



Colouring Outside the Lines

a communiqué from the Ministry of Children & Youth Services

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Minister Marie Bountrogianni often says she thinks every Cabinet Minister should have two portfolios, at least for a while. That way they would be able to see how what happens in one ministry, in one sector, ripples across people's lives.

Dr. Bountrogianni is the Minister responsible for both Citizenship and Immigration and Children and Youth Services. Issues in one ministry often cross over into the other. Nowhere was that more clear than in the recent roundtable discussion about immigration and children.

Participants raised a number of issues including poverty, faith, language barriers, promoting a broader understanding of cultural issues and treating victims of violence.

"We welcome immigrants into this province," said Dr. Bountrogianni. "Immigration is vital to the social and economic growth of Ontario and of Canada. We want to work with the federal and municipal governments and other parties to help newcomers integrate more successfully into their communities. This means we must be aware of their needs and the needs of their children."

The first issue raised was the need to support the language skills of both children and parents. Young children living with parents who don't speak English need learning opportunities such as play groups or drop-in programs according to Carolyn Davis, Executive Director of Catholic-Cross Cultural Services. But beyond children, parents also need language training, otherwise "children start taking on the role as parent by negotiating the administrative problems in a house. It's too much for them," said Liliane Kvarv, Executive Director of the Centre Francophone de Toronto. Indeed Lloyd McKell of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) noted that the children and families in the TDSB speak over 80 languages. He says translation services are necessary so teachers can talk and work with families.

But what of children who are in Canada without parents? Children who are separated from their parents can often find themselves without language, without protection and without care. When 16 and 17-year-olds arrive alone in Canada, there is often nowhere for them to go. They can't be cared for by Children's Aid Societies and in some cases they aren't permitted to attend school. Sometimes the stories are even more chilling.



Bill Charron, Executive Director of Family and Children's Services of Niagara says child exploitation is a problem in Ontario and when a child arrives in Canada alone "immigration staff aren't trained to pick up the clues that there might be something else going on in terms of child exploitation." Rav Bains, from the Peel Children's Aid Society, said 'aunts and uncles' turn up at the airport and an accurate assessment must be done to make sure they are who they say they are.

Carolyn Davis of Catholic-Cross Cultural Services raised the issue of violence against immigrant and refugee women. Counselors who support abused women, she says, need to be in places where women can safely go now, such as the office of their settlement worker. Women who are being abused have many fears about speaking out, from having to leave their family and community to having to leave the country. Often, says Joan Arruda, part of the group of Toronto's Ontario Early Years Centres, "women bring their children to translate when they visit a violence against women counselor." All of these factors "have a huge impact on the children," she said.

And violence in the home is not the only kind of violence that immigrant and refugee children may witness. Sometimes children are coming from countries at war. "That affects children very deeply and there are no resources for them to deal with it," said Liliane Kvarv. Loly Rico of the Canadian Council for Refugees agreed. "We have to help children who are survivors of violence. We need those programs because we see that these children are not adjusting to our culture."

There were many ideas to help ease the transition into Canadian culture, from creating a newcomers guide, to orientation sessions and cultural sensitivity training for education, health and social services staff who work with newcomers.

Dr. Bountrogianni was grateful for the open discussion of the needs of children in our ethnic communities. She added that Premier McGuinty is very appreciative of the opportunities that immigrants bring to Ontario.