

Challenges and Risks Facing Immigrant Youth¹

Separation – from parents or other family members is common during the immigration and resettlement process. These separations may create feelings of cultural dislocation and instability and increase stress levels, making the young person's adjustment more difficult. Even when families are able to stay together, the parents may be absent² due to the demands of working one or more jobs.

Adjustment – A young person's adjustment in a new community and country is significantly affected by their parent's capacity to adjust. Children may feel responsible for helping their parents to cope with employment, language and other challenges.

Traumatic Experiences – Refugee children, in particular, may have had traumatic experiences related to situations such as war, genocide torture and death of family members or friends. These experiences impact children differently and may result in a range of behavioural and/or mental health issues. Family and community responses to these issues may be strongly influenced by cultural beliefs and norms.

Living in Poverty – Although somewhat dated, census data from 2004 indicates that more than one in five recent immigrants of working-age were living in poverty, compared to fewer than one in ten other Canadians². The results of living in poverty may include living in overcrowded housing, living in neighbourhoods with fewer resources and/or higher rates of crime, exposure to gangs, as well as the need for older children to work for additional income or provide child care while parents work multiple jobs.

Student Disconnect from Education – Children may be disadvantaged in their schooling for a variety of reasons including limited English proficiency (both in parents and children), less well-educated parents, and inadequate or interrupted schooling in their country of origin. They may also have attendance problems due to their role as interpreters or child care providers for the family.

Parent Disconnect from Education – Parents may feel and be disconnected from their child's education for a variety of reasons including cultural norms regarding the school's role, their limited language skills, and lack of knowledge and understanding about the Alberta education system and curriculum.

Intergenerational Conflict – Intergenerational conflict and role-reversals may occur when children acculturate more quickly and acquire English language skills before their parents. Parents are often particularly disturbed at their children's adoption of Canadian social/cultural norms and values. Children may feel torn between two worlds and be embarrassed regarding their country of origin.

¹This list has been adapted from *Mentoring Immigrant and Refugee Youth: A toolkit for program coordinators*. It can be found at www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_1197.pdf

²A *Study of Poverty and Working Poverty among Recent Immigrants to Canada*, HRDC Canada. 2007

www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/research/categories/inclusion/2007/sp_680_05_07_e/page00.shtml

Dealing with Choice – A sometimes overlooked element of successful integration by immigrant youth is the ability to manage all of the choices that are available in the Canadian context. Many children and youth from new immigrant communities have not previously experienced so many choices in their daily lives – choices at school, in recreation, in food. It can be overwhelming and difficult to make good decisions in the face of so many decisions. Mentors can be important in helping youth to build their decision making capacity and can help to alleviate some of associated distress and anxiety.

