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Refugee Children in Canada: Searching for Identity

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Canada is providing a new home to refugees from around the globe, who have left their countries of origin because of persecution and are seeking safety elsewhere. These families bring with them myriad stresses arising from their migration. Child refugees, in particular, have special needs that must be considered—trauma from witnessing violent crimes, language difficulties, family disruption, and adjustment to a different culture—in addition to the challenges that accompany childhood and growing up.

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R*efugees* are defined by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as persons (both children and adults) who are residing outside their countries and cannot return due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. UNHCR estimates that one-half of the world's 22.3 million refugees and displaced persons are children. Every day, nearly 5,000 children become refugees, with a vast number growing up and spending their entire lives in refugee camps. The majority of refugees are located in Africa, Asia, and Europe (UNHCR, 2000).

Canada as Host

Canada has a longstanding humanitarian tradition toward refugees. Since the end of World War II, Canada has resettled about 800,000 refugees from every region of the world, including Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America. Canada is one of the few countries in the world with an active resettlement and permanent immigration program.

Nearly one in five (17.4%) persons living in Canada was born outside the country (by comparison, the U.S. ratio is one in 10) and 11.2% of the total population of 31 million identify themselves as members of a visible minority. Canada is a country with two official languages (English and French) and a national policy of multiculturalism (Statistics Canada, 1996).

In the last five years (1995–1999), more than 300,000 immigrant children have resettled in Canada; approximately 15% of these are refugees. Seventy percent of the refugee children came from non-European countries, mainly Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific region. Most of them have settled in large urban centres in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta. The majority of the refugee children (70%) spoke neither of Canada's official languages when they arrived

in the country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1995 & 1996; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000).

Refugee and Immigrant Children: A Comparison

Refugee and immigrant children in Canada have significant similarities. Both groups must deal with migration, which represents a disruptive loss to one's life. Once in Canada, they both have to endure the "push-and-pull" forces of home and school, which often work in opposite directions. At school they share with other adolescents the desire to be accepted by their peer group. At home, both groups may experience a role and dependency reversal in which they may function as interpreters and "cultural brokers" for their parents. Both refugee and immigrant children may encounter society's discrimination and racism, and both have to accomplish the central task of childhood and adolescence—developing a sense of identity—while trying to bridge generational and cultural gaps. Perhaps the greatest threat to these children is not the stress of belonging to two cultures but the stress of belonging to none (Lee, 1988).

Successful adaptation can bring with it the opportunity for growth. How well children adapt is influenced by several factors, including age at arrival, severity of previous traumatic events, family background, individual resiliency, and reception by the host community and society. One key factor in determining success is the reception of newcomers by the host society. Settlement support services, schools, health and social services, and the community at large play a crucial role in assisting and supporting children to adjust and integrate into Canadian society (Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988).

Several key characteristics affect the adaptation of refugee children to a larger extent than immigrant children. First, refugee children often have experienced the tragedy and trauma of

war, including persecution, dangerous escapes, and prolonged stays in refugee camps. Some have witnessed killings, torture, and rape—including atrocities against family members. Others have been forced to serve as soldiers. Some have lost many members of their families and many have lost everything that was familiar to them.

Typically, immigrants can, at least, envision the possibility of returning to their countries; most refugees cannot. It is only natural that refugee children, along with their families, go through a process of mourning those losses. The grieving process in refugee children, however, is seldom recognized as such. This may be attributed to a long-held belief that children adapt quickly, bolstered by the tendency of children to not express their sadness and their mourning in words. Although these children may not know the concept of being homesick; they feel it all the same. Although some will not talk about their experience for fear of upsetting their parents, perhaps it is also true that many do not talk because we do not listen.

The Role of Social Services in Helping Refugee Children

For more than 40 years, Catholic Social Services (CSS), a not-for-profit, nondenominational social agency in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, has been welcoming and assisting refugees and immigrants from more than 100 countries with their resettlement and adjustment.

This article reports preliminary findings of an ethnographic study conducted in 2000 with 10 refugee families who came from five regions of the world and who needed additional help in their settlement process. Settlement assistance provided included first language translation services; help in locating permanent housing and accessing English language classes; a community orientation; referrals to health and social services, including professional counselling services; and other services as needed. In

addition, the children (ages 8 to 12) of these families participated in an application of the National Play Program for At-Risk Refugee Children, "Clearing Their Path" (YWCA Canada). The Play Program facilitates the process of healing in children who have been traumatized by the experiences of war and migration, using group counselling, play, and art.

Promoting Identity Formation in Refugee Children

The development of a personal identity includes the meaningful integration of basic notions of space, time, and social relations (Erikson, 1956). The uprooting, disruption, and insecurity inherent in migration affect psychological and social development, making the process of identity formation a more difficult balancing act between two or more sets of cultural notions and values.

It is often said "children adapt quickly." Perhaps we should ask: "To what? In relation to whom? At what price?" The perception of the resilient and adaptable refugee child needs to be reexamined. Most of the children in our group struggled to maintain and/or create a name, a voice, a space and a self (Palmer, 1997) that was adaptive to the new environment and also preserved the continuity and coherence of their experiences. One 8-year-old refugee, Miranda, explained, "Back home, I used to be blondish and the tallest girl in my class; since I came to Canada, I am the shortest and I turned dark."

In answering questions about his school life and friends, Mohammed provides insight into the challenges refugee children face:

I had lots of friends back home, and I remember all of them, we used to play soccer together. I have also friends here now, well... mostly classmates.

School is OK but there is one thing that bothers me. My name is Mohammed, no other. Here, my teacher calls me Mo, because there are five other kids with the same name.

My friends sometimes call me M.J., which is not too bad, but I wish they will call me by my real name. I like what my grandma called me: 'Mamet.' I like how she used to say it. One thing makes me really mad. I have a pen pal called Rudy. He lives in Toronto. Once I showed his letter to my teacher and she said: 'That is nice name.' Now, all my friends call me Rudy. I hate it, because that's not me, that's not my name. My name is 'MO-HA-MMED.' Do you understand me?

The teacher back home always told us to wait and think before answering a question, here everything is fast. When all the other kids have answered, I am still translating the question in my head.

Enhancing Adaptation

Individual and family strengths and different circumstances played a role in the adaptation process of the families profiled below. The external formal and informal supports (e.g., settlement assistance, community connections, etc.) were crucial in helping the families to manage migration and adjustment challenges. Two case studies illustrate this:

Sanela (11 years) lost her father in the Balkans war during the past decade, and resettled in Canada with her mother and two younger siblings, ages 8 and 6. Sanela's mother had a serious illness that was a major concern for Sanela and her family. Sanela did not want to talk, draw, or remember the war, her father, or her former home. She only wanted to draw butterflies and happy faces. Questions about the future and memories of the past were selectively put out of mind. She had nightmares that keep her terrified for days. While her mother dealt with her own illness and losses, Sanela was placed in a position that seemed to overwhelm her. Between her practical duties of taking care of her younger sister and brother, learn-

ing a new language, adapting to a new culture, and worrying about the future, she had neither the time nor energy to grieve. Activities and social connections outside the family were limited because of the family's recent arrival, the mother's limited mobility (relies on a wheelchair), and language barriers. This family was provided with extensive settlement support and counselling. They were connected with a Canadian "host friendship" family. As a result of this important community connection, the family began to feel supported and encouraged about their prospects for the future. Sanela has expressed a sense of relief and has shown signs of optimism.

Mary, age 12, came from an eastern African country where there have been many civil wars. Her three younger brothers (ages 10, 9, and 8) accompanied her. Their mother and father were both killed in the war. Mary had the responsibility of taking daily care of her little brothers, acting like a mother to them, nurturing and encouraging, but enlisting their cooperation with daily chores.

One of the changes noted in the Play Program was that when given permission and encouragement to play, laugh, and enjoy, Mary took that opportunity. A picture was taken showing her putting her feet up and concentrating on her drawings while singing. She was not worried about the other children's behaviour and manners. She included brilliant colours in her drawings. Ultimately, she and her brothers were connected with a distant cousin already living in Canada who became their guardian.

Helping Children to Mourn

Every culture has its ways of coping with death and losses. There are rituals and ceremonies by which the relatives, friends, and colleagues of the deceased person are supported during their

bereavement—funerals, burials, visits to the family, sympathy cards, etc. The massive losses suffered by refugees have no prescribed rituals for healing and little social support. Society does not easily acknowledge the grief of a person who has lost everything they hold dear in their former country. In addition, refugee families may be so busy “adjusting” that they cannot give themselves permission to grieve. As David Tolfree (1997) said, referring to the effects of war on Central American refugees: “Children may have had little time for play and parents may have had little time for their children.”

Placing Children in Their Family and Cultural Context

Refugee children have witnessed horrors that they cannot comprehend. In fact, some adults have witnessed horrors that typically may only be seen in the cinema. Children and young people need the help of their parents and other significant adults in explaining and providing a safe haven for them. Some refugee parents, being survivors of torture and persecution themselves, are traumatized to such an extent that they may be unable to provide a secure psychological environment for their children. Explained Abdul, a 10-year-old refugee boy, “My mother does not want to be here...all her family is back home. She is always sad.”

Although the present study found that there were some typical characteristics and behaviours observed in refugee children, these characteristics, should not be considered in isolation.* A psychological assessment of refugee children needs to be culturally sensitive and should include background and contextual information. As a society we place much emphasis on the individual, making the refugee family and their history almost invisible. Refugee children become children without a history. When helpers and practitioners analyse the behaviour of a refugee child out

* These included: depressive mood, clinging and overdependent behaviour, sleep disorders, nightmares, regression of social habits (e.g., toilet training, speech), and repetitive drawings of the same topic (usually in dark colours).

of context, there is a tendency to pathologize that behaviour. Many ordinary cultural practices of refugee families are often misunderstood in our classrooms, hospitals, social services, and social life.

Conclusion

Integration of refugees is a two-way street that requires tremendous efforts by both the newcomers and the mainstream Canadians to accommodate each other. The normal childhood tasks of growing up and finding an identity are greatly compounded for refugee children when they come to a new land as strangers who have already led eventful lives. Their challenge is to meaningfully integrate their history with the present and future realities of Canada.

Our goal as professional helpers should be to facilitate this process of integration with knowledge and sensitivity. As researchers, we need to ensure that we include historical and contextual perspectives to our quest. As advocates, we need to ensure that when families and children are forced to leave their homelands, there are host countries with the willingness, ability, and resources to provide them with relevant and culturally sensitive services. No doubt many of us who read this article belong to families whose histories reflect either immigrant or refugee status at some point in time. We must ensure that refugee children receive humanitarian assistance, as stated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ♦

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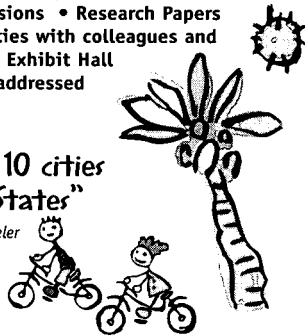
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