



FALL 2009 SPOTLIGHT

I Came All This Way for Them: Refugee Parents in Their Own Words

From 2006 to 2008, BRYCS staff interviewed a dozen refugee parents from nine different countries, asking them to reflect on their parenting experiences before and after coming to the United States. This Spotlight article summarizes themes and common concerns from these “Parenting Conversations.” Access all of BRYCS’ Refugee Parent Interviews by clicking [here](#).

Introduction

Here you can become anything you want—a doctor, a mechanic, a banker—anything you want, if you try. In Burma, we don’t have opportunities like that.

For Karen people who have been here for several years, their kids are not showing respect to elders. They begin acting like American kids and calling people by their name rather than their title. [Klee Thoo, Karen father]

These quotes from a Karen father resettled in the U.S. exemplify a common conflict for refugee and immigrant parents raising children in a new country: gaining access to educational and vocational opportunities for their children, not to mention safety, while giving up certain cultural values and traditions as children acculturate to the U.S.

This bittersweet tone of loss and reward was a familiar theme in BRYCS’ refugee parenting interviews—the intertwined advantages and disadvantages of raising children in a new culture including changes in discipline and respect, new family roles and values, increasing independence and decreasing interdependence, and the delicate balancing of two cultures.

The reflections of these parents point out the importance of a family strengthening approach in working with refugee and immigrant families—recognizing the resilience, assets and experiences that refugee families bring to parenting, while helping refugee parents to contextualize these strengths for a new environment, and overcome past hardships and traumas from the refugee experience.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) describes family strengthening as developing the following protective factors in families, thereby reducing the likelihood of child maltreatment:

- *Parental resilience*
- *Social connections*
- *Knowledge of parenting and child development*
- *Concrete support in times of need*
- *Children’s social and emotional development* [1]

One program working to prevent family breakdown by building on family strengths is the “Family Stabilization Services” of Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Richmond, VA, a unique partnership with the Virginia Office of Newcomer Services providing family preservation services to refugee families referred by resettlement offices and service providers within the state of Virginia. Read more about this program in our [“Promising Practices” program description](#).

Healing Transitions, a research-based multidisciplinary project at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, is building on the strengths and leadership potential among recently resettled Burundian refugee families in TN through the development of an African community based organization, a Family Stabilization Committee, cultural competency training, a youth soccer camp, and MP3 recordings in the Kirundi language. To read this “Promising Practices” program description, click [here](#).

Discipline and Respect

A recurring theme in BRYCS' refugee parent interviews involved the related concerns of changes in discipline practices and a loss of respect for elders. Parents mentioned the following concerns regarding their ability to discipline and elicit respect from their children:

- Perception that time-outs are ineffective
- Uncertainty about U.S. discipline practices or alternatives to corporal punishment
- Threats by children to call “911” if punished by parents
- Sense of conflict between the Biblical reference to “spare the rod, spoil the child” and an American emphasis on non-physical methods of punishment
- Sense that they will be unable to control their children, especially teens
- Erosion of respect towards elders and those in authority
- Perception that American children talk back to parents

Most parents expressed an understanding that corporal punishment [2] was discouraged in the U.S., though several parents viewed alternative practices as ineffective. Although most parents seemed to struggle with changed discipline practices, one parent was pleased to switch from physical punishment to using his “good ideas” to teach his children, since using a stick can make children fear adults.

Discipline¹

*I like that there is not beating here like in Sudan...but I don't want my children to call the police on me, like [my relative's] child did...here the rules say that parents should not hit their children. So, here in America, what do you do? **[Mary, Sudanese mother]***

*We heard back in Laos that parents in the U.S. cannot spank their children to discipline them...One difference in the U.S. that we find surprising is that if your daughter grows up to be a teenager and she gets into trouble with the law, then the parents may have to go to court. So it seems like a system where parents are not able to control their children but then parents are blamed if the children misbehave. **[Tou, Hmong father]***

Respect

*It seems that children have too much freedom here. In Iraq, children have limited freedom. They are expected to listen to their parents, to not talk back, but here I see children talking back to their parents and the parents don't do anything about it. **[Dina, Iraqi mother]***

Family Roles and Values

Family roles have changed for many of the parents we interviewed—both the parents' roles as well as the children's.[3] In the U.S., women are more involved in employment, men are more involved in household tasks, and children seem less involved in both work and chores. Issues mentioned included:

- Importance of good communication between parents and children
- Possessions prioritized over family relationships
- Busyness of family members leading to less family time
- Couples adjusting to gender role changes
- Men's perception that women seem like the head of the household in the U.S., unlike in some other cultures
- Childhood responsibilities, such as childcare or household chores, can prepare children for their future role as caretakers
- Children with more family responsibilities prior to coming to the U.S. want to maintain that role once in the U.S.
- Americanized children perceived as less willing to help their families and more concerned about play
- Children less able to work in family business
- Involvement in children's education increasing for some parents and decreasing for others

Parents' Role

I think there can be a lack of communication here between parents and children. Parents don't seem to know what is going on with their children when they get home from school. When your child comes home, you have to make your child the first priority. [Caridad, Cuban mother]

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 [possessions] you have. [Jarso, Oromo father]

Children's Role

In our culture, it's OK for children to take care of certain responsibilities, but here they think we're asking too much of them. For us, it is a source of pride: we're preparing them to be good caretakers when they grow up. Our teens still want that same level of responsibility here as well...My seven-year-old boy was born here. At his age, my other kids knew how to sweep the house, but he says that it's not his job yet; that he needs to play. I don't know what makes him believe he cannot do it. [Aline, Burundian mother]

My daughter did most of the cooking while I was separated from my wife; men do not cook in Liberian culture. [John, Liberian father]

Parents' Role in Education

The conditions of Iraqi schools were not very good... I think that about 75% of the responsibility for schooling fell on the parents... About 25% of the responsibility for schooling fell on the teachers. Besides teaching the material, teachers could also hit students to discipline them. [Farah, Iraqi mother]

Independence and Interdependence

Several parents commented on the increased independence of children in the U.S., something viewed as both positive and negative. On the positive side, children make decisions for themselves and take responsibility for themselves as adults. On the negative side, this independence can undermine a parent's authority and result in children moving away from their families.

Several parents expressed particular concern about what will happen when their children become teenagers,^[4] along with the hope that their children will maintain the cultural value of family unity and proximity.

Independence

New values that I like here are independence. When a teenager is over 18, they think for themselves without their mother taking care of them, they can live by themselves. This is a wonderful thing... Something I worry about is the teenage years, when a lot of bad things can happen. I need to train them well. In Karen culture, there are teen years, but you are under your parents' control. There is not a period of independence like here. [Klee Thoo, Karen father]

Interdependence

Children belong to the extended family, society, and friends. Decisions are based on those ties. No one is left behind; we care for the elderly. We have a saying: "Once a rabbit grows older, it nurses from its baby." This means the parents do their best to raise their children, then in old age it's the children's turn to take over. [Aline, Burundian mother]

Balancing Two Cultures

Most newcomer families struggle with balancing the values and expectations of their original culture, while adapting to American culture. Several of the refugee parents we interviewed talked about the values and traditions they hope to pass on to their children, including familiarity with the parents' language, food and faith.

While holding on to familiar cultural practices, these refugee parents must also help their children navigate peer influences, American mores, multiculturalism and new opportunities—a process that is both frightening and enlightening.

Ultimately, most parents hope their children will take advantage of the educational and vocational opportunities available to them, opportunities which were not available or accessible in their conflicted homelands.

Family's Culture

Core values that I want pass on to my children include speaking Russian; that they would keep their eating habits so they don't forget Russian food and the Russian way of eating; but mainly we hope they will continue being part of the church. [Anna, Russian mother]

In Africa, if you're from the other village, you're still my sister. There is no line—if you don't help your extended family, you are selfish. [John, Liberian father]

American Culture

Before I came to the U.S., I was mostly concerned about exposing my children to drugs, alcohol, and sexual harassment or abuse. I always warn my kids about these things. These things can be found anywhere, including Iraq despite all of the taboos with these things...I am also worried about what my children will see on TV here. In Iraq, there is such strict censorship, but here it is very open. [Farah, Iraqi mother]

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. [Jarso, Oromo father]

Related Research

The themes that emerged from BRYCS' interviews with refugee parents share similarities with research conducted with other parents from diverse backgrounds. One study at a pediatric clinic, involving 46 New York City families representing 27 countries, documented the following similar parenting concepts:

Similarities in parenting concepts were found among families. Teaching values and respect and the need for strict discipline were important. A sense of community, family, and spirituality/religion was strong...Parents feared children playing alone outdoors; distrusted nonfamily babysitters; and felt conflicted between a desire for cultural preservation versus assimilation.[5]

Likewise, a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention used focus groups with parents representing five broad cultural groups to examine parenting norms across cultures. This study observed the following commonalities:

All parent groups wanted their children to be respectful, obedient, and polite; to share and to do well in school; and expressed displeasure with their children being disrespectful, disobedient, selfish, dishonest, or having temper tantrums. All groups also agreed that when children misbehaved, disciplinary tactics such as signaling disapproval, explaining, and setting limits should be attempted before resorting to more punitive practices such as isolation, taking away privileges, or spanking. Nonetheless, the groups did express some

distinct preferences for and comfort levels with certain kinds of responses, such as time-out, emotional control, ignoring, and physical punishment.[6]

As these two studies found, parents across cultures share similar principles and desires for their children, however the specific methods used in childrearing can vary from culture to culture, and can be misread if not understood within the relevant cultural context.

Newcomer parents are subject to local child welfare laws, just as other parents are, but understanding the context and motivations for particular parenting behaviors can help determine decisions about child safety and well-being.[7] As most mothers and fathers will agree, parenting is not an exact science but instead learned behaviors that vary by context and that evolve over time at the individual, family and societal levels.

Conclusion

Services that capitalize on a newcomer family's strengths—such as family cohesion, resilience, role differentiation, biculturalism, strong faith, valuing education, etc.—can support parents as they acculturate and balance the parenting demands of two cultures. Like most parents, refugees also want to see their children succeed, as Dina from Iraq commented, “I came all this way for them, to help them be better people.”

Lastly, as families make the challenging transition from a familiar culture to a new culture, these parents from Liberia and Sudan offered other refugees the following encouragement to have patience in the acculturation process:

Be quick to hear and slow to take action. [John, Liberian father]

Hurry, hurry, no blessing. [Mary, Sudanese mother]

See the **Highlighted Resources** that accompanies this article to find additional resources on newcomers and parenting.

REFERENCES

¹ See http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net/index.php/main_pages/protective_factors . These protective factors are also described in the resource *Strengthening Families and Communities: 2009 Resource Guide*, pp. 8-10, available at

http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_guide_2009/guide.pdf

² Phoenix Children's Hospital has published a report by Elizabeth Gershoff titled, *Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About Its Effects on Children*, available at http://www.phoenixchildrens.com/PDFs/principles_and_practices-of_effective_discipline.pdf. See also BRYCS' *Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook*, available at <http://www.brycs.org/documents/RaisingChildren-Handbook.pdf>

³ Catholic Community Services of Utah has published *Cultural Orientation for Children with Refugee Backgrounds*, a curriculum including sections on “Family Roles” and “Claiming Your Culture.” Available at <http://www.brycs.org/documents/UtahCO.pdf>

⁴ See “Connecting with Your Teen” a tip sheet for parents and caregivers in *Strengthening Families and Communities: 2009 Resource Guide*, available on p. 77 at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/res_guide_2009/guide.pdf

⁵ M. McEvoy, C. Lee, A. O'Neill, A. Groisman, K. Roberts-Butelman, K. Dinghra, K. Porder (May/June 2005). “Are there universal parenting concepts among culturally diverse families in an inner-city pediatric clinic?” *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 19(3), p. 142. <http://download.journals.elsevierhealth.com/pdfs/journals/0891-5245/PIIS0891524504002986.pdf>

⁶ K.M. Lubell, T. Lofton, H.H. Singer (2008). *Promoting Healthy Parenting Practices Across Cultural Groups: A CDC Research Brief*. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/images/DVP/Healthy_Parenting_RIB_a.pdf

⁷ Joan Mosier and the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work published a training outline for the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program, titled, “Parenting Styles: A Cross-Cultural Perspective” (June 2001). Pages 21-23 include a discussion of “Strengths and dysfunction” in relation to cultural context. <http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/Curriculum/307ParentingStylesACrossCulturalPerspective/Content/Content.pdf>