



FALL 2008 SPOTLIGHT:

Helping Refugee and Immigrant Families Stay Together

Ellen, a 14-year-old Liberian youth, was reunited with her mother whom she had not seen since the age of three. She moved in with her mother and joined her new step-father and two younger step-sisters. Not long after her arrival, tension within the family increased. Her mother and step-father became frustrated, claiming that Ellen was not listening to them. Ellen's refugee resettlement case manager tried to intervene, but soon Ellen's mother and step-father were talking about "sending her back to Liberia." At that point, the refugee resettlement case manager sought help from the local public child welfare agency, which provided family preservation services, including intensive case management, counseling, and almost daily home visits with the family. Due to limited experience working with refugee families, the family preservation caseworker sought help and information from BRYCS staff. Together, the family preservation and refugee resettlement caseworkers, with coaching and support from BRYCS, were able to help the family stay together.

BRYCS social workers often receive calls like this for assistance with addressing severe conflict between parents or guardians and their children. The most common problems arise due to distant or renewed family relationships, or due to resettlement stresses which compromise parenting skills. For instance, some refugee and immigrant parents may have difficulty caring for or supervising their children due to financial pressures or work schedules, resulting in conflict. Parents or caregivers may feel that a conflict with an adolescent seems unresolvable, sometimes resulting in youth who "couch surf," rotating between relatives' or friends' homes, when the difficulties at home are extreme. In the most severe circumstances, parents or caregivers may neglect a child's needs or express a desire to "send them back" to their country of origin. Such behaviors and remarks must be taken seriously. To support the caseworkers assisting families struggling with these issues, this article provides some strategies and resources for preventing and responding to these situations.

Protective Factors and Risk Factors¹

Refugee and immigrant families are often extraordinarily resilient. Many have endured dangerous journeys to seek safety in the United States or to join relatives, but they are able to thrive in the U.S. due to a number of "**protective factors**" including values that emphasize the importance of:

- Strong family relationships (in the U.S. and transnational)
- Education and achievement for children
- Maintaining cultural connections while adapting to the U.S. as a family
- Rebuilding supportive communities

Yet, that does not mean there are not challenges. Indeed, most foreign-born families find it challenging to resettle, and ultimately integrate, into American society due to a variety of potential **risk factors**:

- Loss of family members, community
- Shifting family hierarchies and role changes
- Financial stress/negative change in socioeconomic status
- Greater cultural differences in parenting strategies and the role of adolescents
- Experiences of discrimination and racism
- Traumatic experiences

Children reunited with parents or other caregivers after a period of separation face additional risks,² depending on factors such as:

- **Length of separation:** Sometimes children have not seen their parents or adult caretakers in years. Once reunited, they may expect to relate to one another as before, only to find that they feel like strangers. Children may miss a caregiver who was left behind, they may feel anger towards a parent who left them behind, or they may have developed habits and maturity which seem foreign to their parents or caregiver. It takes time for family members to become reacquainted and for the family to stabilize.
- **Distant relationships:** Some refugee children are resettled with distant relatives or caregivers with whom they have little shared history or bond because it may be the best option at the time. In the case of unaccompanied, undocumented minors in federal custody, child welfare practice dictates that it is better for children to live in the community rather than remain in custody in federal facilities, and distant relatives may be the only family available in the U.S. Also, remember that some children will be meeting step-parents, siblings, or other family members for the first time.
- **Age:** Adolescents – and particularly those who were largely independent before resettling – may have difficulty living with new caregivers and adjusting to their rules. Refugee and immigrant youth who join parents or other caregivers face the challenges of recreating their family, including affirming parental authority, after the youth has been independent or attached to another caregiver, in addition to cultural adjustment and the challenges of adolescence.

Typically, the protective factors mentioned above outweigh the risk factors, while the struggles and separations endured by refugee families also strengthen their resolve to remain together. Sometimes, however, the difficulties families experience are too great, and they need additional support to thrive. Refugees, in particular, who may have more risk factors than other immigrant groups, sometimes need additional support from resettlement case managers or other community service providers.

Refugee Healthy Marriages Initiative

BRYCS supports a “family strengthening” approach, which is a “framework based on the belief that the best way to protect and support children is by strengthening their families.”³ (For a brief overview of family strengthening, see this past [BRYCS Spotlight](#).) Many programs throughout the U.S. offer newcomer families workshops and/or counseling to avert problems related to family functioning, such as those outlined above.

In 2002, the Healthy Marriages Initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, piloted the Strengthening Refugee Families and Marriages (SRFM) program through which several sites across the United States provided marriage and family education for refugees. These classes covered topics such as communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving. In 2006, after that first three year grant cycle, the Healthy Marriages Initiative continued to fund a number of [programs serving refugee families](#). These programs focus primarily on refugee marriages, while indirectly addressing the needs of children through the understanding that strengthening marriages strengthens families and has a positive impact on the children.⁴ Programs address parenting concerns or involve youth in programming to varying degrees.

For example, Jewish Family and Children’s Services of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has a Refugee Healthy Families Program, which helps ethnically diverse populations learn ways to maintain healthy families, develop better communication skills, and resolve conflicts as they adjust to American culture. Culturally sensitive training is provided on communication and money management. For more information, read about this [BRYCS Promising Practice](#).

Another example is the Catholic Charities of Galveston-Houston, Texas, which has a [Strengthening Refugee Families and Marriages Initiative](#). This program consists of a series of four-hour, interactive workshops offered in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Farsi, Swahili and Arabic. The workshops address topics such as

healthy families and marriages, financial literacy, U.S. laws about child abuse and family violence, cultural orientation and life in the United States, preventing alcohol and drug abuse, stress management, and employment.

Throughout the years, a number of culturally and linguistically appropriate curricula and resources have been adapted and developed by these programs. For a list of such resources, see [here](#). For questions related to these programs, please contact the [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society \(HIAS\)](#), which provides technical assistance to all Refugee Healthy Marriage grantees.

Steps for Refugee/Immigrant Service Providers to Take when Assisting Families in Conflict

Whenever possible, service providers aiding newcomer families should address family conflicts early on, before they become crises. However, when a conflict within a family escalates, it may be necessary for the service provider to work more closely with the family and other support services. Such intensive services may be necessary, but they may also be hindered by the short-term nature of some resettlement programs (at minimum, three-months of services after arrival in the U.S., though some services may be available for up to five years after arrival, depending on location and funding). For more information on refugee services in your state, contact your [refugee state coordinator](#).

Some resettlement agencies have created specific staff positions dedicated to working with families in crisis in order to keep them together. For example, [Refugee and Immigration Services](#) of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, Virginia, employs a family preservation specialist. Whether or not a refugee/immigrant serving agency has a specific staff person dedicated to supporting families, there are steps that can be taken by case managers and other service providers to help strengthen families, such as the following:

1. Involve Local Community Leaders

Consider working with local ethnic community based organizations or mutual assistance associations to incorporate traditional mediation techniques or provide other suggestions for working with the family. Remember to respect the wishes of the family for involving, or not involving, such a leader, as confidentiality may be a concern.

2. Listen to the Family

Listen to what the refugee/immigrant parents have to say about what might be contributing to the stresses they are experiencing. **Let them know that their stress is normal for refugees adjusting to a new life here** – refer back to the list of common stressors above, highlighting parenting challenges and role changes. It may be helpful to use BRYCS' new illustrated parenting booklet, [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#), or other resources from the [BRYCS Clearinghouse](#) for these conversations. In addition to relationship issues, remember to address practical stressors and needs, such as financial problems – these challenges are real and can contribute to stress within families.

Spend time helping the parents think through what **the children might be feeling** as a result of stressors that are similar to the parents are experiencing (refer back to the list above). Some children may manifest their distress by appearing sad, aggressive, fearful, withdrawn, and/or having difficulty sleeping or eating. In addition, it is important for service providers to point out that sometimes children “act out” these feelings by skipping school, refusing to do chores, and other defiant behavior.

If the difficulty in family functioning is related to parenting a **child that has just been reunited** with the parents or caregivers, or has just met them for the first time, case managers may want to discuss with the parents/caregivers reasons the child(ren) might be feeling sad or upset (refer back to list above).

3. Identify and Focus on Strengths

When struggling with adjustment and experiencing conflict, it can be difficult for family members to remember their own strengths, much less the positive qualities of the child they may now view as causing their difficulties. In addition to asking about stresses and problems, it is important to ask about what they love about their family, memories they share from the past, and their hopes for the future. Participating in family rituals and activities they enjoy together in the present can also help families to recognize their strengths. Most important is to be sure to frame issues in a way that focuses on strengths, giving them more to work with and making it more likely that they will find ways to address the challenges they are experiencing.⁵

4. Reach Out to Local Child Welfare Agency for Supportive Services

If it seems the family will not be able to resolve the conflict on their own, it may be helpful to involve a local child welfare agency, either through existing agency contacts or by inquiring about relevant family support services available in the community.

Many child welfare agencies provide family preservation or family support services. However, newcomer parents may assume that U.S. child welfare agencies exist solely to take children away from their parents, thus requiring further information about the nature of family preservation services.

A movement begun in the 1980's, family preservation services attempt to prevent the placement of children in foster care and are now available in most states.⁶ Typically, family preservation services include:

- Rapid response
- 24/7 availability
- Time-limited services
- Large amounts of face-to-face contact with families in their homes/communities
- Provision of both concrete and clinical services⁷

The full impact of family preservation services is still being debated by researchers, nonetheless these services allow refugee/immigrant service providers to connect their clients with intensive case management and counseling that they may be unable to provide themselves. Some mainstream child welfare agencies even have family preservation or family support programs that are designed for specific populations. For example, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services has a [Latino Family Preservation Program](#) that works specifically with Latino families.⁸

Considerations for Family Preservation Providers Working with Refugee/Immigrant Families

BRYCS has written a number of articles for mainstream child welfare staff, from which the following suggestions are selected for their relevance to family preservation workers:

1. Recognize that culturally competent practice may require treating certain families differently. Families from diverse backgrounds will have different needs and traditions, which require **unique interventions**. (For a list of "Cultural Considerations When Planning Family Meetings with Refugees and Immigrants," see the text box on p. 7 of BRYCS Spotlight on [Family and Community Centered Child Welfare Practice with Refugees and Immigrants](#), and see the BRYCS Spotlight on [Cultural Competency in Child Welfare Practice: A Bridge Worth Building](#))

2. Family preservation workers should spend a significant amount of time in the assessment phase of their work with newcomer families, helping families identify their strengths in addition to addressing issues and needs. It is crucial to learn how families prioritize their concerns and to **operate from their perspective**. What do they perceive to be their greatest strength? Their most urgent need?
3. Recognize that many refugee and immigrant groups may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the idea of seeking help from anyone outside their extended family or community **due to “losing face” or respect, fear of losing their children, shame, or other reasons**.⁹ Social workers should be sensitive to this as they begin work with refugee or immigrant families.
4. Learn about the **family’s background**:
 - a. History of the refugee/immigrant group’s immigration
 - b. Environment of the country the family came from
 - c. Traditional cultural values, especially related to the family (family roles, methods of discipline and praise, etc.)
 - d. Help-seeking behavior of the population (including norms about assertiveness or compliance)
 - e. Coping behaviors of the population
 - f. Norms about expression of emotion¹⁰
5. Suggest the possibility of **involving a local elder** or other community member to help mediate and respect the family’s wishes for doing so. In some situations this can be extremely helpful, while in small communities there may be confidentiality concerns.
6. If it is not in the child’s best interests to remain with the existing caregivers, consider other family members in the U.S. or elsewhere. [International Social Service](#) can assist with overseas home studies and family tracing, if appropriate.
7. If the child’s safety requires removal from the home, consider the [Unaccompanied Refugee Minor foster care program](#) as a resource. In some situations, refugee and other types of immigrant children may be eligible to access this special foster care program.
8. **Use BRYCS as a support!** Whether you need to consult on a case or would like materials to use when working with refugee/immigrant families, feel free to [contact us](#).

Examples of Collaborations Between Refugee/Immigrant and Child Welfare Agencies for Family Strengthening/Preventative Services

Ideally child welfare and refugee/immigrant serving agencies will have a working relationship with each other before an urgent situation or crisis requires a collaborative response. BRYCS highlighted the importance of collaboration in an earlier spotlight article, [Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare: Collaboration for Child Protection](#), describing initiatives in St. Louis and New York City that include preventative components. Numerous other successful collaborative initiatives exist across the country, many of which have prevention components.

Collaboration Between Refugee Resettlement and a State Child Welfare Trust Fund

In some areas of the country, refugee resettlement agencies contract with their state’s child welfare trust fund to provide family preservation or other types of preventative child welfare services. To look up your state’s child welfare trust fund, visit the [National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds](#) Web site. For example, [Community Refugee and Immigration Services](#) in Columbus, Ohio, contracts with the [Ohio Children’s Trust Fund](#) to provide child welfare prevention services to their clients. (In this case, they also partner with [Franklin County Children’s Services](#) for intervention services for their clients.) Services are primarily provided in clients’ homes in the form of one-on-one parenting classes and counseling and are typically provided by individuals from the same background as the families being served. Learn more about this initiative by reading a description of this [BRYCS Promising Practice](#).

Collaboration Between Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare Departments in the Same Organization

In some areas of the country, refugee resettlement departments are located in agencies that also offer child welfare services. For example, the Catholic Family Center of Rochester, New York resettles refugees and offers extensive services for [children and families](#). Though these services are technically provided in two separate departments, they have recently become more integrated because of the Catholic Family Center's [Family Investment Initiative](#) (FSI). The purpose of the FSI is to weave services together to create a comprehensive, integrated, and family-centered system of care for families seeking services. Case managers who are familiar with all of the departments and services within the center are designated as FSI case managers and strategically placed in various departments, including refugee resettlement. The FSI case manager who is located in the refugee resettlement department is available to connect fragile refugee families with a variety of services they may need.

Collaboration Between an Ethnic Community Based Organization and Child Welfare

In some parts of the country, ethnic community based organizations or mutual assistance associations partner with child welfare agencies to provide services to refugee and immigrant populations. For example, [Sauti Yetu](#) contracts with the Administration for Children's Services in New York City to provide prevention services as a part of the city's new "[Immigrant Community Partnerships Project Initiative](#)."

Collaboration Between an Ethnic Community Based Organization and a National Family Strengthening Organization

On the opposite coast, [Horn of Africa](#) runs a "Families Together Program," which is an affiliate program of [Healthy Families America](#) (HFA). Their Families Together Program is the only HFA site in the nation that works exclusively with East African refugee families. In this program, Somali Family Support Workers visit the homes of both pregnant and parenting refugee families to implement an individualized plan of care. Family Support Workers link the families with medical and social services while also providing support to parents regarding parent-child interaction and bonding, nutrition, health care, and the well-being of the entire family. Learn more about this initiative by reading a description of this [BRYCS Promising Practice](#).

For more information on the issues addressed in this Spotlight article, see the [List of Highlighted Resources](#) on family preservation and strengthening as well as the list mentioned above on the Refugee Healthy Marriage Initiative.

¹ Weine, S. (2008). Family Roles in Refugee Youth Resettlement from a Prevention Perspective. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 17 (3), 515-532.

² Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I.L.G., & Louie, J. (2002). Making Up For Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification Among Immigrant Families. *Family Process*, 41 (4), 625-643.

³ National Human Services Assembly. (2004). Introduction to Family Strengthening. <http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/documents/final.pdf>

⁴ The Healthy Marriage Initiative. Benefits of Healthy Marriages. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/benefits/index.html> (Retrieved August 6, 2008).

⁵ Weine, S. (2008). Family Roles in Refugee Youth Resettlement from a Prevention Perspective. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 17 (3), 518-519.

⁶ Westat, Chapin Hall Center for Children, & James Bell Associates. (2002). Evaluation of Family Preservation and Reunification Programs.

⁷ Kirk, R.S. & Griffith, D.P. (2007). An Examination of Intensive Family Preservation Services.

⁸ County of Los Angeles, Department of Children and Family Services. Latino Family Preservation Program/Programa de Preservación de la Familia Latina (brochure).

⁹ Fong, R. (1994). Family Preservation: Making It Work For Asians. *Child Welfare*, 73(4), 331-341.

¹⁰ Ibid.