

# Parenting Challenges Among New Americans

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According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced individuals rose by over 50% in the past decade; from 42.7 million people in 2007 to 68.5 million people in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). While most people were displaced in their countries of origin, approximately 25.4 million people, half of whom were children, were forced to flee their countries as refugees.

Since the displacement of millions of Europeans following World War II, the body of literature on the refugee experience has grown significantly. However, experiences of newer refugee groups coming from diverse Middle Eastern, African, and South Asian countries are not as well documented. Of particular interest are the ways in which these refugee families experience parenting as they encounter and try to adapt to a new culture.

Recently, a community based participatory research (CBPR) project led by local service providers and academic researchers engaged in focus group discussions with Somali, Bhutanese, and Congolese community members to learn from their unique experiences. The ultimate objective of this community conversation was to understand the challenges of newly resettled refugee parents in hopes of developing effective and sustainable intervention programs to support their transition as New Americans.

Each of the groups expressed similar parenting challenges and identified opportunities and resources that may help improve the parenting transition.

## Challenges

On a large scale, the diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds of newly resettled refugees present distinct challenges to institutional systems such as schools, healthcare, and social agencies that often lack adequate resources to provide culturally responsive services (Brenner & Kia-Keating 2016; Sarr & Mosselson, 2010). Additionally, recent reductions in federal funding to refugee resettlement programs have reduced or eliminated social services which directly impacts the ability of refugees to achieve economic self-sufficiency and cultural adaptation (Brown & Scribner, 2014)

Language barriers, lack of community resources, and few vocational opportunities were identified by all three groups as having a detrimental effect on their ability to provide for their families and build community. Because of the language barrier, many new Americans enter the job market in low paying positions such as housekeeping and janitorial services, and they struggle to make ends meet. They look to refugee community centers for support in the form of

education, system navigation, and training to improve their social standing, but many of these centers' have lost financial resources to support such programs.

Parents in all three groups also expressed frustration with their lack of knowledge when trying to navigate the healthcare and public-school system, leaving some of them with feelings of powerlessness and mistrust. Newly arrived refugee parents need to rely on settled community members or their own children as sources of information and often, the information they receive is inaccurate or misleading. For example, a parent describes explaining a complex medical issue to a trained medical interpreter to have their problem reduced to a few words in English and feeling that their story was being miscommunicated. Others described how their children, who pick up language and cultural cues more quickly, sometimes intentionally manipulate information when they are asked to interpret information or concerns from the school system.

As a result of inaccurate information and a lack of cultural knowledge, some refugee parents expressed great fear that their children would be taken away from them by child protective services (CPS). Parents reported that their children were quick to realize they could use the threat of CPS against them as a means of curbing parental discipline or authority. Lack of communication and cultural knowledge, coupled with fear of perceived threats, led many refugee parents to feel powerless and they become less involved with their children's schooling (Osman et al., 2016).

These groups of parents also described feeling powerless as their children became Americanized. Refugee children, who gain exposure to the mainstream culture through school, peers, and social media, typically adapt to the language and customs of the new culture more quickly. This transition and adaptation can cause tension between the children, who are gaining skill sets and independence in a new culture, and their parents who tend to hold tightly to their native culture and beliefs. This clash in values, known as cultural dissonance, is often associated with a breakdown in parent-child communication, distancing, and a perceived decreased in parental authority (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

## **Resources**

While the challenges to refugees are many, the focus groups also identified ways to enhance resources that might improve parenting among new Americans. All three groups expressed a need for better informational and educational resources upon resettlement that could help them learn accurate information about social systems as well as how to navigate them. They also expressed a need for culturally congruent parenting classes with targeted interventions aimed at maintaining communication with children, negotiating expectations, communicating with medical and school systems, adapting parenting skills, and exploring alternative ways to discipline children.

Additionally, all the groups stressed the need to focus on English language acquisition and literacy for adults to achieve better paying jobs and economic self-sufficiency. Acknowledging the cuts in funding to refugee service agencies, suggestions for enhancing individual and community development included identifying and recruiting volunteer tutors and role models from settled families who would be willing to help teach English and share experiences.

All of the groups expressed a strong desire to maintain and share their language and unique cultural values with their children and saw opportunities to achieve these goals through developing and partnering with positive support networks in their refugee communities,

incorporating afterschool culture and religious classes for their children, and providing regular opportunities for community members to engage with their children by coming together to celebrate their culture. They also saw a need to provide community education to institutions such as public schools and healthcare settings to enhance cultural competence and respect among service providers.

The results of this project highlight the challenges and supports needed for some Congolese, Somali, and Bhutanese refugees in our community to achieve a successful parenting transition. Our hope is that organizations that serve these populations may consider these findings to better their understanding of newly resettled refugee parents' experiences and opportunities for support.

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