



SUMMER 2009 SPOTLIGHT

Strengths-Based Programming: The Example of Somali Refugee Youth

The main challenges facing Somali youth as they try to integrate into mainstream society include difficulty with the U.S. education system, maintaining parental and family relationships that are supportive, managing and understanding the multiple identities and roles they are required to integrate into their lives, developing skills that increase their employability, and experiencing systemic discrimination. [1]

Although the above quote from a Somali leader in the Minneapolis area refers specifically to Somali refugee youth, these comments reflect the challenges experienced by many refugee youth as they adjust to life in the U.S. today. To provide an in-depth look at how strengths-based programming can address such challenges for refugee youth, this Spotlight focuses on the example of Somali refugees. Challenges and strengths shared by Somali youth are highlighted, together with current examples of strengths-based programs for Somali youth from across the country.

Somali Refugees

Located on the East Coast of Africa, Somalia has a rich and ancient history. The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims and are predominantly pastoral nomads and agro-pastoralists. Starting in the early 1970s, Somalia developed a growing urban and highly educated population. However, after the civil war and clan warfare erupted in 1991, the Somali government collapsed and the country was left in anarchy, and the economic and education systems were devastated. Many Somalis fled their country at that time, only to spend many years in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Since 1991, it is estimated that over 100,000 Somali refugees have resettled to the United States, with the majority now living in Minneapolis, Minnesota and in other sizable communities in cities such as Atlanta, GA; Columbus, OH; Denver, CO; Nashville, TN; Portland, ME; San Diego, CA; and Seattle, WA.[3] The [Somali Family Care Network](#), a national non-profit serving all Somali Community Based Organizations (SCBOs), currently works with a [national network](#) of 60 agencies, providing comprehensive capacity building and technical assistance.

Somalis now comprise the largest African refugee group in this country. [2]

Somali Refugee Youth: Challenges in Adjustment

Although most Somali refugee youth adjust remarkably well, a recent study of Somali youth in the Twin Cities area[4] noted a number of factors that may complicate adjustment for these youth, including:

- (1) **Forced migration experiences**—including traumatic separation from family members, direct experiences of violence and threats to their own survival, physical deprivation, and exile from their homeland—affect their current well-being and the degree of family support available to them. This is particularly true for children who lost one or both parents and are currently living with extended kin.[5]
- (2) **Poverty** affects refugee children and their families. Refugees typically flee with “only the shirts on their backs”. Since many parents and guardians have limited literacy, English, and urban work skills, these families may struggle at first in low-income communities, with parents working long hours as they establish themselves.
- (3) Somali youth have **limited access to recreational and other community programs** that can occupy them in constructive activities after school, strengthen their social and academic skills, provide them with positive adult and peer support, and offer needed preparation for college or the workforce. Barriers to these programs typically include language, cultural differences, transportation, cost, and the knowledge that such services are available to them.

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- (4) **Lack of resources in the schools** for Somali students include appropriate academic assessment and placement, tutoring, bilingual teachers, and orientation of school staff and other students to the background of Somali refugees. Teasing and bullying due to ethnic and cultural differences has been reported as a common experience for Somali school students. Discouragement regarding school achievement and feeling different can result in truancy. These circumstances, as well as the need to assist their families, can lead to dropping out of school.
- (5) **Family conflict** due to cultural adjustment, in addition to other family stressors has, in some cases, led to **homelessness** or **gang involvement** for youth. This study identified three distinct Somali youth gangs in the Twin Cities area, two of which were engaged in crime and violence. At the same time, it also noted that only 1% of gangs in the Twin Cities are comprised of Somali youth.

In a recent study of the adjustment of Somali youth in Massachusetts and Maine, Dr. Heidi Ellis and colleagues identified “alienation” at the family, school, and community levels as key to Somali youth adjustment, and have developed a community-based program, with meaningful Somali community participation, in order to help ensure Somali youth have the support and safety they need to thrive. [7]

Protective Factors: Somali Refugee Youth

While several research studies have documented the difficulties facing Somali refugee youth,[6] few have focused specifically on refugee youth strengths.[8] Fortunately, more and more funders and those developing programs for refugee youth are recognizing the value of a strengths-based approach, such as positive youth development.[9]

More recently, researchers have identified “**protective factors**” for American youth – circumstances that promote healthy behaviors and reduce the chance that youth will engage in risky behaviors, such as substance abuse or crime, including gang violence.[10] In fact, researchers in the immigrant and refugee field have concluded that:

“To promote achievement among youth from various ethnic groups, programs that focus on youth strengths and potential rather than concentrating on preventing specific negative outcomes have been found to be more successful.”[11]

A new Federal Website devoted to youth, www.FindYouthInfo.gov, provides information such as research-based risk and protective factors, a list of effective youth programs, and federal resources for youth programming.

Growing evidence supports a number of circumstances that make achievement and healthy behavior more likely for American youth.[12] The section below integrates selected protective factors for youth detailed at www.findyouthinfo.gov with research on Somali and other refugee youth, and describes how these protective factors may apply to refugee youth.[13] The final section on strengths-based programming describes selected programs serving Somali youth that support these protective factors.

Protective factors for youth[14] include the following:

- **Family Attachment and Stability:** Positive and stable family relationships are key to youth adjustment. The effects of war, forced migration, and acculturation, as noted in the Twin Cities study, irrevocably changes these relationships. However, the family is central to Somali identity, and a powerful sense of mutual attachment and motivation to maintain positive family relationships tend to be among refugees’ greatest strengths. For teenagers, maintaining communication and mutual understanding between youth and parents, since youth tend to acculturate more quickly, is often the key to success. Finding the balance between maintaining traditional family values and enabling sufficient flexibility to adapt to this new culture can be challenging, however. Somali families can benefit from community resources, such as religious leaders and elders for traditional problem-solving, as well as access to other community services.
- **Social Skills:** Building social skills is a part of successful youth development; however, refugee youth need to develop social skills that are appropriate for Somali culture, while also learning social skills that will help them be successful at school and in the larger U.S. society. Research on refugee and immigrant youth has shown that youth who are “bicultural” are most likely to have the support and the skills they need to succeed in their new country.
- **Pro-social Relationships:** Supportive relations with pro-social adults and peers are important protective factors for all youth. In addition to this pro-social support, Somali youth will benefit from role models who can help them bridge the two cultures they live in, by showing them how they can keep their ethnic identity without rejecting the positive aspects of U.S. culture, and how they can adapt and be successful in this country without losing their sense of ethnic pride and connection to their roots.

- **The Role of Religion:** Islamic faith and identity are very much integrated with Somali culture and can be a strength for Somali youth. In fact, a recent study of family strength from the Somali perspective notes that, “*Religion was the starting point of family structure and the center of family organization. Religious traditions provided family members with priorities of values for promoting family unity within strong families.*” [15]
- **Academic Engagement/Achievement:** Engagement in school and academic success tend to be highly valued by refugee families who often make tremendous sacrifices to support their children’s success in school. As noted previously, schools can also be challenging for refugee youth, especially those who arrive at an older age with less formal education, and those who experience discrimination. These refugee youth can benefit from additional support, such as mentoring, tutoring, and advocacy.
- **Community Resources:** Access to community resources, including ethnic community support as well as mainstream services can make a tremendous difference to refugee youth. The ethnic community can provide support, a sense of identity, and can reinforce parental values and expectations for good behavior and achievement. Having access to the services and resources of the larger society can increase practical support for families and provides an avenue for long-term refugee youth success and integration into U.S. society.

Strengths-Based Programming for Somali Refugee Youth

To learn how some programs across the country are helping develop and strengthen these protective factors for Somali refugee youth, BRYCS spoke with a range of programs serving Somali youth across the country. These programs support the above protective factors in complex and interactive ways.

Based in Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs), these programs employ bilingual, bicultural staff who can engage the youth as well as their parents or guardians. When programs mainly engage and focus on youth, they can sometimes inadvertently increase the “acculturation gap” between parent and child, since youth tend to acculturate more quickly than their parents. ECBOs are well-positioned to involve family members in their youth programs, as well as celebrating their heritage, and can thereby strengthen family relationships and youth adjustment at the same time.

The ECBO staff act as role models, and are successful U.S. professionals as well as rooted in their communities. By recruiting young people from local colleges as mentors and tutors, they help build these youth’s pro-social relationships and support their academic success.

In addition to being based in their own ethnic communities, these programs partner with mainstream youth-serving organizations, such as the Girl Scouts and local colleges, helping refugee youth access these services and providing a “bridge” to success in the larger society.

Afterschool and Leadership Development Programs

1. East African Community Services (EACS)

Location: Seattle, Washington

Contact: eastafricans.org; (206) 721-1119

<u>Program:</u>	EACS Afterschool Program
<u>Serving:</u>	Somali, Oromo, Eritrean, Yemeni children in Kindergarten – 8 th Grade
<u>Description:</u>	EACS operates an afterschool program 4 days a week. They have 120 students registered, with daily participation of around 55 students. The program has partnered with an English Language Learning specialist as a consultant and mentor, who has helped them conceptualize the program. The 3 primary goals of the program are: 1) That every student will know who they are (versus how the world defines them); 2) That every student will be functionally comfortable with multiplication facts; 3) That every student will improve their understanding of and ability to manipulate sentence structure.
<u>Partnerships:</u>	EACS has an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer as their Outreach Coordinator and recruits local college student volunteers through Service Learning programs. In addition, they partnered with the Atlantic Street Family Center and the Seattle Public Schools to organize a “Family Math Night” with students and families from the Afterschool program.
<u>Challenges:</u>	Running the program on a very limited budget and recruiting enough volunteers.

Program: EACS Peer Leadership Development Program

Serving: East African youth ages 15-21

Description: The Peer Leadership Development Program serves 15-20 teenagers through relationship and leadership building. Youth are encouraged to volunteer in the EACS afterschool program, in order to develop job skills and fulfill school service learning requirements; in exchange youth participants are offered training, advanced homework assistance, mentorship, and activities.

Partnerships: The Peer Leadership Development Program is funded through an agreement with Seattle Housing Authority.

Challenges: Consistent teen participation.

2. Somali Women and Children's Alliance (SWCA)

Location: Columbus, Ohio

Contact: www.swaca.org; (614) 473-9999

Program: SWCA Afterschool Program

Serving: Somali children between Kindergarten and 12th grade

Description: SWCA operates two Afterschool Programs: the "No Child Left Behind" program is funded by the Columbus School system and serves around 45 children on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. In a second site, SWCA runs an afterschool program on Monday and Wednesday, funded by Franklin County and serving around 83 children. Despite different funding sources, both programs are similar, focusing on reading, math, and the resource room which includes a computer lab and a library. Some children come to both programs, since they operate on different days. The program has been in operation for four years.

Partnerships: The after school program utilizes service-learning volunteers from Ohio State University and Otterbein College. SWCA provides orientation to the students, and also asks student volunteers for feedback and suggestions about the program at the completion of their volunteer experience.

Challenges: Transportation is an issue; some families carpool or send children with neighbors or friends. Funding is difficult given the economic downturn. Some children require one-on-one tutoring, if they have entered the U.S. with little or not educational background and are placed in school according to their age rather than their ability. However, most students are able to catch up over time.

Program: SWCA Leadership Development Program

Serving: The Leadership Development Program serves ten Somali youth between 8th grade and 12th grade.

Description: The Leadership Development group meets once every two weeks over a four-month period. The program brings in mentors, college students and adult professionals to talk with Somali teens about how to be successful.

Challenges: This program is unfunded. SWCA saw the need for this type of programming and they are developing their own curriculum as they go along. While current college students can serve as good examples for Somali high school students, it is difficult to get college students involved due to their hectic schedules.

3. **Somali Community Center of Colorado (SCCC)**

Location: Denver, Colorado

Contact: www.somaliamerican.org; (303) 369-5998

<u>Program:</u>	SCCC Afterschool Program
<u>Serving:</u>	Somali-American children between 1 st and 7 th grade
<u>Description:</u>	SCCC serves about 15-20 students two days a week afterschool (Monday and Wednesday). Families provide their own transportation to the program. Retired professionals and college students from the community volunteer as tutors with the program. SCCC also hopes to offer a more intensive summer tutoring program for recently arrived middle-school aged refugee students between 7 th and 10 th grades.
<u>Partnerships:</u>	SCCC partners with Denver University to involve college students as volunteer tutors with the program.
<u>Challenges:</u>	Transportation; sustainable funding and the lack of a grantwriter; parental illiteracy resulting in an inability to understand notices sent home from school.

4. **Somali Community Center of Nashville (SCCN)**

Location: Nashville, Tennessee

Contact: www.sccnashville.org; 615-366-6868

<u>Program:</u>	SCCN Afterschool Program
<u>Serving:</u>	Somali youth between 5 th – 12 th grade
<u>Description:</u>	SCCN operates an afterschool program 2 days per week (Wednesday and Friday), offering after school tutoring with a bilingual Somali-speaking teacher for three hours each session. The program serves 15-20 students per session, with about 9 additional students receiving supplemental educational services.
<u>Challenges:</u>	Consistent participation, especially when transportation is an issue; expectation by some parents that sending children to school is sufficient; students who are placed according to age rather than ability.

Programs Serving Somali Girls

1. East African Women's Center of the Confederation of Somali Communities in Minnesota

Location: Cedar Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Contact: www.cscmn.org; (612) 338-5282

Program: Girls' Group

Serving: East African girls between the ages of 5 and 10

Description: The organization is neighborhood-based and partners with a local college, providing assistance, role models and a path to success for Somali girls. Up to 15 girls come to the Center four days each week, three hours each day, for afterschool tutoring, homework help, and socialization. The Girls' Group of the East African Women's Center provides a safe and welcoming space afterschool for elementary school age girls to gather and do homework. Girls also learn to sew, cook, and garden, and they participate in arts and crafts activities, play sports, and go on field trips. To participate in Girls' Group, girls' mothers are currently required to participate in monthly parents' meetings and volunteer with the girls at least twice each month. Because mothers are requesting more help with parenting in America, the Center will also offer a multiple-week parenting class in the Fall.

Partnerships: Young mothers from the East African community pair up with volunteers and work-study students from Augsburg College to provide cross-cultural supervision and tutoring. The girls from the Center also participate in Augsburg College's community garden.

2. Minnesota African Women's Association (MAWA)

Location: Brooklyn Park, New Hope, Golden Valley, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota

Contact: www.mayanet.org; (612) 588-7972

Program: African Girls Initiative for Leadership and Empowerment (AGILE)

Serving: African girls – primarily Liberian, Somali, Ethiopian, and Oromo – ages 8 to 18.

Description: MAWA coordinates seven afterschool clubs for middle school and high school age girls of African descent. The clubs meet once a week for 1.5 – 2.5 hours, gathering in schools, libraries, or apartment building community rooms. Girls are grouped by age, with separate groups for 8-12 year olds, 13-16 year olds, and 16-18 year olds. They currently serve over 110 girls, with groups ranging in size from 12 to 20 girls. The clubs focus on building self-esteem, reducing isolation, and helping girls with goal setting, particularly around education. They involve college students of African descent, including one current facilitator who came through the program herself and is now a university student. MAWA has developed its own curriculum, relying on "best practices" identified by the McKnight Foundation, and culturally issues.

Partnerships: They have partnered with the Girl Scouts to tour historically black colleges. Girls have also participated in "Girls Rock the Capitol", a youth advocacy day at the MN State Capitol. MAWA utilizes interns from area colleges, including the Univ. of Minnesota and Macalester College.

Challenges: Transportation is a big issue, and program staff find themselves having to provide transportation for participants. Some girls have to balance household demands with program participation. Sometimes parents or guardians will deny participation as a form of punishment, since the girls enjoy coming.

3. Sauti Yetu Center for African Women

Location: Bronx, NY

Contact: www.sautiyetu.org; 718-665-2486

<u>Program:</u>	Girls' Empowerment & Leadership Initiative (GELI)
<u>Serving:</u>	African immigrant female high school students in New York City, between ages 14-21.
<u>Description:</u>	Girls' Empowerment & Leadership Initiative (GELI) of Sauti Yetu Center for African Women helps African immigrant girls to discover their own voice through social theater, public speaking and leadership development, and receive academic support through mentor "coaches". Sauti Yetu facilitates 2-5 groups around New York City, using a combination of empowerment (leadership and identity development) and coaching (tutoring, mentoring). Groups last for about 9 weeks; most girls come from Muslim households, including participants from Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone. The agency is developing its own curriculum, which they plan on making available to other programs as a toolkit and training in 2010. They incorporate poetry, audio-recording, and theater into the groupwork.
<u>Partnerships:</u>	In order to overcome language barriers, they have partnered with a Theater Arts Consultant to incorporate acting into the program. Girls can communicate their feelings with one another through playacting, despite different native languages and limited English ability.
<u>Challenges:</u>	Diversity is a strength of the program, but also a challenge in working across different languages and cultures. Participants have many demands on their time, between school expectations, jobs, and helping their families. The coaching component, through mentor relationships, does not occur at a fixed place and time, which provides flexibility but also can make consistency a challenge. There are numerous transportation options in New York City, but it can be a challenge for girls to figure out how to use subways and buses.

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⁹ BRYCS (2006). *Growing up in a New Country: A Positive Youth Development Toolkit for Working with Refugees and Immigrants*.

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¹⁰ The [FindYouthInfo.gov](http://www.findyouthinfo.gov) website provides Federally-developed interactive tools and other resources to help youth-serving organizations and community partnerships. Go to http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/cf_pages/programtool-factors.cfm for their list of research-based protective factors.

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¹² Ibid, Note 4.

¹³ Ibid, Note 7.

¹⁴ The bibliography for these research-based protective factors can be found at: http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/cf_pages/programtool-factorsbibliography.htm

¹⁵ D. Lynn Heitritter (1999). *Somali Family Strength: Working in the Communities*, page 4.