



BRYCS Photo, Claudia Gilmore

BRYCS BRIEF

Winter 2010

Training Staff for Child Welfare Practice with Newcomer Families

Case Example

A refugee mother from North Africa was resettled in the U.S. with her five young children. Following a period of homelessness, the family was relocated to an apartment. A child protection worker made an evening visit to check on the family and found that the mother was gone, there was no food in the house, and the eight-year-old child was caring for his younger siblings, including a newborn. The children did not know where their mother was nor when she would return. After waiting for a while, the caseworker called the police since it was unknown if, or when, the mother would return. Sometime after the police arrived, the mother returned home carrying a grocery bag: she had walked to a nearby gas station to buy food for the family.

The children were placed in foster care for a time, due to concerns about the mother's mental and physical health. After the children were reunified with their mother, the child protection worker learned that the mother was planning to have her sons go through a traditional facial scarification ritual, signifying eligibility for marriage. The child protection worker had to decide how to respond.

What are the child safety issues?

What are the cultural differences and adjustment difficulties?

If you were the child protection worker, how would you handle this case?

As American communities become increasingly diverse, so does the population of children and families served by state and county child welfare systems across the U.S. One analysis notes that 8.6% of children involved with the child welfare system live with a foreign-born parent.¹ While six states remain home to the highest proportion of immigrants—California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas—other states with traditionally fewer immigrants have seen large increases in their immigrant populations.²

In response, numerous state child welfare systems are creating or enhancing staff training and development efforts to prepare child welfare workers for serving families from diverse backgrounds. This BRYCS Brief discusses the process that some states have undertaken to improve skills and increase knowledge for working with immigrant and refugee populations involved in the child welfare system.

Georgia Model

Georgia implemented a statewide needs assessment with child welfare workers and identified a need for training on working with immigrant families. Around the same time, the Georgia General Assembly passed a 2006 state law requiring state agencies to verify the legal status of anyone receiving public benefits. Thus, to address both the educational needs of child welfare staff and the legislative requirement that caseworkers understand clients' immigration status, Georgia's Department of Human Resources (DHR) partnered with Georgia State University to develop a specialized curriculum on "Working with Immigrant Children and Families."

These training materials complemented an earlier curriculum developed in conjunction with Dalton State College on "Culturally Competent Practice with Latino Families." Two critical elements in developing this kind of curriculum, as noted by the Education Training and Services Section of the DHR, include:

- Identifying a **workgroup**; and
- Recruiting a **curriculum writer** with knowledge of the subject area.³



The curriculum was developed as a two-day training, incorporating interactive small group discussion and case scenario activities. Due to recent efforts in Georgia to combat sex trafficking, material was included to help caseworkers identify child trafficking victims. As an unanticipated benefit of the legal status check requirements, DHR can more easily identify children in care who are candidates for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS).

Minnesota Model

In response to a report on Child Welfare Disparities, the Child Welfare Training System (CWTS) of the Minnesota Department of Human Services (MDHS) has been developing five culturally specific training curricula over a five-year period. The curricula were to address working with:

- African Americans,
- Native Americans,
- Asian Americans,
- Latino Americans, and
- Immigrant Americans.

So far, CWTS has developed curricula and implemented training on working with African Americans and Native Americans; curricula on Asian Americans and Immigrant Americans are in process; and a writer is being recruited for the Latino American curriculum.

Simultaneously, MDHS has developed a new "practice model" in response to its Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) process with the federal government. The new practice model describes core values and skills to be implemented by child welfare workers, including cultural competence through understanding a family's beliefs, values, race, ethnicity, history, tribe, culture, religion and language.⁴

Considerations

There are several things to consider when developing curricula on working with newcomer families:

- Should the training address ethnic specific information, general cultural competency skills, or both?
- Should the training be developed in-house, in collaboration with a university, or by contracting with a consultant or a non-profit?
- What combination of immigration data, immigration law, cultural information, local cross-cultural resources and practice skills are needed by caseworkers?

Training Development Steps

Following is a general outline of steps taken by Georgia and Minnesota in developing their cross-cultural curricula.

- **Establish a workgroup**
 - Invite participants and determine size of workgroup (ensure significant participation by immigrant and refugee representatives)
 - Include government employees (from different departments and positions), community members, private social service agency staff, ethnic community based organizations, and/or parent groups
 - Determine frequency of meetings and duration of commitment
 - Select chairperson
 - Clarify role and authority of the workgroup
- **Recruit a writer or trainer**
- **Develop priorities for the training program**
 - Identify specific immigration and child safety issues for the state/region
 - Gather specific immigration concerns from caseworkers
 - Request state data on immigrant populations involved with child welfare
 - Include evidence based practices and perspectives from national organizations
- **Elicit community input**
 - Through the workgroup, the review process, and/or some other way
- **Determine training materials**
 - Develop training outline
 - Choose training method (word for word or discussion questions, in-person or on-line)
 - Assemble case scenarios, group activities, relevant media, evaluation components (such as pre-test / post-test)
- **Develop curriculum review process**
- **Pilot the training**
 - Incorporate feedback
- **Determine training availability**
 - Decide whether optional or required; frequency and location

Case Outcome

The child protection supervisor approved the caseworker's request to spend time with the mother and an interpreter, in order to learn more about the family's culture, parenting practices, and traditional rites of passage. The family, community elders and the caseworker worked together on a painting ceremony as an alternative rite of passage event. Mutual education between the caseworker and the mother about each other's culture proved critical to the success of the reunification.

Be sure to check out BRYCS' lists of highlighted resources:

[Child Welfare Training Curricula for Staff Working with Refugees and Immigrants](#) (includes curricula from Georgia, California, and more!) and [Resources to Enhance Child Welfare Training Curricula](#) (includes books and articles to draw from when training staff).

References

¹ Alan J. Detlaff, Ph.D., and Ilze Eamer, Ph.D. "Children of Immigrants in the Child Welfare System: Findings From the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being," Migration and Child Welfare National Network (p. 2), <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=3674>

² *Ibid*, p. 2.

³ Interview with Julie York, Education and Training Services Section, Division of Family and Children Services, Georgia Department of Human Resources (November 10, 2010).

⁴ MN Department of Human Services. "Minnesota Child Welfare Practice Model" (August 2009). <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=4568>