Treating Traumatized Immigrant and Refugee Youth

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Egal
Why does he act the way he does?

What is at stake if we ignore him?

What can we do to help?
Prevalence world-wide

- Approximately 11.4 million refugees and people in refugee-like situations world-wide
- About half of these are children <18yrs

UNHCR 2007; www.unhcr.org/statistics
Prevalence

United States

- Approximately 1 million refugees and people in refugee-like situations in the U.S.
- About 38% of these are children <18yrs

UNHCR 2007; www.unhcr.org/statistics
Why does he act the way he does?
Social-Ecological Model

- Individual
- Family
- School
- Neighborhood
- Peer Group
- Culture
Pre-migration / migration

Identity and beliefs targeted

Disruption of basic scaffolding of childhood

Separation from family, loss

Trauma
Resettlement

- Discrimination
- Peer acceptance, acculturative stress, school readiness
- Intergenerational trauma, loss, acculturation
- Trauma
Somali Youth Experience Project

- N = 144
- Ages 11-19, living in U.S. at least 1 year
- Community sample
Trauma exposure

- Average 7 traumatic events (range 0-22)

94% of individuals were trauma exposed.
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Nearly 2/3 of youth reported significant PTSD symptoms, and 1/3 screened positive for Full PTSD.
What is at stake if we ignore him?
Consequences of traumatic stress

• Social
  - Drug abuse
  - School failure
  - Anti-social behavior
  - Isolation/withdrawal

• Psychological
  - Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
    • Reexperiencing, Avoidance, Hyperarousal
  - Depression
  - Conduct disorder
  - Emotion Regulation
Are refugee youth receiving services?

Parent and adolescent report of formal service use by the 26 ‘in need’ adolescents
How can we help?
Trauma and adjustment

Proximal aftermath: Ongoing war stress

Distal aftermath: Ongoing resettlement stress
Trauma and Social Context

Proximal aftermath: Ongoing war stress

Distal aftermath: Ongoing resettlement stress

Social Context:
- Family acculturative stress
- School belonging
- Discrimination

Trauma

Adjustment
Project SHIFA:
Supporting the Health of Immigrant Families and Adolescents

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It’s about a trauma system...

1) A traumatized child who is unable to regulate emotional states,

2) A social-environment/system-of-care that cannot help contain this dysregulation.
Social-Ecological Model

- Culture
- Neighborhood
- Peer Group
- School
- Family
- Individual

Social environmental interventions
Self-Regulation Interventions
Partnership:

• **Mental Health Providers** (Children’s Hospital Boston, Boston University School of Social Work, Home for Little Wanderers)

• **Somali community agencies** (Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center, Somali Development Center)

• **School** (Boston Public Schools, Lilla G. Frederick Middle Schools, Alliance for Inclusion and Prevention)

• **Families** (Family advisory board, parents)
The Base: Social Context and Trauma

Mental health promotion for refugee children

Acculturative stress

Resettlement stress

Isolation

Trauma
Continuum of care

- Child
- School
- Community
- Partnership
Continuum of care

- Community
- School
- Child

Intensive Intervention
Early Intervention
Engagement
Community

Approach: Parent outreach lead by Community-based organization

Goals:
- Engage parents as partners in advocating for children
- Connect with parents before problems emerge
- Connect parents with school and beyond
School

Approach: School-based youth groups
Teacher consultation

Goals: Connect with youth in non-stigmatized setting
Connect before problems emerge
Address core risk factors of alienation, discrimination
Child

**Approach:** Trauma Systems Therapy: Evidence-based mental health intervention addressing key stressors in the social environment and related emotional dysregulation

**Goals:**
- Engage child and family
- Decrease child traumatic stress symptoms
- Prevent long-term negative outcomes
Outcomes

• Community
  Family advisory board
  100% engagement in treatment
  Families and youth self-referring

• Family
  Decrease in acculturative stress in family

• School
  Increase in sense of belonging, decrease in rejection
  Decrease in experiences of discrimination

• Child
  Decrease in PTSD symptoms
  Decrease in Depression symptoms
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http://traumasyystemstherapy.com/