Strengthening Immigrant Children’s Mental Health: Together We Can! Juntos, Podemos!

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Learning Objectives

- Increase awareness of the mental health challenges faced by immigrant children in the US from diverse countries of origin
- Increase knowledge of effective strategies to work with multiple systems & families to identify immigrant children who can benefit from mental health services
- Increase knowledge of evidence-based mental health service delivery approaches effective for immigrant children & their families
The numbers

* 1 in four children in the US lives in an immigrant family
* 18.4 million children live in an immigrant family
* 30% of immigrant children live below the FPL compared to 19% of US-born children
* Immigrant children are 2x more likely to be uninsured (15%) than non-immigrant children (8%)
Family decisions to immigrate may be based on a variety of reasons that cause stress on their children:

- Economic
- Political
- Safety

Act of immigrating itself can cause stress.

Life as an immigrant in an often unwelcoming society exacerbates those stresses.
Mental health is worse among immigrant children than among similar children of US-born parents.

Undocumented children have even greater externalizing problems than US-born or immigrant children with legal documentation.

Non-citizen populations access mental health services only .1 times a year (Kaiser Study).
Many immigrant children have traumatic experiences prior to reaching the US

- May have been separated from family members for extended periods
- May have lost family members due to violence, famine, etc., in their country of origin
- May have personally faced poverty, hunger, drought, violence, sexual trafficking, exposure to war, natural disasters
- May not have had access to medical or mental health care prior to arriving in US
Many immigrant children have traumatic experiences in the US

- Parent more likely to be low-income & have menial jobs even if they were professionals in their country of origin
- More likely to live in sub-standard conditions
- Likely to face many disruptions
- May be unaware of or afraid to use existing services
- May be ineligible for many services/resources
  - If undocumented, ineligible for any government services except public education
  - Even if documented, may be ineligible for government services (for example, adult immigrants are ineligible for federally-funded health care coverage for 1st 5 years in US)
Because children tend to learn English faster than their parents, they are often compelled to assume roles, like translating & serving as intermediaries, that are more appropriate for adults.

Often face in-person discrimination & negative messages about immigrants in the media, school, etc.
Results of stressors

- Psychological stress
- Significant family conflicts & lack of family cohesion
- Feelings of isolation
- Emotional & behavior problems
- Potentially severe & long-lasting psychological problems including:
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Post-traumatic stress disorder
  - Suicide
- Physical problems
- Lost sense of safety
Common Reactions to Trauma

Physical Reactions

* Nervous energy, restlessness, jitters, muscle tension
* Upset stomach
* Rapid heart rate
* Dizziness
* Lack of energy, fatigue
* Teeth grinding
* Loss or gain in weight

Behavioral Reactions

* Becoming withdrawn, isolated from others
* Easily startled
* Avoiding places, situations
* Becoming confrontational, aggressive
* Change in eating habits
* Increase/decrease in sexual activity
Common Reactions to Trauma

Emotional Reactions

- Fear, inability to feel safe
- Sadness, grief, depression
- Guilt
- Anger, irritability
- Numbness, lack of feelings
- Inability to enjoy anything

Emotional Reactions

- Loss of trust, self-esteem
- Feeling helpless
- Distance from others
- Intense or extreme feelings
- Feeling chronically “empty”
- Blunted, then extreme feelings
Common Reactions to Trauma

Mental Reactions

- Changes in the way you think about yourself, the world, others
- Heightened awareness of your surroundings (hyper-vigilance)
- Lessened awareness, disconnection from yourself (disassociation)
- Difficulty concentrating

Mental Reactions

- Poor attention or memory problems
- Difficulty making decisions
- Intrusive images
- Nightmares that impact sleep
Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

- Lack of income or eligibility for insurance to pay for mental health services
- Language barriers
- Cultural barriers rooted in often negative cultural conceptions of mental illness & mental health care
- Lack of adequate #s of linguistically appropriate & culturally competent mental health providers trained to treat immigrant children with mental health problems including trauma, etc. leading to under-identification of mental health needs, under-utilization of services, & inappropriate treatment
Values & Viewpoints

- Time & space
- Fate & personal responsibility
- Face & face-saving
- Nonverbal communication
- Have been silenced
- Stigma
- Confidentiality
- Attitudes & beliefs about providers, interpreters
- Help-seeking behaviors
Causes of Illness

- Imbalance in body
- Germs
- Spirit possession
- Loss of soul
- Violation of taboo
- Intrusion of harmful element
- Divine decision
- Evil eye

How to Respond

- Restore the balance
- Kill them
- Exorcize it
- Ritual to retrieve it
- Penance
- Remove it
- Acceptance
- Rituals/oferings
Overcoming the barriers

- Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
  - Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, S. Covey
- Practice “cultural reciprocity”
* Cultural Destructiveness
* Cultural Incapacity
* Cultural Blindness
* Cultural Pre-competence
* Cultural Competence
* Cultural Proficiency
Culture shapes status, relationships and social behaviors with regard to every aspect of life

Justice for individual vs. group harmony
Willingness to question authority

People from various backgrounds communicate and process information differently

Rational vs. intuitive
Linear vs. circular
Abstract vs. concrete
Time-bound vs. not
Cultural Reciprocity

• A process, not an outcome
• Cultural reciprocity is about relationships... learning about the other, sharing about oneself
• You can only practice cultural reciprocity if you listen with the heart... for the heart... and share your heart.
Examine cultural values: Time

- What does it mean to be “on time?”
- How do you feel/ react when someone arrives late to an appointment? Why?
Communication

- Verbal communication
  - Rates of speech
  - Voice modulation
  - Pauses
  - Use of silence
  - Time between Q&A
- What is rude? Polite?
• Nonverbal
  • Body language
  • Eye contact
  • Proximity
  • Deference
  • Respect
Ten Strategies for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication
Cultural Scanning

- Is the behavior
  - Innocent
  - Ignorant
  - Insensitive
  - Racist
- How to respond? Do we
  - Know the person
  - Value the relationship
  - Have a history
• Identify partners with legitimacy with families & targeted communities.
• Ensure partners are representative of the community.
Cultural Liaisons

• Knowledge of:
  – Values, beliefs & practices within their cultural group
  – Service delivery systems they have learned to navigate
Gathering Community Knowledge

- Communities know:
  - Their history: where they have been
  - Their culture: who they are
  - Sacred places
  - Dangerous places
  - What is important to them
Cultural Mediator

• Helping service delivery systems:
  – Establish and maintain trust
  – Build meaningful relationships

• Helping immigrant families understand service delivery systems & access them
Catalyst for Change

• Helping service delivery systems:
  – Recognize the barriers to participation
  – Make changes to address barriers
  – Engage immigrant families & youth in all processes

BECOME A CATALYST FOR CHANGE.
Listen with the heart... for the heart

* Engage immigrant parent leaders:
  * Identifying strengths & needs
  * Developing plans including selecting interventions
  * Implementation including engaging other parents
  * Evaluation
* Provide the needed resources to support their active participation!
Evidence-Based Interventions

* Cultural Adjustment & Trauma Services (CATS)
* Coffee & Family Education & Support (CAFES) group intervention
* Caring Across Communities Comprehensive School-Linked Mental Health Program
  * Project Shifa (Children’s Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts)
  * Bridges Program (NYU School of Medicine)
  * Refugee & Immigrant Youth Mental Health Project (Chicago)
  * Tan Am Inner Peace Project (San Jose, California)
  * Empowerment Across Communities (Portland, Maine)
* School-Based Mental Health Program for Traumatized Latino Immigrant Children (www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/Articles/29.pdf)
* Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (www.rand.org/health/projects/cbits/publications.html)
Resources: Working with Immigrant & Refugee Families on Mental Health

* Child Welfare Information Gateway, US DHHS
  * https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/cultural/families/immigrant.cfm

* American Psychological Association
  * http://www.apa.org/topics/immigration/immigration-psychology.aspx

* National Center for Mental Health Promotion & Youth Violence Prevention at EDC

* NAMI Multicultural Action Center
  * www.nami.org/TextTemplate.cfm?Section=Multicultural_Support1&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=55786
Resources

* National Center for Cultural Competence (http://nccc.georgetown.edu/)
  * Cultural broker guide
  * Cultural & linguistic competence self-assessment for:
    * Family organizations
    * Disability Organizations
    * Individual mental health practitioners
* National Family Voices (www.familyvoices.org)
  * Growing your capacity to engage diverse communities