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**A Booklet for
Service Providers
Who Work with
Immigrant
Families**

*On Issues Relating
to Child Discipline,
Child Abuse and
Child Neglect*



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Our mission is to help the people of Canada
maintain and improve their health.

Health Canada

A Booklet for Service Providers who Work with Immigrant Families on Issues Relating to Child Discipline, Child Abuse and Child Neglect was prepared by **Barbara Preston** for the Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada.

Également disponible en français sous le titre *Châtiments corporels, négligence et violence envers les enfants – Guide à l'intention des dispensateurs de services qui travaillent auprès des familles immigrantes*

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Family Violence Prevention Unit

Healthy Communities Division

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Background

The information in this booklet has been drawn from a report of the Canadian Ethnocultural Council on a consultation with expert resource people from a cross-section of ethnocultural communities. Staff of several family service organizations for immigrant families added additional input.

Introduction

Canada is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. As a result, you and other service providers will likely have an opportunity to work with families whose life experiences and culture are different from your own.

This booklet is for people who work with children and parents from ethnocultural communities. It describes the concerns and questions that minority families, especially immigrant families, are likely to have about issues relating to child discipline, child abuse and child neglect.

Understanding these questions – and the reasons behind them – will help you to work more effectively with families from



other cultures. It will be especially useful if you work with members of families who did not grow up in Canada and are not familiar with Canada's child protection system.

A key starting point



No ethnic group condones sexual abuse or physical abuse of children, but the understanding of what constitutes “physical abuse” varies from family to family and culture to culture.

As in wider society, there are parents who consider it their responsibility to discipline their children physically when they misbehave. Like many others, they may have been taught that to “spare the rod is to spoil the child.” They themselves were punished this way by their parents, and such punishment was never equated with abuse.

Although these parents might have heard that physical punishment is frowned upon in Canada, they probably don't know *why* it is considered inappropriate. Nor are they likely to have received information about other ways of guiding children's behaviour.

Parents in immigrant families may also have different understandings of the term “child neglect.” Keeping a daughter home from school to look after a sick sibling, or

letting a young child stay home alone after school, are practices that might be acceptable to some families. They may not realize authorities frown on these practices in Canada.

Perceptions of child welfare officials and police

Sometimes immigrant parents are fearful and resentful of child protection authorities and police, particularly if they had unpleasant experiences with them in their countries of origin.

They worry that they won't be understood, that their cultures or values will be considered inferior, or that they will be treated unfairly. Their biggest worry is that they will lose their children.

And, because in many countries it is the extended family – not government – that deals with family problems, immigrant parents may not understand why authorities, police and courts get involved in family matters here in Canada. They may not understand that you are required by law to act in the best interest of the child.



They may want to avoid involving authorities in family issues, because family issues are considered to be private. Many families believe that

authorities have no right to interfere with their child-rearing or child discipline practices; in fact, they may not believe it possible to raise children without corporal punishment.

Child abuse risk factors



The same risk factors of child abuse in wider society – poverty, unemployment, parental childhood experience with abuse, lack of parenting skills, lack of understanding of a child’s developmental needs, and lack of support networks – are true for immigrant families.

Stresses caused by the immigration experience – for example, value clashes between parents and their children over how much of the new country’s ways children, especially girls, should adopt – can be catalysts for family problems.

Other stressors can include:

- not being fluent in English or French
- financial pressures/unemployment/underemployment
- feelings of cultural isolation and detachment from everything that’s familiar
- fears that children will assimilate rather than integrate and lose their family’s culture and heritage

- loss of the extended family, friends and community and the validation and support that they provide
- feelings of having different perspectives than co-workers, neighbours, etc.
- family trauma caused by separation from extended family members, refugee camp experiences, etc.

It is important to understand the stresses on immigrant parents, and to link those parents to appropriate services when possible. It is equally important not to accept such stresses as excuses for abuse, because most people who face such stresses do not become abusive.

In any culture, including the mainstream cultures, a parent's fundamental reason for hitting his or her child is to control the child's behaviour. It is seen as being "for the child's own good," a way of deterring the child from a situation that could be dangerous.

Information needs of immigrant families

Because of linguistic and other barriers, a great deal of information that is readily available to Canadian-born parents doesn't reach many immigrant families. As a result, they may not understand how child abuse and neglect are defined in Canada, or the consequences if a parent's actions are considered abusive.

Nor would many think to ask these questions, if they came to Canada from countries that do not have similar laws or programs.

Immigrant parents may not realize that Canada has service organizations that can help them with parenting and family problems. If they do, they may not know how to contact these organizations. And if they *can* contact these organizations, they may worry that information about their problems will somehow get back to others in their communities.

The following are some questions about parenting in Canada that parents in immigrant families may have:

- Why would authorities take a child away from his or her parents?
- What is the difference between child discipline and child abuse?
- What are the alternatives to physical punishment of children?
- When parents are having trouble with parenting, who can they go to for help?
- Are there organizations with staff members who are themselves from ethnocultural communities?
- Do these organizations ensure confidentiality?



- What resource materials are available in the first languages of ethnocultural communities?
- At what age, and for what period of time, can a parent leave a child unattended?
- Is it neglect to keep a child out of school?
- Is it abuse to put pressure on a child to meet very high academic standards?
- To what extent can parents restrict a child's social life to people of the same culture or religion?
- To what extent can parents limit a child's activities and interactions with peers?
- To what extent can parents prevent a teenage daughter from wearing make-up or dating?

As a service provider, you should be able to discuss these subjects with parents in a thoughtful and sensitive way.

Helping immigrant families prevent child abuse and neglect

There are ways you and your organization can encourage good parenting and help prevent child abuse and child neglect in immigrant families.

- Be respectful in your interactions with people whose culture or religion is different from yours.

- Be ready to explain your role and that of your organization.
- Make the most of opportunities to learn about the needs, views, values and beliefs of people of other cultures and religions. Consider inviting resource people from ethnocultural communities to make a presentation to the staff of your organization. The more you know about and understand diverse communities, the more effective you will be as a service provider.
- Offer to be a resource person when ethnocultural organizations put together information sessions for their communities about subjects such as parenting. Build information about your organization and its services into your presentation. Such gatherings are good opportunities to pass along information about your organization and its services in a friendly and non-threatening way.
- Help members of immigrant families feel comfortable in your organization by having a multicultural, multilingual staff. In addition, offer resource materials in the first languages of ethnocultural communities as well as in English or French.
- Establish working relationships between your organization and ethnocultural organizations that provide family services.

Multilingual resource materials for ethnocultural communities

The Child Welfare League of Canada has produced *Parenting in Canada*, a brochure for immigrant parents who want information about child rearing, parents' rights, and child abuse and protection laws in Canada. The brochure is intended for distribution by agencies and community centres with a multicultural clientele. Bulk quantities are available, free of charge, in Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, English, Farsi, French, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Tamil and Vietnamese.

A second brochure, on alternatives to physical discipline, will be available soon in several languages, from the same organization.

Copies can be ordered from:

Child Welfare League of Canada
75 Albert Street, Suite 209
Ottawa, ON
K1P 5E7

Telephone (613) 235-4412

Fax (613) 235-7616

<http://www.cwlc.ca>

E-mail: info@cwlc.ca

Crcy@newforce.ca

Resource materials for service organizations

Service organizations may also be interested in the Canadian Ethnocultural Council's consultation report. It was prepared for the Council by Gentium Consulting and is available for \$10 from:

Canadian Ethnocultural Council
251 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 1100
Ottawa, ON
K1P 5J6

Telephone (613) 230-3867
Fax (613) 230-8051
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