

Promising Practices in Positive Youth Development With Immigrants and Refugees

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Children of immigrants are an important and growing part of American society, and they have an increasingly vital role to play in the future of this country. Those arriving in the U.S. as immigrants or refugees, as well as those born here to at least one immigrant parent, currently make up more than 20% of all children and youth in this country. This percentage increased more than three-fold between 1970 and 2000, and it is estimated that, if these demographic trends continue, one-fourth of all U.S. children by the year 2010 and almost one-third of the children in our nation's schools by the year 2015 will be children of immigrants (Capps & Fortuny, 2006).

Immigrant and refugee youth will benefit from community-based and after-school programs for many of the same reasons as their non-immigrant counterparts. However, their unique strengths and needs are important for programs to consider when targeting these youth or including them in their services. This article will address these considerations, and will provide principles of effective programs, as well as “promising practices” from across the country that other programs can learn from and adapt to their own circumstances and populations.

Positive Youth Development for Immigrants and Refugees

Recent research has indicated that how well immigrant and refugee youth do today may affect the success of future generations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Culturally competent, effective programming that builds on the strengths of these youth is therefore critically important. The growth in the use of positive youth development (PYD), a strengths-based programming approach that emphasizes helping youth develop into mature and successful adults, holds promise for immigrant and refugee youth in many ways. First, it helps service providers to recognize and build on immigrant youths' unique strengths, as well as the potential they share with all youth. Second, it helps providers successfully engage with immigrant and refugee communities, since these communities are more likely to be drawn to positive goals such as educational achievement for their children. Finally, the PYD approach helps create youth services that make a difference. Research has demonstrated that “the programs that are most effective are framed in terms of the constructive assets they seek to build, rather than the negative behaviors they seek to avoid” (Ferber et al., 2005, p. 3; BRYCS, 2006).

Strengths to Build On

Immigrant and refugee families arrive in this country with many strengths. Compared to children of U.S.-born parents, children of immigrants are more likely to live in two-parent families and with or near extended family members (Hernandez, 2004). On average, first generation immigrant youth perform better in school than their native peers, at least through middle school, and families tend to have a strong work ethic, with parents often sacrificing through hard work so that their children can succeed in this country. As a recent article in a special issue of *The Future of Children* aptly summarizes:



“Children of immigrants typically are imbued with a strong sense of family obligation and ethnic pride, and with the importance of education. As a result, the children of immigrants tend to have higher educational aspirations and are less likely than children of U.S.-born families to engage in risky behaviors...”
(Shields & Behrman, 2004, p.6).

The strongest evidence to date, however, suggests that integrating a strong sense of ethnic heritage with a positive identity as American—or a bicultural identity—tends to provide immigrant and refugee youth with the greatest opportunities for success in this country. In addition, a cohesive ethnic community can provide emotional

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and practical support to parents, reinforcing cultural values and helping them maintain a close relationship with their children. A close relationship with parents increases opportunities for

positive guidance for youth, and helps them develop pride in their heritage. Co-ethnic communities can also act as a buffer against the effects of discrimination and other challenges of living in the U.S. for these youth (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

It is important to note that qualities frequently viewed as challenges for immigrant youth can become strengths with sufficient positive support. For example, values that emphasize family or group needs over the individual's needs—common in immigrant cultures—can lead to a larger sense of purpose and motivation to succeed, as well as skills in cooperative decision-making. Bilingualism can provide advantages in cognitive development (Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 1997), and marketable skills in an increasingly global economy. Balancing two cultures can lead to greater self-awareness and increased flexibility in problem-solving. Finally, successfully overcoming migration-related challenges can lead to greater self-confidence and maturity (Easter & Refki, 2004).

Promising Practices for PYD With Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Programs serving immigrant and refugee youth experience challenges that may be more pronounced than when working with non-immigrant youth. These challenges include developing effective methods for engaging newcomer parents and communities; designing programs and curricula that bridge generations and cultures; addressing access issues, such as transportation and cultural and language barriers; and recruiting and retaining talented bilingual and bicultural staff.

Although local programs across the country are frequently developing innovative strategies that successfully address these challenges, very few of these efforts have been documented. When funding ends or program staff move on, valuable “lessons learned” are subsequently

lost, resulting in a gap in information on effective programming for immigrant youth. To remedy this situation, Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)¹ developed a "Promising Practices" initiative that has resulted in the documentation of over 60 successful programs for immigrant and refugee children and youth across the U.S. (See Box 5.1 for more information about this initiative). By integrating criteria drawn from current research on immigrant youth risk and protective factors (Hunt et al., 2002), effective youth programming, and a content analysis of the 60 program descriptions, BRYCS developed seven principles for effective PYD programs for immigrant and refugee youth. These principles, together with examples from the Promising Practices initiative, are described below.

1 Partner with the immigrant community from the start, including working with local leaders and parents to identify needs and to frame the approach in a way that is meaningful to community members.

Promising Practices:

Get to know the local communities by visiting community gathering places, including churches, synagogues, temples, or mosques; ethnic community-based organizations; and community events. If you are not familiar with the countries and cultures of origin, find out about them (search the online Clearinghouse at www.brycs.org for resources).

To build a trusting relationship with community members, link families with direct services to meet their concrete needs, such as pro bono legal services, medical assistance, or affordable housing.

Tap a wide range of sources to identify community leaders who are broadly accepted, respected, and viewed as leaders by community members themselves.

Develop a "Community Advisory Committee" or similar structure for community leaders to help guide program efforts. This can give the program legitimacy within the community, increase accountability, and keep the community and parents informed, engaged, and supportive of the program.

Use the outreach process to identify potential bilingual/bicultural staff members with good standing in the community, and who can also act as a bridge between cultures for the project.

2 Engage the entire family, especially parents or guardians, being careful not to inadvertently increase the "acculturation gap" between parents and youth; encourage activities that are family-focused and geared towards increasing communication skills and mutual understanding between youth and their parents.

Promising Practices:

Consult with parents prior to starting the program to determine their interests and concerns; invite parents to join the "Community Advisory Committee" to gain their input to the program.

Provide formal invitations to families for the "kick-off" celebration as the program begins as well as the final graduation; follow up the invitations with personal phone calls.

Hold regular family events that include youth and parents eating dinner together, providing an opportunity for open and positive discussion about issues important to them. Include youth-organized demonstrations of what they have learned so far in the program (such as skits, speeches, music, and artwork).

¹BRYCS is grateful to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) for its generous support, which makes this work possible. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the ORR.

In addition to sending written information home, make frequent phone calls to parents to make sure they understood the materials and to connect with them personally, letting them know about activities and their child's achievements. Use interpreters as needed.

3 Support and develop bicultural and/or bilingual staff who can play key roles as community liaisons, culture brokers, role models for youth, and can help keep the program on track culturally.

Promising Practices:

Value bicultural staff equally with other staff and recognize the contribution they can make to the team (for example, do not limit them to language interpretation).

Be flexible with work schedules so that bicultural staff can pursue training or continuing education to qualify for higher level positions; offer assistance by linking them with professional contacts, providing recommendations, and financial aid resources.

4 Strengthen positive ethnic identification and bicultural identity by recognizing and celebrating youths' countries of origin, while also supporting their comfort and identity as Americans.

Promising Practices:

Integrate the national holidays, heroes representing positive national values, traditional and current music, foods, folklore, dance, and art of each country as regular program activities.

Help youth identify and focus on the positive aspects of their ethnic heritage, as well as the positive aspects of being part of this society.

Assign youth "homework" that includes interviewing older family members about their birth country and their journey to their new home.

Box 5.1

BRYCS' Promising Practices Initiative

In 2003, BRYCS began to research and document programs that successfully serve immigrant and refugee children and youth. Main criteria for "promising practices" included:

1. Recommended as "successful" by other service providers, federal and state funders of services, and/or experts in the field;
2. Based on principles drawn from current research on risk and protective factors for immigrant children and youth (Hunt et al., 2002); and
3. Results-oriented, demonstrating the ways in which newcomer children and youth benefitted from the program.

Currently, over 60 programs for refugee and immigrant children and youth have been documented, with about half of these devoted specifically to positive youth development. Program locations span the country, and include states with a long history of immigration (such as New York, Illinois, and California) as well as states newer to addressing immigrant issues (such as Kentucky, Georgia, and North Dakota). Youth served come from all over the world, including East and West Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Programs range from primary to tertiary prevention in their approach, and positive youth development strategies include supporting academic success; developing and strengthening cultural "roots" and ethnic pride; family strengthening and community building; leadership development; conflict mediation and communication skills; political and environmental awareness and action; transition to independence; and career development, including assistance with applying to college. New "promising practices" are added quarterly. For links to all 60 program descriptions, visit http://www.brycs.org/brycs_archive.htm#PPRACTICES

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Create a “My Journey” book that traces the family’s journey from their country of origin to the U.S.

Build bridges between communities by helping youth share their culture and heritage with other youth.

5 Encourage youth leadership in the program and in their communities. Youth can provide unique leadership roles and outreach to their communities due to their knowledge of the language and culture.

Promising Practices:

Conduct a participatory community needs assessment in partnership with youth, including interviewing community members and service providers about needs.

Engage youth in “community youth mapping,” or CYM, a process through which youth identify the resources in their community (for CYM resources, see BRYCS, 2006).

Create a youth management team (or some other type of youth board), which can make decisions on behalf of all students within the program, as well as plan parties, coordinate community service activities, or distribute event information to other members.

Develop programs in which youth partner with elders from their community to address concerns within their neighborhoods.

6 Support academic success and career development for youth, particularly for those youth with limited formal education; most newcomers will have limited knowledge about how to apply to college and for financial aid in this country.

Promising Practices:

Set up homework clubs and recruit volunteer tutors.

Choose projects that are both fun and teach useful skills, such as computer labs, creating a Web site for the program, and multi-media arts.

Use volunteers from a local university to introduce immigrant and refugee youth to college life, and allow them the opportunity to ask questions they may not be comfortable asking other adults.

Tour colleges and set up a weekly class at a local college.

Work with youth and their families to develop a “youth plan” with concrete education and career goals, complete with timelines.

Hold career development activities for young women separately, ensuring they receive the information, support, and encouragement they need to prepare for a career.

Find role models within the ethnic or the broader community that represent a wide range of career choices to speak to the youth about careers or act as mentors.

7 Build bridges with mainstream organizations and businesses, educating them about the immigrant communities, linking them with ethnic organizations and community leadership, and enlisting their assistance with the program.

Promising Practices:

Develop partnerships with others interested in youth development, such as the school system, Girl Scouts, 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, and others.

Solicit monetary and in-kind donations, such as healthy snack foods, from local businesses; keep them informed about the program and youth accomplishments.

Recruit volunteers, tutors, and mentors from these organizations, helping to establish deeper mutual understanding and a greater investment in immigrant youth by the mainstream.

Conclusion

Immigrant and refugee youth arrive in the United States with tremendous potential that can be tapped and developed through positive youth development programming. PYD can be an especially effective approach for these youth when programs are developed in partnership with ethnic communities and adapted to the special assets and needs of immigrant and refugee youth. An effective, strengths-based approach is especially crucial since research indicates that how well immigrant and refugee youth do today has a tremendous impact on the opportunities they can provide their children, affecting future generations. Since the children of immigrants make up a substantial—and growing—proportion of the U.S. population, our nation’s future will depend on their success. →



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