Somali Bantu Refugees: Cultural Considerations for Social Service Providers

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BRYCS – Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services
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The Somali Bantu - background

- The first of 12,000 refugees began arriving to the U.S. in spring 2003; arrivals have been delayed so that only about one-quarter are here.

- History of severe oppression and discrimination in native Somalia, so that few have formal education, are literate in own language, or have exposure to Western culture and lifestyles prior to arrival.
- 60% of these Bantu are under 17, and 31% are under the age of 6 (IOM). Families have an average of 4-8 children.

- Most Somali Bantu over 15 received up to 80 hours of cultural orientation from IOM in the refugee camps, including “mothers’ classes” that address parenting issues in the United States (helpful, but just the beginning...
Cultural Issues
Cultural Differences in Childrearing
Six Dimensions*

- Obedience
- Responsibility
- Nurturance
- Achievement
- Self-reliance
- Independence

Role of Extended Family & Community

- Helps with child care
- Watches out for children’s safety, disciplines children
- Helps resolve family disputes
- Provides advice and support
Parental Authority and Discipline

- Children expected to obey adults, have respect for elders
- Parents use range of discipline, including physical
- Children disciplined by parents, other family members, teachers, community members
- Parents’ authority reinforced by larger community
Responsibility in the home...

- Children expected to assist with housework, chores, and caring for younger siblings (especially girls)
- Teenagers expected to work to help support the family
Childrearing Issues in the U.S.
Issues so far...

- Some families feel isolated, miss family members, Bantu community
- Reports of unsupervised children, especially preschoolers
- Need for tutoring for school-aged children, especially for older teens
- Parents report confusion over their ability to discipline children; assume no physical punishment is allowed, and so become permissive
Lessons Learned
Lessons Learned...

*Intensive involvement with families:*

- Use volunteers (“Adopt a Family”)
- Link with previously arrived Somali Bantu
- Somali community eager to help in many sites, monitor relations with Somali Bantu
- Local Mosques, churches, other community and civic organizations
- School systems for after-school and summer programs, volunteers, tutors, parenting
- Formal & informal parenting classes
- Coordinate, use existing programs
Lessons Learned…

*Parenting classes should be:*

- Intensive and repetitive
- Empowering: Maximize parents’ role in defining problems, developing solutions, trying out new behaviors
- Educational: Parents need to know and understand U.S. child protection laws
- Providing effective and appropriate alternatives to physical punishment
- Use visual, concrete examples
- Strengths-based and integrated with cultural values and concepts
BRYCS Offers…

- **Parenting Services Training**: technical capacity-building for parenting programs

- **Cross-Service Trainings**: brings together public child welfare, resettlement, MAA’s, the schools, other agencies to develop ways to better integrate services

- **Information & Referral Service**: 2004 pilot site in Washington State
BRYCS Resources....

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