

# Hope for the Future: Building on the Strengths of Hmong Refugee Youth and Children

*Lyn Morland, MSW*

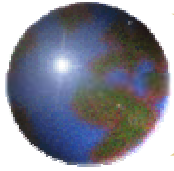


Photos courtesy of Christophe Calais/In Visu [www.invisu.fr](http://www.invisu.fr)

***BRYCS – Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services***

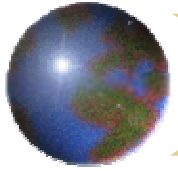
***A joint project of LIRS and USCCB***

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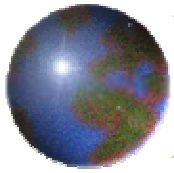


# Background: The Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok

- Exodus and resettlement—almost 3 million refugees left Southeast Asia from 1975 into the 1990s
- Originally from the highlands of Laos, these Hmong fought in support of U.S.-backed government in Laos
- In 1975, many Hmong fled to Thailand, fearing reprisals after communists overthrew the U.S.-backed government.
- Approved for resettlement in U.S., these refugees decided to stay in Thailand in hopes of returning home some day.

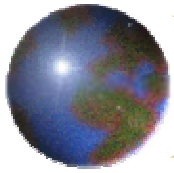


- When refugee camps in Thailand closed in 1995, some Hmong joined others who had taken refuge in a nearby Wat (Buddhist temple)—Wat Tham Krabok.
- The Thai government recently decided these Hmong can no longer stay in Thailand.
- 15,000 Hmong refugees are now beginning their journey to the United States.



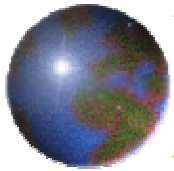
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## Wat Tham Krabok



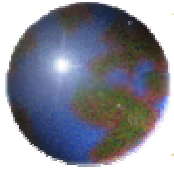
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## Wat Tham Krabok



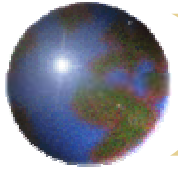
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## Attending School at Wat Tham Krabok



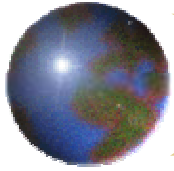
## **30 years of Hmong resettlement in the U.S. tell us that:**

- Despite the fact that most Hmong parents originally arrived with little formal education, few transferable work skills, and low incomes, their strong community and high value placed on education have resulted in...
  - Most children performing well in school, less likely to drop out than other immigrant groups
  - Many Hmong advancing relatively quickly: economically and professionally



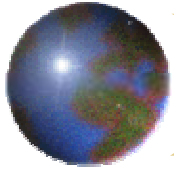
**However, it is important not to forget the children who have not fared as well.**

**Why do some children do better than others?**



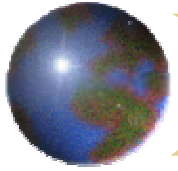
*Lia Thao, a Hmong senior at Hoover High School in San Diego's central city, lives with her parents and five siblings in a small apartment near her school. As her family is very poor, she has found jobs at a local restaurant and as a classroom aide to help make ends meet. Despite those demands, she spends hours on homework each night, and with the second-highest GPA among Hoover seniors, she plans to attend the University of California as a pre-med student.\**

\* Rumbaut, R. (2001). The crucible within. In Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, p.211.



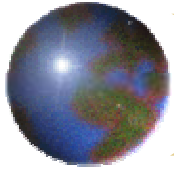
*ST. PAUL, Updated 11:02 p.m. CST December 1, 1999 -- Police now have suspects in a drive-by shooting that took place in St. Paul last July... The five victims were just visiting an apartment building and had no gang affiliations, WCCO-TV reported. They were just leaving when shots rang out. Nineteen-year-old [Hmong youth name]—the alleged trigger man—and 20-year-old [Hmong youth name] apparently thought the five were from a rival gang.\**

\* From Channel 4000 news stories, [www.channel4000.com](http://www.channel4000.com)



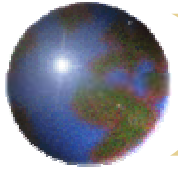
## Research on successful adjustment of refugee children tells us that Risk Factors include...

- Separation from parents, other family members
- Older age at arrival (> 12 yrs)
- Low level of formal education
- Number and severity of traumatic experiences suffered (by child and/or caretakers)
- Resettled in inner city communities (fewer resources, more exposure to gangs, drugs)
- Intergenerational conflict



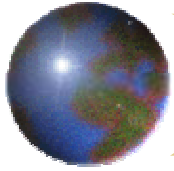
## ***Intergenerational conflict is increased when:***

- Children acculturate faster than parents
- Children prefer to speak English, begin to lose language spoken by parents
- Family role reversals (children interpret for parents, mother finds employment more quickly than father, etc.)



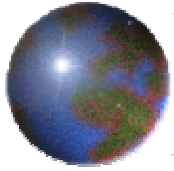
## **Protective Factors include:**

- ***Strong ethnic community***
  - Reinforces parents' cultural values and heritage
  - Supports respect for parents' authority
  - Provides emotional, material support to families
  - Parents know children's friends
- ***High achievement drive***
  - Family values and supports education
  - Children see success in school as direct result of their effort



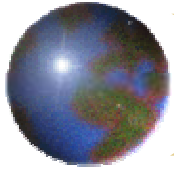
# ***What are risk and protective factors for this new group?***





## ***Newly arriving Hmong have a blend of cultural influences:***

- Traditional Hmong culture (particularly elders)
- Experiences from living in refugee camps and at the **Wat Tham Krabok** in Thailand for almost 30 years (many adults & all children born there)
- Influence and guidance from Hmong American relatives and communities, in the U.S. for almost 30 years

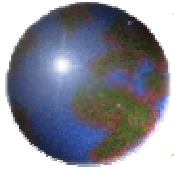


# ***Wat Tham Krabok***

## ***Cultural Continuities as Strengths...***

- Among clan and family structure and roles still strong and in place\*
- Practice many traditions, including cultural & religious celebrations & rituals\*
- Refugees are joining relatives in the U.S. and arriving into a **strong established community**, that has demonstrated success, and is willing to help—a powerful protective factor for children.

\* Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report, April 2004

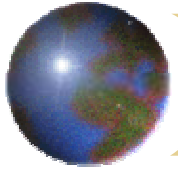


## ***Wat Tham Krabok***

### ***Changes in family structure as risks...***

- “severe disruption of family relationships”\*
- “higher than expected incidence of distantly or unrelated youth and adults banded together as family units”\*

\* Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report, April 2004

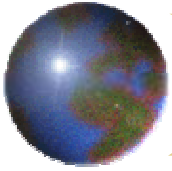


# ***Wat Tham Krabok***

## ***Changes in family roles as risks...***

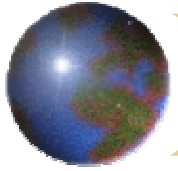
- Women may have earned more money than men by making and selling handicrafts\*
- Many children learned English (and Thai) quickly, have acted as interpreters/translators for parents and elders\*
- Intergenerational differences may be exacerbated by experiences of elders in Laos, parents in Thailand, and now children in the U.S.

\* Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report, April 2004



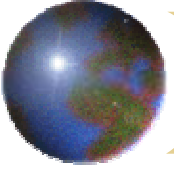
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# ***Childrearing in the U.S.***

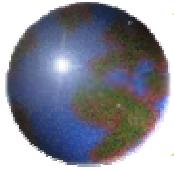


## *Immediate concerns...*

- Separated children: Identify families who may need more support
- Parenting issues:
  - Parents have been told no physical punishment is allowed in the U.S.; will need their authority reinforced, guidance on discipline
  - Parents need to fully understand U.S. child protection laws—some spanking IS okay and CPS will NOT remove children just because they call 911



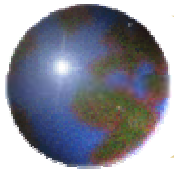
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## ***Potential future pressure points...***

Difference in backgrounds, acculturation rates between parents and children

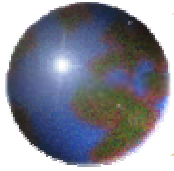
- Language, literacy
- Independence versus obedience, respect for elders
- Expectations to help out in the home
- Peers' values (materialism, dating, schoolwork, going out, etc) vs parents'



# *Lessons Learned*

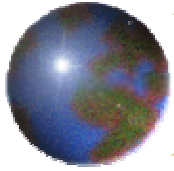


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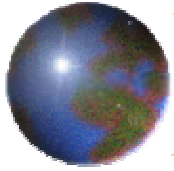
## *Lessons Learned...*

- Successful programs for youth emphasize pride in cultural heritage, in addition to practical skills (such as academic, communication skills)
- Programs for parents can include education and support for parenting, but can also teach English, literacy, and job skills to reduce acculturation gap
- Actively involve both youth and parents in all phases of program development and implementation



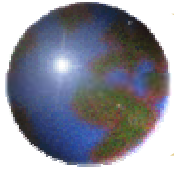
## ***Parenting classes/support groups are important for prevention!***

- Strong relationship when child is younger helps prevent problems in adolescence
- Enhanced communication skills
- Understanding intergenerational issues reduces stress, increases ability to address problems
- Helps with parents' acculturation, can help reduce acculturation gap between parents and children



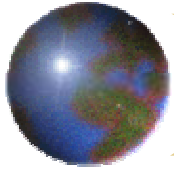
## ***Parents' classes/support groups should be:***

- Intensive and repetitive
- Educational: Parents need to know and understand U.S. child protection laws
- Provide effective and appropriate alternatives to physical punishment



## ***Curriculum should be:***

- Visual, concrete, use stories
- Strengths-based and integrated with cultural values and concepts
- Empowering: Maximize parents' role in defining problems, developing solutions, trying out new behaviors
- Build support among each other, link to larger community



# Hope for the future ...



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