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Fostering Connections Act Promises New Opportunities for Child Welfare Reform



*National Foster Care Month
shines spotlight on new
guidelines for states*

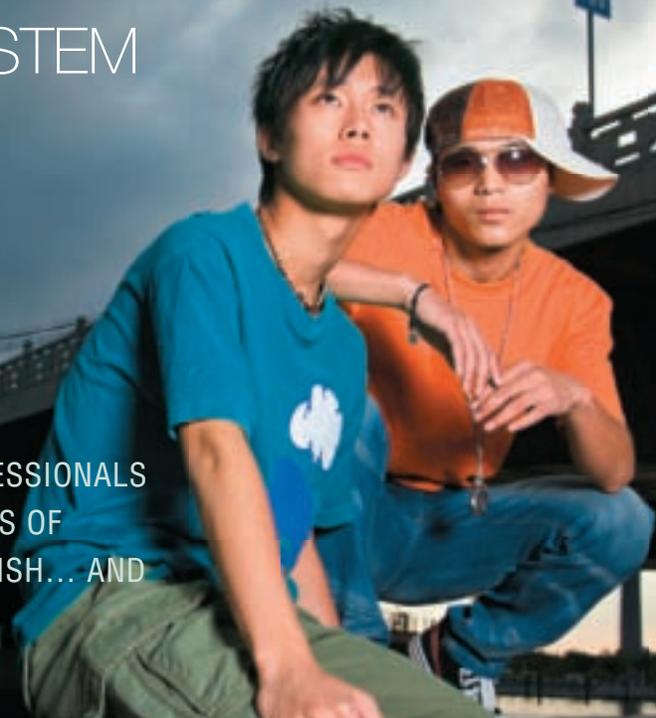
*Congressman Jim
McDermott talks Fostering
Connections Act*

*Immigrant families face
unique challenges in child
welfare system*

*Young people share stories
of adoption as teens*

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

IN MANY JURISDICTIONS, CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS ARE NOT PREPARED TO MEET THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES WHO DO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH... AND HAVE LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS PARENTS IN AMERICA.



SCENARIO: After police were called to intervene in a domestic dispute, a mother from Guatemala says, "In my country when a government employee knocks on your door, a family member disappears. I came to this country to give my children a better life, but all they see is someone who doesn't speak English, who doesn't know anything. They think we don't care about our families. They took my daughter and did nothing to help me."

SCENARIO: A caseworker who did not speak Chinese came to the house, explains an immigrant mother. "I sent my daughter to talk to her; I thought she was a missionary. All my daughter said was that she would call me back. I later found out the school had reported me for abuse because I punished my daughter for misbehaving. No one ever explained what was going on to me, only to my daughter."

These scenarios reflect the experiences of many immigrant families who come to the attention of child welfare service providers. These families often have little understanding and considerable fear of the formal social service system. Furthermore, service providers who work with immigrants face

unique challenges, such as cultural differences in parenting styles and expectations, and language barriers.

Immigration increases nationwide

Immigration has been a defining feature of the United States throughout its history, and children currently represent one of the fastest-growing immigrant subgroups. In fact, they are expected to constitute 30 percent of the nation's school population by 2015.

Approximately 80 percent of children in immigrant families – and 93 percent of those under age 5 – were born in the United States and are entitled to support as citizens. And although immigrant children enter the child welfare system for the same reasons as native children – poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, health and mental health problems – challenges such as linguistic and social isolation, limited economic resources, and low educational attainment may place these children at greater risk of growing up without opportunities to succeed. Consider these facts:

- Poverty rates generally are higher among children of immigrants than among native

children. According to an Urban Institute report in 2005, 27 percent of all young children in immigrant families are poor, compared with 19 percent in native families. Even in two-parent families, one in five young children of immigrants lives below the federal poverty line – triple the rate for children with United States-born parents.

- Young children of immigrants are less likely to receive public benefits and are more likely to be uninsured, reported in fair or poor health, and lacking access to preventive health care.

Systemic challenges

In many jurisdictions, child welfare professionals are not prepared to meet the special needs of immigrant families who do not speak English, have few family members or friends they can turn to for help, fear deportation, and have little knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as parents in America. Furthermore, immigrants who left countries plagued by harsh authoritarian regimes and corruption often have little trust in government agencies and may not seek help or services.



In addition, social workers may require training to work with different cultures and communities. For example, a worker may have serious concerns about six people living in one room, when such conditions may represent an improvement for the family. The situations, characteristics, and behaviors of immigrant families, therefore, may trigger caseworkers to remove children hastily and decrease the likelihood of placement with relatives.

“We have to be aware of our assumptions when working with families,” says Casey Family Services social worker Greeta Soderholm. “Some parents get written off quickly as being incapable, because their parenting style and belief systems do not fit with our values or those of the foster care system. Our interpretations of events can become facts in the record,” she adds. “A person who has experienced war may have a vastly different view of what constitutes a safe home environment than what is recognized by the foster care system.”

Many challenges immigrant families experience are exacerbated by:

- A shortage of interpretation/translation services and multilingual and multicultural staff within the child welfare system.
- Limited culturally and linguistically relevant services, such as parenting classes, domestic violence services, and drug treatment programs.
- Differences in cultural norms and child-rearing practices, for example, corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is accepted in many countries, and Western parenting styles appear permissive.

- Perceived restrictions about access to federal income and employment supports. Many immigrants believe that receiving public benefits could prevent them from becoming legal permanent residents or citizens.
- Difficulties licensing relative caregivers because they can't fulfill minimum space-per-occupant requirements and income qualifications required by foster care systems.

“MANY IMMIGRANT FAMILIES COME HERE WITH INTACT, MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILIES AND A STRONG DESIRE TO SEIZE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES.”

– YALI LINCROFT

Meanwhile, child welfare practitioners may not consider the positive factors in immigrant family life, says Yali Lincroft, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family program and an expert on immigration/child welfare issues. “Many immigrant families come here with intact, multigenerational families and a strong desire to seize economic opportunities,” she explains. “They want to take care of their own and have a strong sense of community. In many cases, they need help for only a short time to overcome hurdles.”

Inadequate federal and state support

“There is very little guidance at the federal level, and it's hit or miss in the states,” says Lincroft, noting that federal funds often

cannot be used to care for undocumented children, forcing jurisdictions to use scarce local funds.

“These issues will come up more as immigrant populations grow across the country,” adds Sonia Velazquez, vice president of the Children's Division of the American Humane Association.

Working toward solutions

Research on how and why immigrant families, children, and youth come to the attention of child welfare has been limited to date, and more needs to be done.

“The patchwork of approaches used to deal with immigrant populations may result in unnecessary removals, longer stays in out-of-home placement, or the outright denial of services for which families and children may be eligible,” Velazquez explains.

Child welfare agencies need to conduct training on how immigration affects family functioning, adopt written protocols that address immigration status, and connect undocumented families to community-based networks.

In addition, language access must be considered a right for families engaged in child welfare services, and bilingual staff or translators must be available. Under no circumstances should minor children, neighbors, or family friends be used as interpreters.

To address these issues, Casey has joined the American Humane Association, Casey Family Programs, and other child welfare agencies to form the Migration and Child Welfare National Network, a coalition that provides training, research, and practice materials on the intersection of immigration and child welfare.