

Tip Sheet



Cultural Collisions: Addressing Service Implications of the Balance of Power in Immigrant Families

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Introduction

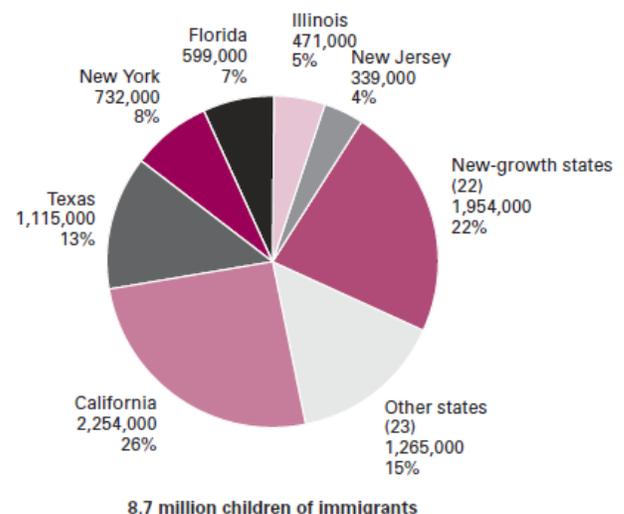
Immigrant and other foreign-born families¹ represent a substantial proportion of the U.S. population. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the foreign born population of the US constituted nearly 40 million people, or 13% of the total population². Additionally, 19.73% of the US population speaks a language other than English at home, out of which 37.83% speak languages other than Spanish or a Spanish Creole.

Children of immigrants are the fastest-growing section of the US population under age 18. About 20 percent of this country's children—nearly 17 million—have at least one foreign-born parent. The Urban Institute (<http://www.urban.org>) estimates that by 2015 children of immigrants will constitute 30% of nation's school population. These children represent 26% of all low-income children³ in the United States, and are more likely to forgo needed medical care, drop out of high school, and experience behavioral problems. Yet, they are less likely than other children to benefit from government programs designed to assist low-income families.⁴

A major factor affecting the ability of the foreign-born to access services and achieve self-sufficiency is the immigration process itself. Almost every immigrant family endures crisis simply because they have migrated from one country and culture to another, and many have gone through various types of traumas and distress in their countries of origin. Adjustment to American cultural norms affects immigrant families in different ways. This includes tremendous changes in their family dynamics, such as balance of power shifts, family role

reversals and changes in social status. Women may need to work outside the home, in many cases for the first time in their lives. Immigrants who were professionals in their home country may fail to meet re-certification standards in the United States and are forced to take employment outside their field. Finally, immigrant children acculturate much faster than their parents, which triggers a process called reverse parenting.

Exhibit 1: Distribution access States of Children of Immigrants Age 0-8, 2007-08



Source: Urban Institute tabulations from the IPUMS datasets drawn from the 2007 and 2008 American Community Surveys.

Note: The new-growth states are Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington.

Ensuring Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency

Understanding all the difficulties of immigrant integration, and striving to improve access to services by non-English speaking individuals,

the US government has enacted the following legislation:

- The Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act Requires any recipient of federal funding (which includes virtually all state and local government social service agencies) to make its services or programs reasonably accessible to individuals with limited English proficiency.
- The Executive order 13166 (2000) requires federal agencies to “improve access to federally conducted and federally assisted programs and activities for persons who, as a result of national origin, are limited in their English proficiency (LEP).”
- Attorney General’s 2011 Memo “Government’s Renewed Commitment to Language Access Obligations Under Executive Order 13166” requires ensuring effective communication at all points of contact between an LEP person and Federal agencies.⁵
- Best practice recommendations of the Executive order 13166 can be found in the “Language Access Assessment and Planning Tool for Federally Conducted and Federally Assisted Programs.”⁶

These laws are significant as they establish the government’s intent to be inclusive and offer a framework for organizations *to develop their own policies and approaches to ensure that immigrant families have the supports they need to achieve self-sufficiency*. By fostering culturally appropriate services for immigrant couples and parents, these organizations can alleviate their reliance on English speaking children and relatives and promote Western attitudes to family roles –such as empowerment of women and girls, and non-judgmental/respectful approach to men as family caregivers and participant parents. By

accessing such assistance, immigrant families will better and faster adjust to the American values and way of life.

Cultural and Generational Aspects of Immigrant Children’s Acculturation

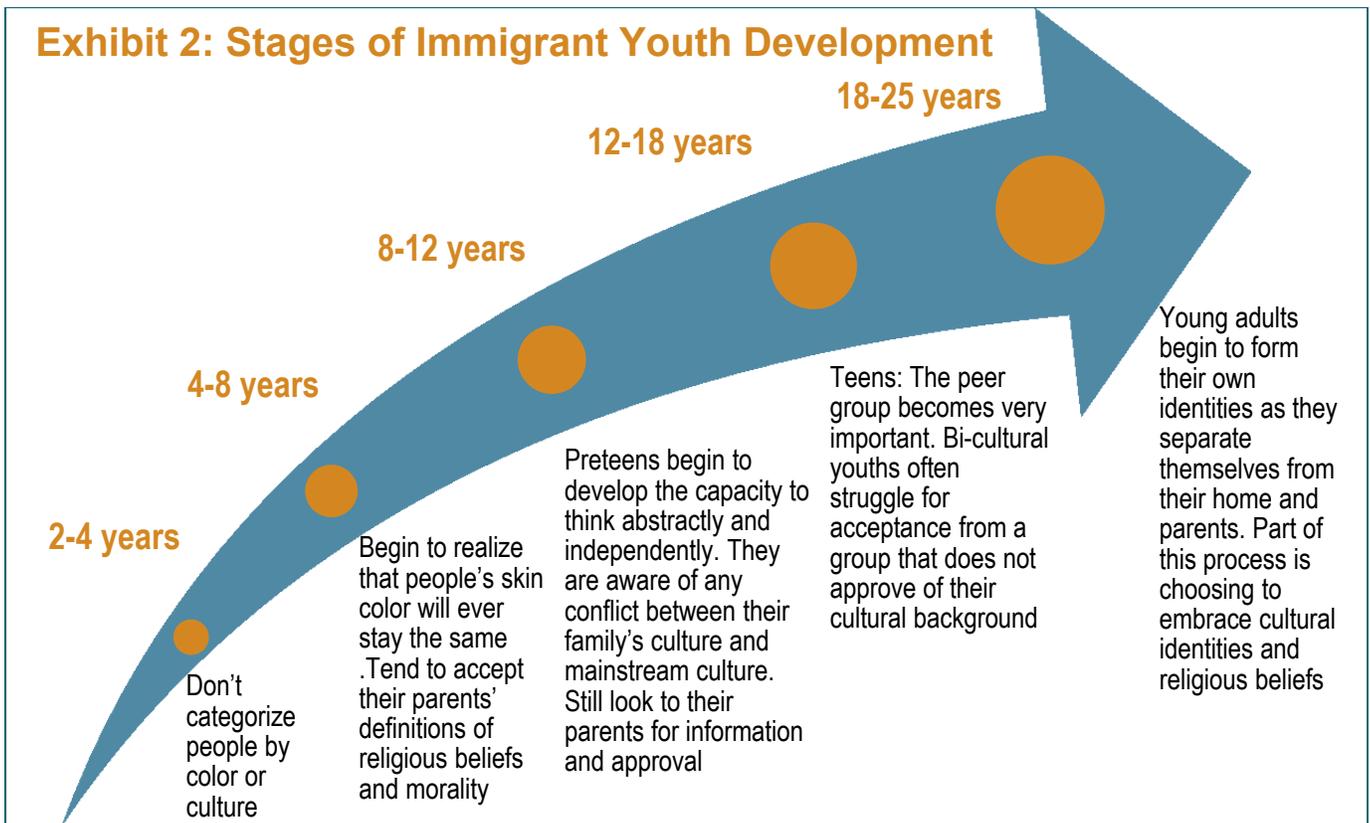
Stages of immigrant child development

Eric Erickson, a German-born American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, is known for his theory on psychosocial development of human beings throughout the human lifespan. His theory explains that, at every stage of life, a person encounters a conflict in order to meet a certain achievement goal. When this goal is met, a person moves to another phase.

For example, a developmental goal for young children of all cultural backgrounds between 5 and 12 years of age, is to achieve a competency: *“I am what I can achieve”*. The primary conflict is industry (productiveness) vs. inferiority: if the goal is not met, children can develop low self-esteem, become unenthusiastic in learning, etc. Another very important characteristic of children this age is that they begin to internalize their race, ethnic background, etc.

An important study of more than 400 immigrant children demonstrated that one’s ethnic identity forms prior to adolescence.⁷ When children reach this turbulent period of life, a new conflict arises: identity vs. role confusion, or identity crisis. In Western individualistic society, identity formation tends to take longer as teens learn and master the skills needed to enter adulthood in our technological and individualistic world. In many immigrant cultures, at a very early age, kids (especially boys) are taught that they should answer to the whole community first, and then to their own family.

Exhibit 2: Stages of Immigrant Youth Development



High context culture and the contrasting low context culture are terms presented by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*.⁸ In a high context culture (a non-Western culture), many things are left unsaid, many messages are hinted, and many rules are assumed. This can be explained by the fact that historically people lived in close communities; and their families were in an essence an extension of these communities. Members of these communities have similar experiences and expectations. Words and word choice become very important in higher context communication, but words cannot communicate a complex message fully. In a low context culture (Western/American cultures), the emphasis is on the interests of individual responsibility, and nuclear families. American/Western communication styles are verbally explicit; feelings and deeds are explained and the value of words is less important.

For immigrant families there are many implications caused by cultural differences. Most importantly, the steadiness of family relationships becomes influenced by the Western (low context) culture, causing conflicts and miscommunications.

Dissonant acculturation in immigrant families and impact on traditional family roles

Very often, children acculturate faster than their parents. As a result, parents' engagement in children's educational and social integration is limited. The dissonant acculturation occurs when linguistic and cultural differences between parents and children create intergenerational conflicts and upset the traditional balance of power. Children assume adult roles serving as interpreters and cultural brokers for their parents. This affects the parents' ability to introduce and connect their children to surrounding communities. The "Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study"⁹ (1996-2006),

which is the largest study of its kind to date in the United States, indicates that level of parental acculturation and education directly impacts academic and social success of their children.

The 2011 American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force reports, that because parents and children acculturate in different ways and at different rates, immigrant parents and children increasingly live in different cultural worlds. Immigrant parents often understand little of their children's lives outside the home. For immigrant children, it can be difficult to live with the expectations and demands of one culture in the home and another at school. Children may not turn to their parents with problems and concerns, believing that their parents do not know the peripheral culture well enough to provide them with good advice or assistance or that they are already overburdened with the multiple stressors of resettlement.

Children become torn between two cultures, which can lead to internal and familial conflicts, as they struggle to define their identity. In addition to parent-child relationships, this struggle also impacts the couple relationship as parents often acculturate at differing speeds and may be more or less tolerant of the child's efforts to become Americanized.

Compounding the current stressors is the fact that many immigrant families and children have been exposed to violence, persecution, displacement and extreme poverty in their countries of origin. Better understanding by service providers of the impact of **life-long traumas**, as well as the stressors of migration and integration, is crucial for successful outcomes for immigrant children.

Tips for addressing the effects of trauma on immigrant families¹⁰:

- Screen for exposure to violence symptoms and mental health needs of children and their families on an ongoing basis.

- Refer families for comprehensive mental health assessments that include lifetime exposure to violence and acculturation stressors.
- Plan for individualized interventions that take into consideration traumatic experiences for both caregivers and children, which may be affecting the current family situation.
- Expand the definition of "trauma-informed care" and "evidence-based interventions."
- It is important for providers to consider the socio-cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and other contextual variables (for example, immigration) that may compound the impact of exposure to violence.
- Become familiar with immigration laws, policies, and resources.
- Increase cultural responsiveness to families.

Levels of immigrant families' acculturation and best practices for service provision

There are three levels of immigrant acculturation (ethnicity). The power balance in immigrant families is affected by intensity of their acculturation process: the higher the level the greater the probability of a misbalance of power.

The chart on the following page describes the three levels of ethnicity (acculturation); how immigrant families are affected; and what the best practices to address the challenges.

Exhibit 3: Assessing Levels of Immigrant Families Acculturation

Level of Ethnicity	High Level of Ethnicity	Medium Level of Ethnicity	Low Level of Ethnicity
Characteristics used for Assessing Level of Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First generation immigrants • Grew up outside America • Not fluent in English, speak mostly ethnic language • Living in high-density ethnic areas • Traditional (hierarchical) family structure • <u>Strong ties with ethnic culture</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 ½ Generation , or Second generation or acculturated first generation • Are proficient in two languages (native and English) • Live in moderate ethnic-dense areas • Young children often become caregivers for their parents • <u>Belonging to two worlds</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are second generation and onwards • Were born and raised in America • Are bilingual, but prefer English • Speak with a slight accent, or with no accent • Live in low ethnic-dense areas • <u>Weak ties with their original culture</u>
Service Provision for Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping navigate new culture • Helping families maintain stability in new culture • Parenting education • Assessment for trauma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing issues of bi-cultural families • Addressing relationships between family members who are on different levels of acculturation • Addressing intergenerational issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream • Help youth to keep cultural traditions

Developing Culturally Sensitive School Readiness Support and Empowerment Systems for Immigrant Parents

Immigrant parents customarily experience high levels of anxiety when their children start going to school because they often have no idea how to facilitate their kids' education in a new cultural environment. Some just stop participating in the educational process, others

become excessively demanding and enforcing, and many continue using parental approaches practiced by their parents back in the countries of origin, which more often than not are less suitable for the American public school system. This triggers a serious shift in the balance of power. As the children learn how to behave and study in American school system, they become more enabled by the "power of knowledge" than their parents.

For example, it is easier for the child to offer the excuse that there is "no homework today" to a parent who does not know that all the homework assignments could be checked

through the school's web-site; or simply has difficulties reading in English.

There are other factors that may hinder a parents' comfort in taking a leadership role in their children's' educational process:

- Many feel uncomfortable visiting their children's schools, because they lack English language skills.
- The parents may be unfamiliar with certain "school jargon" used to define topics, curriculum, and teaching methods; and therefore they have difficulties monitoring their children's progress.
- They may be unaware of a school's expectations for parent involvement.
- Even if they speak English, many immigrant parents have had a strikingly different experiences going to school back in their countries. For example, in many cultures, a status of a teacher in the lives of children is highly authoritarian. Neither kids nor their parents can voice an opinion, or choose subjects, or disagree with a teacher.
- Many school officials misunderstand immigrant parents' minimal participation in their children's schooling as indication that parents are neglectful of their children's education process.

What can be done to help immigrant parents to actively participate in their children's education

Launch school-based initiatives to develop partnerships and cultural awareness, through developing support mechanisms, such as establishing the institute of **cultural brokers**.¹²

"If ability to speak English and the knowledge of North American cultural conventions are made prerequisites for 'parental involvement,' then many of those parents will be defined as apathetic and incompetent and will play out their pre-ordained role of non-involvement."¹¹

Cultural brokerage is "the act of bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change." Cultural brokers engage in a number of activities to educate and assist multicultural families and schools. Bilingual or multilingual brokers can not only serve as translators to ensure that immigrant parents understand report cards, home-work assignments, or announcements; "but also can also help parents and students navigate and interpret the mainstream educational system on one hand and coach school administrators and teachers on cultural practices and beliefs"¹³ of immigrants. The brokers can be recruited from a pool of immigrant parents who are better acculturated. Another way to recruit cultural brokers is through collaborating with local ethnic communities and religious institutions. Additional strategies include:

- Implement professional development initiatives that help school staff better understand their students' cultures.
- Support informal parental involvement through the development of Immigrant Parent chapters as part of Parent Teacher Associations (PTA).
- Organize cultural events to highlight various cultures represented in school.

Exhibit 4: Service Provision to Immigrant Families Dos and Don'ts

Do not use children as interpreters and/or cultural brokers when delivering services to immigrant families.

Use qualified interpreters, always check for their references and ask them to sign a confidentiality agreement. The qualified interpreters can be contracted through local language banks or translation bureaus. Use the American Translators Association (ATA) (<http://www.atanet.org/>) for referrals and information on certified translators. We strongly recommend using ATA-certified translators, at least in courts and medical offices. If this option is not available, please contact ethnic community members and/or lay leaders to help you find a trust-worthy interpreter/translator.

REMEMBER: **INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION IS A PROFESSION.** THE FACT THAT SOMEBODY IS A NATIVE SPEAKER DOES NOT MEAN THAT HE/SHE IS A PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETER! INTERPRETATION MISTAKES CAN LEAD TO SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES.

Do not talk loudly to people with limited English proficiency: they are not deaf; they just have trouble understanding English.

Speak in normal tone of voice, try to clearly pronounce words, and use gestures to support your speech.

Do not show irritation when you don't understand what they are trying to say.

Always show understanding, use writing or drawing as communication tools. Smile.

Do not advise parents to speak English-only with their children.

- Encourage parents to promote a bi-lingual approach.
- Emphasize the importance of keeping cultural traditions.
- Encourage and praise children for being bi-cultural and bi-lingual.

Do not use cultural metaphors and references if you do not completely understand their meaning.

Partner with community- and ethnic-based organizations for cultural education and guidance

Conclusion

The cultural and societal implications of immigration will always affect immigrant families. The challenge for social service providers is to meet the diverse needs of these families even when the family themselves may not be able to effectively communicate their needs. Service providers must also make an effort to do this while respecting the traditional

roles of the family so as not to contribute to the imbalance of parental power. Patience and compassion along with an understanding of the complexities of acculturation are keys to achieving the common goal of family stabilization.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of acclaimed novel “The Namesake”, wrote: “The question of identity is always a difficult one, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are.”

Notes

¹ Foreign-born persons include all people who indicated they were either a U.S. citizen by naturalization or they were not a citizen of the United States. Persons born abroad of American parents or born in Puerto Rico or other U.S. Island Areas are not considered foreign born. (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/meta/long_101614.htm)

² <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>

³ Child Trends Indicators,” from Child Trends Data-Bank (2010) www.childtrendsdatabank.org

⁴ Karina Fortuny, Donald J. Hernandez, and Ajay Chaudry, Young Children of Immigrants: The Leading Edge of America’s Future, Brief N3, Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412203-young-children.pdf>

⁵ http://www.justice.gov/crt/lep/AG_021711_EO_13166_Memo_to_Agencies_with_Supplement.pdf

⁶ http://www.lep.gov/resources/2011_Language_Access_Assessment_and_Planning_Tool.pdf

⁷ Children Of Immigrants Form Ethnic Identity At Early Age, Science Daily, Sep. 24, 2007 <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070924104616.htm>

⁸ Hall, E. (1976). Beyond Culture. New York: Anchor Books-A division of Random House, Inc.

⁹ <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/20520/detail>

¹⁰ Cited by: “Trauma Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence: Tips for Agencies Working with Immigrant Families” developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: <http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/tips-immigrant-families.pdf>

¹¹ Cummins, J. (2000). Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matter, p. 8

¹² Jezewski, M.A. (1995). Evolution of a grounded theory: Conflict resolution through culture brokering. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 17(3), 14-30.

¹³ Yohani, S: *Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Cultural Brokers in Facilitating the School Adaptation of Refugee Children*; University of Alberta, white paper. <http://pcerii.metropolis.net/WorkingPapers/Working%20papers%20from%20June,%202009/WP10-05.pdf>

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