



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Jarsso, an Oromo Ethiopian Father

In early Fall 2007, BRYCS staff spoke with Jarsso [1] about his life and experiences as an Oromo parent now living in the United States. Jarsso and his wife, Jartii, have two children.

Family Background

I am originally from the Bale region of Oromia, in Ethiopia. Before coming to the U.S., my family and I were living in Addis Ababa, the capital city.

My wife was the first one to come to the U.S., in 1997. She came by herself and stayed at first with my aunt, who also lives in the U.S. With the help of an attorney, my wife was granted **asylum** due to the situation of the Oromo people in Ethiopia.

Since my wife was granted asylum, our children and I were permitted to join her here. I came to the U.S. in June 2000, along with my son, then age 12, and my daughter, who was 8 years old.

I was separated from my wife for three years. The kids needed their mom, and it was hard for me too, but we were living with my sisters and they helped care for my kids. While we were separated, my wife called from the U.S. almost everyday or every other day. That was very important. She sent games, clothes, and gifts for the children, and she talked with us regularly. So it was like she was far away but still with us.

My wife and I were married in 1982 – she was age 24 and I was age 28. We both come from large families: I have 4 brothers and 5 sisters; my wife has 6 brothers and 4 sisters. Several of my siblings are now living with their families in Nairobi, Kenya. We are trying to help them come to the U.S. as refugees as well.

The Oromo in Ethiopia

The Oromo people are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, but they are oppressed and do not have a voice as the majority. They have been out of power for many years. They do not have power over their land, resources, and wealth, and many Oromo have experienced imprisonment, even torture. The Oromo people are still claiming their right to freedom and political power.

My uncle was just released from prison last week. He is a small business owner, and the government security services assume that Oromo business owners financially support the Oromo movement. My uncle was imprisoned and tortured for one month, before being released. This is very hard on all of us.

Religion

The majority of the Oromo people are Muslim. Of the Oromos who are Protestant Christians, many are Lutheran. Norwegian and German missionaries spread the Bible to Oromia many years ago. Here, we are part of an Oromo church.

Family Life in the U.S.

In the U.S. it seems like my wife and I are running all the time to work. We are busy all the time. We have two kids who need support, and we don't have time to accommodate more children. My parents ask why we don't have more children, and there are expectations from family to have more children, but here we don't have the extended family to support us.

In Africa, everyone helps each other – both relatives and neighbors – but here people don't even know the neighbors next door. We have tried to get to know our neighbors, and sometimes we say hello, but everybody is running; we don't have time.

Employment

I started a job here in the U.S. two years ago. I provide support services to other businesses and government agencies.

In Ethiopia, I used to work for a large corporation in the personnel department. It is a challenge to start a business here in the U.S., but it is better to work for oneself. I hope to employ my relatives once they arrive here. My wife is also employed; she works as a nursing assistant in a local hospital.

Passing on Oromo Culture

We try to teach our language to our children by speaking Oromo at home. Before we came to the U.S., the children spoke Oromo perfectly. Now, I speak to them in Oromo, and they respond to me in English.

Some of the Oromo values that I want to pass on to my children are respecting family, elders, and each other. When you respect elders, you maintain the connection between the generations; if you lose that, the generations are disconnected. If you are in a meeting and an elder enters the room, everyone will stand up out of respect for that elder. We will also kneel down when greeting an elder, or kiss the shoes of an elder – some people think this is backwards, but it is showing respect.

I also want my children to love their country of origin – the language, food, dress, and ways of greeting. In Oromo culture, we give big hugs when greeting each other.

How we dress is also important. For ladies, their skirts should come down to the ankle. We have to respect how we look and how we dress.

Discipline

Back home in Ethiopia, children do not have as much freedom as they do in the U.S. They help their families after school – in farming, shopkeeping, business. Kids are very close to their families. There is more discipline there – you can discipline your child at anytime. Relatives in Africa will punish children too, if they do something bad.

Here it is different from family to family. My kids are very disciplined, they listen to their mother and father and they follow our instruction. In other families, I see there are more problems – like smoking and drinking.

In this country, parents use time outs. But in Oromo culture, this doesn't work. In school in Ethiopia, the teacher would hit your hand with a ruler. At home, parents would use a small stick or a leather strap. When children did something wrong, parents might point to the leather strap hanging on the wall as a warning. Here it is confusion, everything is freedom; but with time outs, nothing can improve.

Parenting in the U.S.

In our family, the children listen to us, they don't have bad habits, like smoking. We try to advise those families who have problems with their children, to spend more time with their kids – to be close to them – because in the U.S. some families don't have time for their kids. Everyone is running 24-hours-a-day just to cover expenses. In Africa, if you're poor, you live poor; there are no bills to pay. Children come home from school and they serve their families. All the time, the children are with their families.

Earlier today, my friend and I were discussing parents in the U.S. Some seem to lose their personal values. There is a good standard of living here – you can have a house, a car – but most people are living on more than their income. They might make \$8 an hour but drive an \$18,000 car. Some people lose their values because they are running here and there, but they have no time for their family. Values seem to shift from the family to what you have.

Everything is good here, compared with African countries, but here we still live with hardship. We try to live like rich people, and many people are sending money back home to support others.

Helping Family Back Home

Many people support people back home. They are not living for themselves, but living for their families back home. Many people don't live their lives; they're living for others. The expectations are high— even \$5 is big money back home. For many refugees and immigrants living in the U.S., they are sending back 10% or 15% of their income.

Advantages for Children in the U.S.

America is the best country for children – the school system, how the teachers follow the students, bringing in new technology, libraries, bus transportation to school, medical insurance, how children come together with other kids from different colors and cultures and become friends. I grew up in one Oromo culture, but here my kids know other students who are Japanese, Hispanic, Nigerian. All of this is best for kids.

My son is now studying pharmacy at university; he enjoys math and sciences. He is also good at sports, especially football. Now he lives at college with some of his friends from high school.

Our daughter is in middle school. She plays guitar and sings in church. She wants to be a lawyer. I think she has the temperament to help people some day.

My dream for our children is that they complete college and continue until they get their Ph.D. I also hope that they go back home and help people in Oromia too...but my son already says he will stay in the U.S. forever.

1 - Names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. How would you advise refugees or asylees who want to have their family members join them in the U.S.?
 - U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, [I Am a Refugee or Asylee: How Do I Help My Relative Get Refugee or Asylee Status in the U.S.?](#)
 - Asylees can get information on a variety of service and benefit issues through the "Asylee Information and Refugee Hotline" at: 1-800-354-0365
2. What do you know about the Oromo people and culture?
 - Ethnomed Web page on [Oromo](#)
 - Center for Victims of Torture, [Culture Profile: Oromo](#)
3. What help is available in your community for newcomers starting their own businesses?
 - [ISED Micro-enterprise technical assistance](#)
4. How can you or your agency help refugees deal with the financial challenges of living in the U.S.?
 - RefugeeWorks, [Financial Literacy for Newcomers: Weaving Immigrant Needs Into Financial Education](#)
 - ISED-Solutions, [Picture This: Financial Curriculum for Adults and Teens with Limited Literacy](#)
5. What guidance or information would you offer newcomer families regarding discipline practices in the U.S.?
 - BRYCS Resources
 - [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#)
 - [Raising Children in a New Country: A Toolkit for Working with Refugee Parents](#)
 - [Positive Discipline](#) (available in Hmong, Somali and Spanish); Regents of the University of Minnesota, and the Children's Hospitals and Clinics; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN (1999).
6. How would you advise refugee parents who want to pass on their native language to their children?
 - Center for Applied Linguistics, [Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research](#)