

## SAFE SPACES: YOUTH WITH REFUGEE EXPERIENCE AND THEIR PARENTS HARNESSING RESILIENCE

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**KEYWORDS:** refugee youth, refugee parents, family-based supports, Arabic-speaking families, mothers, trauma, resilience, mental health, qualitative research, workshops

### WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

**OVERVIEW:** In this study, ten workshops were organized for Arabic-speaking refugee youth and their parents. Facilitated by the Syrian Canadian Foundation and psychiatrist Dr. Omar Reda, the workshops aimed to provide a safe space for refugee families to build better inter-family understanding and integrate trauma stories to build resilience. The workshops were open to both parents; however only mothers chose to attend. The workshops were preceded and followed by focus groups with the participants.

**OBJECTIVE:** To explore tensions that arise between refugee youth and their parents regarding social integration; examine family dynamics in a new culture; help participants develop coping skills; and build resilience among refugee youth and their parents.

**RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION:** Refugee families face considerable stressors when they arrive in Canada, including racism, alienation, poverty, language barriers, acculturation, difficulty accessing employment and housing, culture shock, and other urgent survival and social integration concerns. This study sought to examine concepts and issues related to culture, inter-family communication, rights, and youth empowerment while bolstering family cohesion and improving the coping skills and resilience of participants and their families.

### HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

This study used a qualitative research approach. Focus group interviews were held with the workshop participants – ten refugee youth aged 12 to 20 years old and their mothers living in the Greater Toronto Area. Before the workshops began, focus groups were held to identify participants' needs related to social integration and inter-family relationships. At the end of the series of workshops, another round of focus groups was held to understand the impact of the workshops.



## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

### Youth voices:

- Youth participants feel a strong bond with their mothers and seek comfort and advice from their mothers.
- However, they also desire better communication with their parents and for their parents to trust them more.
- Youth sought more parental support for physical activities – girls especially felt restricted by parentally-enforced gender norms. They also identified a lack of physical activity programs available to them.
- Participants also identified several challenges at school, including bullying -which they did not feel comfortable sharing with parents or teachers- and lack of support for post-secondary education from school staff. Another challenge was that their parents were unable to help with homework due to language barriers or unfamiliarity with the subjects.

### Mothers' voices:

- Mothers in this study experienced several challenges related to language barriers. They struggled to find time to study English while taking care of their children and the house.
- Mothers in the study encountered many challenges raising their children, including cultural differences between how they raised children in their home country and in Canada, as well as concerns over their children's use of technology.
- Mothers often took on burdens silently – particularly regarding their marital difficulties, which they do not feel they could share with their children.
  - Since fathers did not attend these sessions, resolving tensions within the family was limited mainly to child-parent relationships and did not include marital relationships, which were key issues for the mothers who participated.
- Mothers often felt a sense of isolation and loneliness and described not knowing how to adapt to their new country. Through the workshops, participants were able to learn coping strategies to help their emotional and mental wellbeing.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need to find ways to engage fathers in programs, services, and supports, as without their participation, whole-family approaches to addressing inter-family tension and social integration are less effective.
- More efforts are needed to engage youth in meaningful youth-centered activities; in particular, more physical activity programs are needed, especially for girls.
- Flexible and accessible English as an Additional Language classes for women are required, where women can socialize with other mothers of different backgrounds and have facilitated discussions about parenting, spousal relationships, and women's issues.
- Supports for youth are needed at multiple sites, including in the family, school, and the broader community. Teachers, school counsellors, faith-based groups, provincial and municipal government supports, and other community organizations all have a role to play.

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## ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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