MSW, Intake & Investigation Program Specialist, DFPS-CPS State Office, Austin, TX (August 15, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Statutory rape refers to sexual activity considered illegal because of a person's age. Each state has its own laws regarding the age that a person can legally consent to sexual activity. For information on laws governing sexual contact visit: <http://www.sexlaws.org/>

<sup>9</sup> For a more complete description of these responsibilities, go to: "Keeping Families Together and Safe: A Primer on the Child Protection—Housing Connection" p. 5-8,

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2889>

<sup>10</sup> Information provided by Mary Flores, Director Refugee Services, St. Vincent Catholic Charities, Lansing, MI.

<sup>11</sup> For more on guardianship see: BRYCS (2003). *Guardianship Fact Sheet for Staff Assisting Refugee Families*. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0527>, and BRYCS (2006). *Guardianship Information by State*.

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1559>

<sup>12</sup> This section summarized from: Sue Badeau. *Child Welfare and The Courts*.

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4613>

<sup>13</sup> BRYCS (2003). *Guardianship Fact Sheet for Staff Assisting Refugee Families*.

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0527>

<sup>14</sup> From <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/faq/esa/flsa/026.htm>. For more on child labor issues, visit:

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/youthlabor/index.htm> or <http://www.youthrules.dol.gov/>

<sup>15</sup> BRYCS (2005). *Case Study of Child Welfare Interventions in Refugee Families in Texas*.

<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1556>