

BACKGROUND

WHY DID WE DO THIS STUDY?

Canada offers permanent resettlement to more than 20,000 refugees each year. Although studies suggest the importance of social support for refugees during the early years of resettlement, this knowledge has not been invoked to systematically develop interventions that help refugee new parents adapt to life in receiving countries such as Canada.

WHAT DID WE WANT TO KNOW?

The purpose of this pilot study was to design and test an accessible and culturally appropriate social support intervention that meets the support needs and preferences identified by refugee new parents and can ultimately inform services, programs and policies for these vulnerable families.

WHO PARTICIPATED?

Participants were mothers and fathers who arrived in Canada in the last 60 months from Sudan and Zimbabwe, and who had a preschool child between 4 months to five years of age born in Canada.

METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

- *Quantitative Data:* Standardized measures were administered at pre-test (n=71) and at post-test (n=61).
- *Intervention Processes Qualitative Data:* Fifty two field note forms were completed during the support intervention.
- *Post-test Qualitative Data:* Five group interviews (n=50) and in-depth individual interviews (n=33) with participants were conducted. In-depth interviews were conducted with peer and professional mentors (n=9).

INTERVENTION PROCESSES

Face-to-face support groups created comprised of like-ethnic and gender peers. Each of the four support groups was co-led by Sudanese or Zimbabwean peers who had a child in Canada and a professional (service provider) from health, education, or social service sectors. Discussion topics for support groups were informed by challenges identified during the pre-intervention assessment study, and suggested topics that were pertinent participants' specific support needs.

INVESTIGATORS

- Dr. Miriam Stewart; Professor, University of Alberta (Principal Investigator)
- Dr. Edward Makwarimba; Research Consultant, Alberta Health Services (Co-Principal Investigator)
- Dr. Kaysi Eastlick Kushner; Associate Professor, Assistant Dean, University of Alberta
- Dr. Nicole Lyn Letourneau; Professor, University of Calgary
- Dr. Edward Shizha; Associate Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University.
- Dr. Cindy-Lee Dennis; Associate Professor, University of Toronto
- Dr. Denise Spitzer; Professor, University of Ottawa



FINDINGS

PARTICIPANTS' IMPRESSIONS OF SUPPORT GROUP

The opportunity to meet and socialize with peers in similar life situations was one of the highlights of the support group meetings. The support intervention was described as a great experience by participants because it presented opportunities for learning new things, make new friends, and to refresh. Once participants felt comfortable to disclose and share personal experiences, peer mentors were able to address some challenges refugee new parents encountered in raising children in Canada. Participants discussed what it meant to raise children, including getting them to school, preparing food, providing shelter, as well as worrying about their children's future.

This group is just designed for women only, it provide us with a confidential and safe place where we as women feel free to explore a wide range of emotions, experiences and gender specific needs (Sudanese woman).

SUPPORT EXCHANGED/ RECIPROCATED AMONG GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Emotional support: Participants indicated that attending support group meetings helped relieve stress. They stated that the sessions gave opportunities to share ideas with peers who faced similar issues.

Practical support: Participants exchanged ideas regarding strategies for managing family finances identified as a major challenge for many families. Parents shared practical ways to get involved in their children's lives. They challenged one other to set good examples as role models for their children and to develop strong and supportive parent-child relationships with their children.

We should know what is going on in our kids' lives, do not let technology and television raise your kids for you (Zimbabwean man).

Informational support: Participants exchanged personal experiences and opinions on sensitive issues including marital challenges, cultural identity and discrimination; work-related stresses; school; and parenting. They talked about distinguishing disciplining and abuse.

He [divorcee participant] blamed himself for failing to adjust to the new Canadian environment where women are more empowered. He advised all present to start make personal changes in their relationships. His advice was that, 'please have time for your families and listen to them (Sudanese male mentor).

SUPPORT FROM PEER MENTORS

Peer mentors reported that in addition to the support provided and received during group meetings, participants often called them to seek support regarding personal matters such as spousal conflicts or taking care of children. Some participants came earlier or stayed following support group sessions for one-on-one support interactions with peer facilitators. Peer mentors provided interpretation services; helped complete immigration forms; and escorted some participants to meetings with service providers such as school personnel.

I'm not talking to a professional but I'm talking to a person I know and respect. So definitely it hit home really more so it definitely-definitely made a difference (Zimbabwean male)

SATISFACTION WITH INTERVENTION

Participants found the use of their own language and dialect during support group meetings critical for self-expressions. Discussions on topics such as the confluence of cultures, access to jobs, raising children, family budget, personal development, household communication, and parenting resources, were found to be valuable. Participants enjoyed 'hanging around' with people of the same ethnic background.

It may not change the meals on your table; it might not change the income on your pay check. But just to know that someone understands what you are going through is very comforting (Zimbabwean male)

IMPACT OF SUPPORT PROGRAM ON COPING WITH LONELINESS AND STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

Participants took part in group activities such as bowling, dances, work outs, zumba, and soccer. Sharing common problems such as children experiencing racism at school, parenting, and marital challenges, and possible solutions was seen as a way of de-stressing.

The support group and the community meeting gave me the senses that I am not alone (Sudanese woman).

CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS

Some participants felt that their relationships with family members improved following the intervention. Support group meetings fostered proactive parenting strategies that brought parents closer to their children. The participants also reported improved connections and relationships with neighbours and the larger ethnic community.

“Yeah I think the group gave me a break from the family especially the children, yeah and when I get home I found that I am more energized and relaxed when dealing with family stressful situation.... And their school work too” (Sudanese woman)

CHANGES IN HOW THEY FELT ABOUT THEIR SITUATIONS AS NEWCOMERS

Some participants believed that the group had ‘shaped and sharpened their skills’ in dealing with family matters. The more time refugee parent participants spend as part of the support group, the more they shared ideas with peer participants and mentors.

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SOCIAL COMPARISON AMONG GROUP MEMBERS

Most participants noted that they had experienced challenges in their marriages. Defining roles and responsibilities, and managing family finances within the marriage were the major reported causes of marital conflict. Coping strategies shared among peer participants included

development of spousal communication, anger management, and positive thinking skills.

We have had time to figure each other out and the second child has brought us close together (Zimbabwean male).

RECOMMENDED CHANGES

- Addressing barriers to participation
- Enhancing participation and consistent attendance
- Structured program for children whose parents attend support group meetings
- Increased use of professional facilitators in the areas of domestic violence, immigration, parenting, nutrition and healthy habits.
- Skills oriented support such as the promotion of employment skills
- Mixed-gender support sessions to bring about a balanced discussion on topics of interest.

I realized there was too much blame about fathers... and I wonder what if the men were around what they would have said (Sudanese woman).