



Somali Cultural Guide

Building Capacity to Strengthen the Well-Being of Immigrant Families and Their Children: A Prevention Strategy

The following is an overview of selected factors that are critical to understanding child and family environments of Somali immigrants. Through research and field interviews, the following are considered to be themes generally relevant to Somali culture and family dynamics. This guide is not meant to be exhaustive or representative of every family or group. Each family and child is coming from a unique and particular experience and should be approached in this way

Accurate understanding of parenting practices

Most Somali families focus only on the basic needs of their children. These basic necessities include nutrition, education, and shelter. They also put an effort into their children's safety, health, and overall well-being. Religious traditions are considered essential to strong families. A two-parent family structure is described as the ideal family for Somali families. Somali families often utilize an authoritarian parenting style; parents make decisions for their children, who are expected to obey.

Somali parents often express concern with methods of discipline and seek more effective ways to manage children's behavior. There is a desire to ensure that disciplinary interventions are contextually congruent with family and community culture.

The Somali culture is chiefly an oral tradition that values hands on learning and oral exchanges; handouts to be read will have a limited response.

Parent and child nurturing and attachment styles

Traditionally, Somali families are large, with many households including 5-10 children. Somali parents provide for their children and raise them with care, safety, and protection until the child becomes independent. There is a strong and secure attachment between mother and the children, especially when the child is at infant stage and until the child reaches the age of five.

Expectations of child development

Somali parents promote their children's development and make sure their children are developing well according to the stages of development such as the child's age and their mental status. Most Somali parents understand the normal pattern of child development. They are concerned about their children's emotional and social behavior, as well as their cognitive development.

There is reluctance to pursue responses to an assessment of a child disability: concern that this may identify a child in a negative way and that the assessment may in fact be incorrect.

Attitudes in seeking health care for children

Somali parents would know if their children have developmental issues because of yearly check-

ups, especially if the child is under the age of five. Most Somali parents see their child's health as important, and they take their children to regular health check-ups and medical appointments.

Attitudes toward emotional behavior and mental health

"Mental illness" is not acknowledged as an acceptable concept. Various phrases are often used in the Somali community to describe feelings of emotional distress. These can include "noise in the brain"; "burning emotionally"; "thinking too much"; and/or "ongoing headache." Depression is not acknowledged, but cultural healing, such as reading parts of the Koran, is often suggested by friends and family.

Role of kin and tribal networks

Somali families have a strong sense of kinship. Before the civil war, Somali helped each other and got support from extended families. Grandparents, aunts, uncles provide financial support to their relatives. Especially grandparents mostly take big role and responsibility of raising their grandchildren.

Tribal networks can be important for Somali elders and middle-aged adults. However, tribe plays a minimized role for younger generations, who may associate more strongly with an African or Muslim identity.

Support networks in coping with day-to-day challenges

When Somali families face issues and unfortunate events they get emotional support from their immediate families, as well as their extended families. Somalis do not have group support, but their source of help is their immediate families. Somali families are close to their community and seek support when faced with issues whether it is about family, housing, job.

Families have often been accustomed to living difficult lives as nomads and farmers by relying on both the physical environment and on the physical proximity of extended family members for necessary resources. This interdependence and sharing of resources was expected between generations within families, and between families and the greater Somali community.

Intergenerational tradition and values

It is not part of Somali tradition for parents to

socialize with their children. They do not have conversation that involves how their day is going and how they are getting along well with other peers in school or if something is going in their lives emotionally.

In Somalia, every member of the family, whether immediate or extended, is used to provide support and financial assistance and often takes part in a child's life.

In the US, the living situation is different, and it is not convenient for Somali families to live in same state. For many Somali families, the loss of traditional extended family support creates increased stress for resettled family members. It is difficult to maintain kinship and get support from extended families.

Hierarchical role structure within the family was considered to be essential for the stability necessary to promote family strength. Men and elder family members were assigned positions of highest respect by religious tradition, as well as overall responsibility for family unity and well-being. Lifelong respect of parents was believed to be the parents' right and the children's obligation.

There may be occasions of role reversal, where children, by virtue of language and learned behavior, teach their parents. Somali children are often caught between two cultures. Adolescents may be in a disconnect within families and the community: rebellion, involvement in gang related activities, drug use, and

vulnerabilities to recruitment for foreign terror activities are sources of intense anxiety.

Roles of men and women in their family life and socialization of the children

Traditionally, women take care of children and household chores. Somali men are the breadwinners. Usually Somali women put their children's health, education, and well-being first. Somali men only take a small role in this regard.

Patterns of family interaction direct women to defer to men, especially in public. Responsible role functioning for men and women is defined differently according to public and private (home) domains. Family dynamics are reported to "shift" by domain: men dominant in public, women dominant in home management.

Experiences in the migration journey

For some Somali families the severity of the violence and stress of the civil war, and flight from the homeland with loss of family members has made the adjustment process a struggle, in addition to the stresses of poverty, health, language barriers, and isolation. Many have been here for 15 years and they may still suffer from immigration issues, as well as the economic downturn. Moreover, serious concerns for their adolescents are uppermost in their family life. Resettlement takes time.

For Additional Reading and References:

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Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

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