SOCIAL SERVICES AND NEWCOMER FAMILIES IN NYS

BRIDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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INTRODUCTION

- ~4.2 million immigrants live in New York State
- ~20% of people living in New York State are foreign-born.
- ~30% of people live in a household where a language other than English (LOTE) is spoken.
- In 2014, over 4,000 refugees from a variety of countries were settled across NYS
- 8.6% of children who are brought to the attention of the child welfare system are the children of immigrants.
- As these diverse communities encounter Social Service Agencies, tensions can arise.
Burma

- Significant linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity.
  - Major ethnic groups in NYS include Karen, Burman, Chin, and Karenni.
- Value family, expect respect for elders, favor cooperation over individualism
- Important social cues to consider:
  - Direct eye contact is viewed as a challenge
  - It is impolite to show anger
  - Use both hands when giving to or receiving from someone more senior
- Some parenting and medical practices (especially Chin) have origins in animistic religious beliefs and may cause alarm among Westerners.
  - Cupping
  - Finger Prick
  - Coining
IRAQ

• Many Iraqis have strong educational backgrounds and knowledge of English
• Vast majority Muslim
  • Patriarchal society = different expectations for girls and boys
  • Protection of women to demonstrate that they are loved and valued, though Westerners might perceive it as oppressive.
    • Muslim women might be more comfortable working with female social service workers or medical professionals.
• Discipline might include physical punishment, though parents are familiar with laws against corporal punishment
  • Provide alternatives
SOMALIA

- 85% of people are ethnic Somalis and practicing Muslims
  - Next largest ethnic group = Somali Bantu.
- Both groups value family, follow a patriarchal structure, have strong tradition of extended family and kinship in childrearing.
  - Displacement might have disrupted this network, leading to family tension.
  - It is not typical to converse with children about daily life or emotions = parents might be unaware of issues with peers or at school.
- Somali Bantu parents might engage in traditional healing, including cupping or fire-burning.
- Discipline might include corporal punishment, but parents are eager for alternatives to use in an effort to avoid agency intervention.
- The written Somali language was not formalized until the 1970s, so older Somalis may lack literacy skills
  - Seek alternatives for communication = face to face is preferred
LATINO COMMUNITIES

• Many different Latino communities are represented in NYS. Most identify with their national origin and should not be lumped together
  • Puerto Ricans are American citizens = different experiences than newcomers from Mexico or the Dominican Republic despite linguistic similarities

• Families are close-knit, value roles of parents and children, have high expectations for children’s behavior
  • Familisismo = family is a source of pride and strength.
    • Service workers should embrace and build on the strong family structures as an asset when working with families.
Newcomers typically come from countries in which state involvement in parenting and family life is unheard of.

- Families might be weary, unsure what agency involvement entails or why it’s necessary.

The majority of interactions between newcomers and CPS workers are the result of reports of either neglect or excessive physical punishment.
• Sibling Caretaking is a common practice in many newcomer communities, leading to reports of inadequate supervision
  • Hafford (2010) suggests older children may benefit from the sense of self-efficacy, responsibility, and familial importance connected to sibling caretaking.
  • Different kids = different levels of responsibility
  • However, over-burdening older children can lead to parentalization

• Help connect families with culturally appropriate child care.
  • Many families prefer to leave young children in the care of people who share their ethnic or religious background
EXCESSIVE PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

• Acknowledge changing perceptions of corporal punishment (CP) in the U.S.
  • 1968 = 94% of Americans approved; 1994 = 68%; Various opinions still present today

• The majority of parents do not intend to abuse children
  • Following cultural norms or doing what their parents did = acknowledge that their parents did their best with the information they had at the time
  • Make parents aware of the research regarding how physical punishment impacts child development and school performance = use parents’ hopes for their children’s success as a tool in changing attitudes about using CP
  • Explain that CP has the potential to escalate into a pattern of abuse

• Newcomer parents view Western parenting as too permissive
  • Provide viable alternatives to corporal punishment
FAMILY CONFLICT

• Significant resettlement stressors can compound and lead to conflict that results in agency intervention
  • Separation
  • Trauma
  • Renegotiation of family roles
  • Different rates of acculturation for children and parents can cause tension
  • Barriers to employment, quality housing, transportation

• Workers should attempt to connect families with preventative services before tensions escalate.
  • Quality After-school and childcare
  • Job Training
  • Mental health services in cases of trauma
EXTENTION OF SERVICES

• Newcomers often have significant barriers to overcome to participate in services or programs
  • Feelings of isolation or social rejection
  • Transportation and/or childcare
  • Inflexible employment
  • Immigration status affecting eligibility

• Provide materials in parent’s home languages or work with interpreters to ease communication
  • NEVER assume that because a person lacks knowledge of English, he or she lacks intelligence
ASSET-BASED ORIENTATION

• Worker’s attitudes are closely tied to the clients’ willingness to engage/participate.
  • Case workers with a deficit orientation had less success
  • Again, NEVER assume that because a person lacks knowledge of English, he or she lacks intelligence

• Collaborate with parents to identify specific plans for each family
  • There is no one-size-fits-all approach that can work with newcomer communities
  • Be flexible
  • Embrace families’ cultural backgrounds as assets
NEXT STEPS/RECOMMENDATIONS

• Expand cultural sensitivity training to deepen knowledge of the assets of NY’s diverse newcomer communities

• Reframe the role of the case worker as an ally rather than an authority

• Demonstrate expertise, build friendly rapport, but maintain professional boundaries

• Push for policy changes that address the needs of newcomer families before issues escalate into conflicts that require agency intervention
REFERENCES