Child Abuse Issues with Refugee Populations

PART I:
Recognizing Suspected Child Maltreatment in Culturally Diverse Refugee Families

by Lisa Aronson Fontes, Ph.D.
Technical Assistance Consultant
Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services

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National Technical Assistance Provider on Refugee Child Welfare for the Office of Refugee Resettlement

Goals

- Prevent the need for child welfare interventions through refugee family and community strengthening strategies – strengths-based approaches
- Improve access to appropriate and effective interventions when needed by promoting collaboration between refugee and public child welfare services at local, state, and national levels

**BRYCS provides national technical assistance to organizations serving refugees so that all newcomer children and youth can reach their potential.**
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National Technical Assistance on refugees and child welfare

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BRYCS Webinar Series on Child Abuse & Neglect

• **Today** we’ll cover how to recognize child maltreatment in refugee families, including types of maltreatment and cultural issues

• **Part II** will take place Wednesday, March 24, 12:30 – 1:30 pm, and will cover in detail
  - Mandated reporting
  - Working with Child Protective Services

• BRYCS Webinars will be posted and available for viewing at any time via our Web site
Your trainer for this Webinar is
BRYCS Consultant and Expert on Child Abuse and Culture

Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD
www.LisaFontes.com
BRYCS Webinar Series on Child Abuse & Neglect

GOALS:

1. To facilitate the efforts of refugee resettlement staff to help orient refugee families to U.S. child protection laws and to recognize and address potential child maltreatment

2. To help refugee resettlement agencies understand and conform to the legal requirements around reporting of suspected child maltreatment

3. To facilitate collaborations with child protective services that assure child safety while protecting families’ rights to their cultural integrity
It’s not easy to balance

Legal obligation to report child abuse and the desire to keep children safe

The desire to protect refugee families from unnecessary disruptions
Basics of U.S. Law

- Parents have a right to raise children as they choose—and an obligation to care for children’s health and wellbeing.

- When parents fail to protect children or harm them, the government steps in.

- Federal child welfare statutes establish minimum standards of child protection, which are then implemented by State statutes; definitions may vary slightly by state.
State by State Variations

- Definitions of child abuse vary a little by state
- For example, in one state truancy (missing school) is considered a form of neglect, in another, psychological maltreatment, and in a third, in its own category
- For more information about how your state defines various forms of child abuse, go to:
  http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/
Child Maltreatment

- **Child Maltreatment**: All caretaker behaviors that harm children or leave them at risk of harm—including:
  - ✔ Neglect
  - ✔ Psychological maltreatment
  - ✔ Physical abuse
  - ✔ Sexual abuse

- Severe forms of abuse and neglect may result in death or serious physical harm
- Less severe forms can damage children’s sense of themselves and affect their future
Child Maltreatment

- Children with special needs are at higher risk.
- Abuse and neglect are usually perpetrated by caretakers (including caretakers in residential programs).
- Child maltreatment deprives children of their childhood.
- Certain forms of abuse are illegal, and can sometimes result in a child’s removal from the home and/or a caretaker’s arrest.
What Is Neglect?

- Children who are neglected do not have what they need for their bodies and minds to develop in a healthy way.
- Neglect is usually chronic but can be one extreme incident.
- Focus is not on parental intent but rather on whether children have what they need.
Neglect May Include Failing or Refusing to:

- Supervise a child adequately, leaving a child at risk of harm
- Protect a child from harm inflicted by others

*In some states, abandonment is considered a form of neglect. In other states, it’s in a separate category.*

*For parents who are used to a village raising a child, the idea of abandonment may mean something completely different.*
Physical Neglect

Children who have been physically neglected have been deprived of basic essentials such as

- Food, clothing, shelter, hygiene
- Medical, psychological or dental care
- Supervision

Of course, many refugee children experienced deprivation before their arrival.
Poverty and Physical Neglect

• Often occur together
• Can be related to challenges families encounter in providing for their children in a new land
• If children do not have what they need, they are neglected according to the law - regardless of parents’ intentions, abilities or inabilities to provide for them.
• However, parental intent will count in terms of intervention chosen.
Possible Signs of Neglect – Complications with Refugee Children

- Frequently missing school
- Begging or stealing food or money
- Lacking needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Consistently dirty and severe body odor
- Dressing inappropriately for the weather
Possible Signs of Neglect – Complications with Refugee Children

- Stating there is no one at home to provide care
- Hoarding food, overeating, eating in a peculiar way
- Showing signs of delayed growth (failure to thrive)
- Untreated medical issues
Neglect in Refugee Families

• Remember, your role is not to determine if neglect is taking place (CPS will investigate).

• If you are a mandated reporter, you are required to report suspicions to CPS (Part II will cover reporting in-depth).

• You can advocate and work with other organizations to improve access to basic needs, including food, housing, medical care, etc.
Psychological abuse is repeated or extreme assaults on a child’s self-esteem, mental health, or social development by someone who is in a caretaking role.

Abuse may be determined by impact as well as by the act itself.
Types of Psychological Abuse

Rejection
Isolation
Ignoring
Corruption
Exploitation
Terrorization
In Many States, Psychological Abuse Includes Emotional Neglect

- The child lacks positive attention, comfort, and support when upset.
- The child is regularly ignored, rejected, and pushed away.

*Emotional neglect causes some young people to withdraw and others to cling.*
Psychological Abuse

• Difficult to measure since people parent well in so many different ways in different cultures!

• Rarely the sole allegation of maltreatment
Possible Examples of Psychological Abuse

- Parent refuses to talk to child for an extended period as punishment
- Child forced to wear rags or clothes of opposite sex as punishment
- Girl’s head shaved as punishment
- Child shamed for “normal” childhood activities such as playing, eating, drinking, sleeping, using the toilet
What is Physical Abuse?

- **Physical abuse**: *intentional* acts by a caretaker *that result in injury*, such as
  - Grabbing, pushing, hitting, kicking, punching, twisting ears, pushing, shaking and burning
  - Interfering with a child’s breathing
  - Knowingly inflicting unnecessary medical treatment

- **Injury**: a mark, a lasting sore place, any injury to face, pattern of injuries, injuries in various states of healing
Physically Restraining Children May Be a Form of Physical Abuse

- Tying up with ropes, chains or other means
- Locking in room or apartment
- Grabbing and restraining harshly
Genital cutting of any kind is likely to be a felony assault with implications far beyond child abuse (exception for medical circumcision of boys at birth by qualified medical provider)
Shaking an Infant

• Usually a response to crying
• Often by unrelated male caretaker in U.S. populations (for example, mother’s boyfriend) or young caretaker
• Can lead to mild or extreme brain damage, blindness, extreme disability, or death
• Educating caretakers makes a difference!
If you have reason to suspect a baby has been shaken or received a blow to the head...

Seek medical attention immediately!
Corporal punishment: use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child’s behavior.

(Straus and Donnelly, 2001, Beating the Devil Out of Them).
Is It Physical Abuse?

Even if an injury was not intentional, it is considered abuse if the injury was caused by an intentional act, such as

• When discipline “goes too far” or
• When accidents happen
Punishments that may have a Cultural Component

• Kneeling on uncooked rice
• Hitting with whip-like objects
• Hitting with paddle/wooden spoon
• Hitting soles of feet
• Cold water/bath
• Burning
• Standing on one leg in hot sun
Is it an “okay” punishment?

Consider:

- Age of the child
- Injury or risk of injury from punishment
- Fear expressed by child
- Frequency of punishment

If you need to ask this question, chances are the punishment constitutes physical abuse.

Better to err on the side of caution and report.
Why Refugees May Be at Increased Risk of Report for Punishment-related Abuse

- Refugee cultures often value and enforce respect
- Refugees expectations for children may conflict with U.S. culture
- Many stressors & past traumas
- Isolation from family and other sources of traditional support and influence over children
- Professionals who are unfamiliar with refugee cultures may misinterpret traditional punishment as abuse
Helping Parents Avoid Harsh Discipline

- Reduce parental stress
- Increase support to family
- Teach alternatives to punishment
- Help family develop structure: Bed times, laundry days, assigned chores, homework time
- Motivate “buy-in” to the idea of reducing or eliminating corporal punishment
Ways to Motivate Abandonment of Corporal Punishment

• Acknowledge values and motives
• Clarify that you are not criticizing person’s parents, ancestors, or prior behaviors
• Explain modeling (examples that fit culturally)
• Express desire to protect parents from intrusive state agencies
Physical Discipline Is Legal

- Infrequent smacking of a clothed bottom with an open hand
- No weapons
- Not in anger
- Do not undress or humiliate the child
Physical Discipline Is Not Desirable

- Makes children less likely to comply in settings where physical punishment is not allowed (school)
- May result in abuse
- Raises suspicions of abuse
- Not effective in the long run
- Creates fear and mistrust
- New methods needed for a new country
Regardless of Your Personal Beliefs

A family that has abused a child once is at risk of future episodes of abuse. They need our help in reducing risk—including reducing or eliminating corporal punishment.
When Traditional Medicine Is Problematic

• When it leads to permanent disfigurement or disability (burning, cutting, removing teeth, altering genitals, excessive tattoos)
• When it includes use of a poisonous substance (mercury and other heavy metals)
• When child is seriously ill and caretakers neglect to use effective Western medicine
• When cure is called “traditional” but is peculiar to family
• When child is harmed (e.g. malnourished)
What is Sexual Abuse?

• Inappropriate interactions of a sexual nature
  – **Examples**: Inappropriate kissing, fondling, intercourse, exposing youth to pornography, taking pornographic pictures, exposing one’s genitals, unnecessary genital hygiene, rubbing up against a child
  – **Noncontact** sexual abuse (e.g., sneaking a look at a child who is dressing) can be traumatizing because the relationship of trust has been violated

• Offenders and victims can be of **either** gender
More on Sexual Abuse

• Any sexualized contact by a caretaker

• Grooming or testing process: Pay attention and follow up on concerns!

• Youth are especially vulnerable when they are less protected (living apart from parents)

• Young and disabled children are vulnerable

• Adolescents are vulnerable
Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse

• Child exposed to known offender
• Youth has a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
• Child is pregnant
• Caretakers are aware but fail to take steps to prevent an underage child from engaging in sexual activity
• Caretakers benefit from child’s sexual activity (e.g. boyfriend lives in home and pays rent)
Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse

There are usually no physical signs, but what may be observed is

• Child has inappropriate sexual knowledge (with some cautions)
• Child shows sexualized behavior
• Many other nonspecific signs that show distress
Allegations of sexual abuse should always be taken seriously.

Even a vague disclosure should be reported.
Refugee children can be especially vulnerable

- Caretakers may not be able to assess dangers
- Financial desperation places adults/youth at greater risk of exploitation from nonfamily members
- Offenders target children and families who they think are isolated and less likely to report
- Respect for authorities, adults and men
- Family/cultural norms may be illegal here (underage marriage, soothing boy to sleep by playing with penis)
Refugee children may find it difficult to disclose

- Family honor and reputation
- Fear of family member taking revenge against offender
- Fear of victim blame
- Concerns about virginity and value in “marriage market”
- Caretakers try to avoid authorities
- Few “safe” adults with the power to help
Beware of marriage as a “solution”
Age of Consent

- This is the age at which a young person can consent to sexual activity
- Find out the age in your state
“Consent” and Participation

- “Consent” is not relevant with minors. Minors cannot give informed consent to sexual activity, according to the law.
- If a child or a teen acts in a sexual way with an adult, it is the adult’s responsibility to say no and to resist the overtures.
- The more powerful person is responsible
Whether sexual contact with a minor is achieved through intimacy, coercion or force, it is still a crime.
Abusing the children is another way for a man to control his wife or girlfriend. In about half of families with child abuse there is also woman-battering. In about half of families with woman-battering there is also child abuse. Where you see one, look for the other.
Thank you!

We’ll have some time for questions now.
Contact Us!

Web site: www.brycs.org
Email: info@brycs.org
Phone: 1-888-572-6500

Don’t forget to download the *Highlighted Resources List*!
http://brycs.ddivbeta.com/highlighted-resources.cfm?childwelfare&list=19