

Safe Spaces: Building Inter-family Understanding and Harnessing Resilience for Arabic Speaking Refugee Families in the GTA



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ABSTRACT

Arabic-speaking refugee families participated in focus groups to explore inter-family relations, experiences of trauma and developing coping skills as they settle in the GTA. The youth highlighted issues related to school and peer-relationships, while mothers (fathers did not engage in the program) emphasized relationships with husbands and work outside the home. The mother-child relationship is central for preventive mental health interventions, while fun, active youth-focused programs and women-focused activities help to address tensions and promote positive mental health outcomes. The role of cultural community organizations is vital for settlement, even more so during the pandemic.



Description of the program

“Safe Spaces” consisted of a series of 10 workshops offered to Arabic-speaking refugee youth and their parents in the Greater Toronto Area.

The Syrian Canadian Foundation (SCF), ran the program in partnership with Dr. Omar Reda, MD, of Untangled. The program was funded by the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC), which is funded by SSHRC.

The workshops aimed to help refugees build better inter-family understanding and communication, to harness resilience, integrate trauma stories and channel them into building inner strength. Families were encouraged to open up as they explored difficult issues including family dynamics in a new culture, rights and youth empowerment.

Workshop topics included: anger and stress management, emotional expression, affect regulation and life skills such as negotiating, compromise, respecting different opinions, problem solving and non-violent conflict resolution.



Research objectives

- A **Pre-program focus group:** to identify and understand participant needs related to social integration experiences and inter-family relationships.
- B **Post-program focus group:** to understand the impact of the 10 workshops.

Participants

Youth
(aged 12-20)

10 10

Mothers



Research Context

Refugee families face considerable stressors when they arrive in Canada: **racism, alienation, and poverty** (Tribe, 2002; Lustig et al., 2004 in Isakson, Legerski, & Layne, 2015); **language considerations** (Ghumman, McCord, & Chang, 2016; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2015); **acculturation** (Fazel & Betancourt, 2017; Guruge, Hynie, Shakya, Akbari, Htoo, & Abiyi, 2015); **accessing employment and housing** (Isakson, Legerski, and Layne, 2015); **culture shock** (Marshall, Butler, Roche, Cumming, & Taknint, 2016); **and other urgent survival and social integration concerns.**

Post-migration obligations may reconfigure roles and status within families, where for example, **older youth are required to contribute to financial burdens** (Statistics Canada, 2015 in Marshall et al., 2016) **or take on the role of interpreters or institutional intermediaries between health, economic and government processes for the family** (Guruge et al., 2015), **and parents struggle to manage their own trauma-related loss and experiences** (Fazel and Betancourt, 2017). Additionally, concerning learning, refugees with PTSD may experience **persistent psychological stressors and may have difficulties paying attention for extended periods, experience memory loss, anxiety and loss of confidence** (Tull, 2017).



Pre-program focus group Voices of the refugee mothers:

Parenting issues

We like to learn how to deal with kids here and raise them in Canada with all these new challenges. The way we raise kids in our country is different. It's much harder here.

Technology and game addiction

It became a big deal when I said Saturday and Sunday there isn't [phones allowed].

Marital issues

Cultural gender roles, including how men talk to women, and give lots of order, affects us and the kids. We want to change this.

Learning English.

Language is still a barrier. [ESL teacher] asks you why are you not studying? I come home, I have six kids, and mopping and cleaning. I don't leave home. My kids last week were all sick.

Isolation & loneliness

We want to know how to adapt in the country. I feel that I am suffocated. I am choked up because we miss our country and this is a new country and a new lifestyle. Everything is strange/foreign.



Pre-program focus group Voices of refugee youth:

Communication with parents

Some parents hit their kids when they get bad marks and that's bad for the kids. They need to talk to their kids – not hit or abuse. That will affect the kids and they will just do much worse.

Lack of parental support for physical activities

My parents want me to only do homework after school but I want to play sports and do homework. I like to have a balance but my parents don't have information on that so they don't feel it's important.

Lack of parental support for physical activities for girls

I like to play basketball but when I tell my mom that I want her to put me in a basketball team or something she just makes fun of me because she thinks it is only for boys but I love basketball and I am good at it.

Lack of encouragement for post-secondary

The guidance counselors told me no you are not going to make it to university, just take the easy way. But I want to go to university.

Bullying at school

When there is bullying happening, I won't tell an adult because they will come and make bullying worse. There is no way to tell an adult, not parents [and] we don't tell teachers.

Lack of parental help with homework

Whenever I have homework and I need help and I ask my mom she says I don't know what it means in Arabic or in English. She's like, 'we didn't learn this in school'.

Lack of parental trust

I want my mom to know that we tell her everything because she thinks that we have secrets and then she gets mad.



FOCUS GROUP



Post program focus group Voices of the refugee mothers:

Learned strategies give us peace of mind

[What we learned], is as much as you can, to take it easy, have a positive outlook and be patient. Have a calmer temper.

If you talk to someone, you can go with the flow. You can write, draw to express yourself, anything inside of you that is hurting you. You can talk to yourself.

There is also that you feel sometimes that you are struggling alone but when you sit with others and listen to other people's problems your own problems feel less significant ... so you feel thankful for your own situation and you try to help those around you.

My emotional and mental state is now better. I haven't taken my medicine for two weeks.

Continued psychological stress

When you are sitting alone, hundreds of things cross your mind, old and new things. You feel like the world is suffocating you but you want to relieve that stress and feel comfortable.



Post program focus group Voices of refugee youth:

The importance of relationship with the mother

I feel more safe with my mom. There are private things that girls like to say only to the mother.

Wish for more opportunities to do physical activities

We want programs like martial arts, boxing, camping, and fitness classes.

FINDINGS

Participants are clear that they are living with many stressors individually and collectively. They are looking for change and solutions to improve their circumstances, their sense of wellbeing and mental health as well as their inter-family relationships. They reach out to the SCF for those supports but fathers are often missing from these initiatives.

More involvement of fathers in these types of “Safe Spaces” workshops may have helped as Fazel and Betancourt (2017, p.6) noted, “the involvement of all family members is a powerful approach and specific sessions for married couples are recommended.”

Youth, particularly girls, have a strong bond with their mothers and seek comfort and advice from their mothers. However, they also feel restrictions placed on them due to gender cultural norms.

The numerous issues raised by both groups were not resolved by the workshops. Due to limited resources and lack of engagement of fathers the program fell short of offering a holistic family-based preventive mental health intervention.

Recommendations

The needs expressed by the participants are urgent. More must be done to “encourage the social and emotional support among family and community members that involves exploration of cultural, spiritual, and family beliefs, which can be a protective factor against mental health problems” (Marshall et al. 2016, p. 313).

New ways must be created to engage fathers as programs, services and supports for refugees are optimized when families, not just individuals, are involved in addressing inter-family tensions around social integration, and expand refugees' understanding of mental health (Ellis et al 2011).

More efforts to engage the youth in meaningful youth-centered activities and supports in multiple sites are essential, such as within the family, at school, and in the broader community. Fazel and Betancourt identify resilience of refugee youth as arising from family and community social supports, a sense of belonging, family connectedness, having a positive outlook, and allegiance to one's native culture (2017, p.3).

SCF plays an important role in addressing the needs and concerns raised by the participants however teachers, school counsellors, faith-based groups, and government supports all have a role to play in the successful integration and wellness of refugee families.