



WINTER 2007 SPOTLIGHT:

Cultural Competency in Child Welfare Practice: A Bridge Worth Building

When the ACS [child protective services] worker came to the house she did not speak Chinese, so I sent my daughter to talk to her, I thought she was a missionary. She talked to my daughter for five or six minutes, my daughter only said she would call me back...then I later found out I had been reported for abuse by the school because I punished my daughter for misbehaving. No one ever talked to me or explained to me what was going on, only to my daughter. [1, p.82]

I had to get a psychological evaluation; the first person who did this was American and did not speak my language. He said I was below average intelligence. They gave me a Spanish-speaking one and he said I was above average intelligence. [1, p.82]

These newcomer parents painfully convey the cultural and linguistic barriers that can be experienced when child welfare workers interact with foreign-born parents. Situations like these are frustrating for both newcomer families and for the child welfare workers involved with them, underscoring the relevance of cultural competence training for child welfare workers. Such training is a necessary bridge between the assumptions and practices of majority and minority cultures.

The intersection of culture and child welfare may be particularly charged with emotion, due to the deep sentiment between child and caregiver, the implied questioning of one's parenting ability inherent in a child welfare investigation, and the tendency to assume that our own cultural practices are best for children. Given increasing diversity, and decreasing cultural isolation—due to the forces of globalization and migration—child welfare workers and newcomer service providers must collaborate more in order to improve caseworker knowledge of cross-cultural parenting practices, and to improve newcomer knowledge of U.S. parenting laws and norms. Current strategies to address diversity and cultural competence must include practice considerations for the growing refugee and immigrant populations in our systems.

The Child Welfare League of America defines cultural competence as:

The ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

Developing Training

To meet the need for culturally sensitive service providers, many refugee resettlement, immigrant, and ethnic community based organizations provide training to the staff of their local child welfare agencies. Though less formal and often unpublished, these trainings frequently utilize refugees and immigrants as effective training leaders. Described below are several local training examples from NY, CA, and NC.

- **New York, New York:** The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF), offers such training to promote a broader understanding of the Asian American community in New York City and to highlight how language, culture, and the immigrant experience affect family functioning and help-seeking behavior. To read more about what is commonly covered in such trainings, see this [PowerPoint presentation](#). In particular, see slides 21-22, which cover why immigration is relevant to child welfare.

In addition, from 2003-2006, child welfare staff and workers from community-based organizations in New York City received training on working with immigrant families. The training included information on immigration status, the immigration process as experienced by various immigrant groups, access to services and benefits, and utilizing informal service networks. The curriculum used was developed by Dr. Ilze Earner and the National Resource Center on Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, together with a number of community-based organizations, to respond to problems specifically identified by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) "Roundtable on Immigrant Issues". As a result of this group's advocacy, ACS now has a structure in place to integrate immigrants' needs into their child welfare services, highlighted in this past BRYCS [Spotlight](#).

- **Santa Clara County, California:** The Department of Family and Children's Services has created a number of resources for staff working with refugees and immigrants. For example, their [Immigration and Naturalization Resource and Practice Guide](#) provides basic information on the differences between refugees, asylees, and immigrants; issues surrounding language access; and lists of resettlement and other community-based agencies for the purpose of building collaborative relations.
- **Catawba County, North Carolina:** Representatives from the United Hmong Association often provide Catawba County Social Services' staff with training on the history of the Hmong in America and North Carolina, and facilitate discussions about effectively communicating and interacting with Hmong families. For more information on the collaborative relationship between the United Hmong Association and Catawba County Social Services, read this past BRYCS [Promising Practice](#).

I know of one case in which the parents were illiterate and had less exposure to urban life. Their children assimilated first and became the teachers of the parents, making family decisions in the favor of the children. The mother sought help from the local child welfare agency and asked them to mediate. The mother asked that the children be removed, saying, 'Take them, discipline them in your ways, and then bring them back, because if we use our ways, we'll get in trouble.' Juvenile probation authorities became involved and worked with the parents and teenagers on communication and decision-making.
- BRYCS interview with [Aline, a Burundian Social Worker](#)

Another type of training has grown out of [The Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Program](#), created under the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980. Title IV-E provides federal funding to states to train current child welfare staff and/or future employees of child welfare agencies. The program supports university-agency partnerships by providing internships and financial incentives for social work students to work in child welfare agencies, while child welfare agencies receive professional in-service trainings, promoting evidence-based practice and contributions to the development of social work curricula.

At least two such child welfare training programs currently teach child welfare staff on working with refugee and immigrant families.

- The [Ohio Child Welfare Training Project \(OCWTP\)](#) has expanded a training on "Working with Families who are Muslim" to provide training to child welfare staff on working with refugees and immigrants. Currently, the OCWTP is preparing to launch a new two-day workshop called "Casework with the Immigrant and Refugee in Mind," which will cover access to services, language and information gaps, cultural issues, and the migration experience. To learn more about this "Promising Practice" identified by BRYCS, read the [full program description](#).
- The [Public Child Welfare Training Academy \(PCWTA\)](#) in San Diego, California, serves five counties in the Southern California region and recently worked with a Kenyan psychologist to develop a training on "Refugee Communities: Social and Practical Implications for Service Providers." The training will cover the basic definition of a refugee and a historical overview of refugees in the U.S., the journey of refugee families from refugee camps to Southern California, the role of culture in society, and basic skills for culturally competent practice with refugees. In addition, the training will provide participants with an overview of African and Middle Eastern cultures including gender roles, extended family practices, child rearing practices, acculturation, and role

changes while in the U.S. To learn more about this “Promising Practice” identified by BRYCS, read the [full program description](#).

Developing Standards and Practice

In 2001, the National Association of Social Workers developed [Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice](#), which includes “immigration, acculturation, and assimilation stresses” as important factors to consider when working with diverse populations. Most social work programs and child welfare training programs address cultural competency, but few pay specific attention to the knowledge and skills required for working with refugees and immigrants.

Currently one in five children in the U.S. is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, which means that most child welfare agencies have immigrant children on their caseloads at any given time. [2] It is important to note that refugee and U.S. born children of immigrants (about 85% of children in immigrant families) are eligible for the same services as other U.S. residents, and may also be eligible for specialized foster care programs ([Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Programs](#)). However, all children of immigrants also face complex barriers to effective services.

Refugee and immigrant families have some unique needs that affect child welfare practice:

- **Diverse Backgrounds:** Each culture includes differing values and norms related to family structure, family life, parenting practices, child development, gender roles, etc.
- **Levels of Acculturation:** Levels of acculturation affect the amount of explanation and orientation needed; children’s ability to acculturate faster can lead to tension and intergenerational conflict.
- **Complex Migration Journeys:** Many refugees, and some immigrants, have experienced migration adversity, which may include war, persecution, trauma, loss, separation, and deprivation. These experiences can affect the cohesion of refugee families and refugee parents’ ability to care for their children in the U.S.
- **Separation:** Most refugee and immigrant families in the U.S. experience separation from loved ones as part of the migration experience, affecting families’ emotional well-being and support system. Some refugee and immigrant children arrive in the U.S. without parents, or without extended family, due to death, displacement, immigration regulations, or limited resources.
- **Diverse Languages:** A Federal executive order requires federally funded agencies to provide accessible services to most limited English proficient clients under [Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act](#).
- **Complex Legal Needs:** Many foreign-born children in the child welfare system have family members with varying immigration statuses, or other complex legal needs. Refugee families may need help tracing and reunifying with family members, while undocumented children in the child welfare system may be eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status or other forms of legal relief.
- **Eligibility for Benefits:** Immigration status affects eligibility for various benefits, ranging from food stamps to health insurance, with refugees often eligible for more public benefits than immigrants.

We heard back in Laos that parents in the U.S. cannot spank their children to discipline them. We have heard that you can teach your child, but you cannot punish her when she misbehaves. 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. - BRYCS Interview with [Tou and Mee, Hmong Parents](#)

For more detailed information on these and other factors, see BRYCS’ publication, [Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children: A Resource for Meeting the Special Needs of Refugee Youth and Children](#).

A relative who lives in the U.S. has a teenage daughter who did not want to listen to her parents, so she went outside the house and sat under a tree. Then she went to the police and told them that she was not happy and that her mother was beating her. When the police brought her back home, she lied to the police and said that her mother was her stepmother. The police eventually found out that the girl had been getting into fights at school and that her mother had hit her for this. The girl finally admitted that she had called the police because her mother was not allowing her to do what she wanted.

I like that there is not beating here like in Sudan—in Sudan, even if you're 18, your father has the right to beat you—but I don't want my children to call the police on me, like this child did. I don't think there is a big difference between U.S. and Sudanese values, but here the rules say that parents should not hit their children. So, here in America, what do you do?

- BRYCS interview with [Mary, A Sudanese Mother](#).

Conclusion

Cultural competence is as much a journey as a destination: something we continually move towards rather than assume that we have reached. However, there are tangible signs of progress along the way, as pointed out by this immigrant parent:

I think if there were more people who worked in the system who can speak the language and who understand the culture, then we could see improvement in how [child welfare workers] do things. [1, p. 21]

This hope for cultural and linguistic understanding within child welfare systems is a goal which many child welfare service providers are working towards today. To get there, collaborations between child welfare agencies, newcomer service providers, and ethnic community based organizations seem to be the most effective strategy for bridging our cultural and linguistic differences.

This is a bridge worth building – one which increases our understanding of one another, broadens our notions of parenting, and improves the wellbeing of all of our nation's children.

For resources on cultural competency, see these two new “Lists of Highlighted Resources” from BRYCS:

- [Child Welfare Training Curricula for Staff Working with Refugees and Immigrants](#)
- [Resources to Enhance Child Welfare Training Curricula](#)

Cultural Competency Assessment Tools for Agencies

A number of tools assess cultural competence at both organizational and individual levels. Most of the assessment instruments refer to culturally diverse communities, without explicitly speaking of refugees and immigrants; they can be used as a foundation for further assessment on culturally competent practice with foreign-born populations.

At the organizational level, agencies might consider using the following assessment tools:

- [Cultural Competence Agency Self-Assessment Instrument](#) from Child Welfare League of America
- [Cultural Competence: A Guide for Human Service Agencies](#) from Child Welfare League of America
- Any of the tools from the [National Center for Cultural Competence](#)

At the individual level, service providers might consider using the following assessment tools:

- [Cultural Competence Self Assessment Questionnaire](#) from Portland State University, Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health (see pages 19-28 for the Service Provider version of the questionnaire)
- [Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Behavioral Health Services and Supports to Children, Youth and Their Families](#) from the National Center for Cultural Competence
- [Other Self-Assessment Checklists](#) from the National Center for Cultural Competence (including one for those who work with children with disabilities and families affected by sudden infant death syndrome)

Additional Resources

For more information, see previous publications by BRYCS on this topic:

- [*Brighter Futures for Migrating Children: An Overview of Current Trends and Promising Practices in Child Welfare*](#)
- [*Determining Child Abuse & Neglect Across Cultures*](#)
- [*Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare: Collaboration for Child Protection*](#)
- [*Collaborative Partnerships to Enhance the Well-being of Foreign-born Children in New York City, New York*](#)
- [*New Americans and Child Protection*](#), St. Louis, Missouri
- [*Family and Community Centered Child Welfare Practice with Refugees and Immigrants*](#)
- [*Family Involvement in Child Welfare Practice*](#)
- [*Hmong Child and Family Team Meetings*](#)

To join a nation-wide effort to increase the effectiveness of child welfare services for immigrant families, join the [Migration and Child Welfare National Network](#) and see the following publications:

- [*Undercounted. Underserved. Immigrant and Refugee Families in the Child Welfare System*](#) by the Annie E. Casey Foundation
- [*Migration: A Critical Issue for Child Welfare*](#) by American Humane Association

BRYCS' Spotlights and other publications are written for practitioners. All of the information and recommendations above are based on the references below. In places where there is not a specific reference listed and you would like to know the source, please [contact us](#) and we would be happy to provide that information.

REFERENCES

1. Earner, I. (2007). *Immigrant Families and Public Child Welfare: Barriers to Services and Approaches for Change*. Child Welfare, 86(4).
2. Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2007). *Kidscount Data Snapshot*. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=2291>