

Creating Successful Programs for Immigrant Youth

By Maud Easter and Dina Refki

Immigrants and children of immigrants make up one-third of New York State's population. The families of immigrant youth come from over 150 countries and speak as many languages. They have made new homes across the state in rural, suburban and urban areas.¹ Programs for immigrant teens work best when built on the special strengths of immigrant young people. This issue of prACTice MATTERS describes assets of immigrant youth and useful strategies for three kinds of program development: with youth themselves, their parents and their schools.

Four Assets of Immigrant Youth

1. Immigrant youth often wear an important mantle of protection, based on values in their family's culture of origin. Many immigrant cultures offer youth the strengths of:

- Extended families: providing many adults for support and guidance.
- Community needs valued over individual needs: buffering youth against materialistic, competitive pressures of mainstream US society and celebrating youth achievements as bringing pride to the whole community.
- Emphasis on collective decision-making, yielding more effective teen conflict resolution.

Effective programs help immigrant youth develop a **healthy bi-culturalism**, combining the excitement of new opportunities in mainstream US culture with protection against that culture's unhealthy behaviors.

Immigrant Cultures of Origin: An Asset for Youth

- Research by Kathleen Harris has shown that the longer the time since arrival in the US, the poorer adolescents' health and the greater the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors such as first sexual intercourse at an early age, delinquent or violent behavior, use of cigarettes and substance abuse.²
- The adoption by immigrant children of American behavioral norms which can increase their health risk can be slowed by the reinforcement of native ethnic values and norms.³
- Research on Latino and Asian youth finds that biculturalism and exposure to immigrant culture seem to serve as protective factors against dropping out of school.⁴

2. The bi-lingualism of most immigrant youth is an enormous asset in the context of the globalizing world. Bi-lingual skills increase future job and leadership opportunities in our increasingly multilingual society. Youth programs which honor bi-lingual skills as community and personal assets empower immigrant teens.

3. The migration-related struggles faced by immigrant families create challenges which can spur healthy adolescent development. Immigrant adolescents, with more access to English classes than adults, can help their parents solve many English-language problems. Although it is inappropriate to rely on youth to interpret in medical or confidential conversations, other roles as family language navigator can empower immigrant teens.

4. For immigrant youth, juggling two cultures inherently demands resiliency, flexibility and developing skills to assess human interactions. Negotiating a new culture provides immigrant teens with a head start over other teens in meeting 21st century challenges. Skills include: adapting to rapid change, life-long learning and exposure to multicultural communities.

As Craig Kielburger from Free the Children points out: while children in some countries may have to bear too much responsibility for their communities, generally children in mainstream US culture are not given enough social responsibility.⁵ Responsible community involvement of immigrant youth can model empowering options for other teens.

Some immigrant youth thrive from meeting family and community needs. For others, extra adult support helps prevent challenges from becoming overwhelming. Some youth have experienced violence and terrible uncertainties during migration. Youth development programs can provide special support for these teens or link them with culturally appropriate, language accessible services.

Program Strategies for Youth, Their Parents and Their Schools

Understand the cultures of immigrant youth: A first step for agencies sponsoring youth programs: The experience of immigrant youth programs suggests the importance of agency-wide commitment to multicultural programming. When the agency recognizes that white European culture is only one among many cultures and that ethnic identification has a major impact on adolescent development, two organizational commitments become priorities: 1) language access for youth and their parents and 2) staff who reflect the ethnicity of youth they wish to serve. Historically, mainstream youth agencies have developed a universalist approach which assumes English-competency and European values and practices. Re-examining these assumptions transforms program development for immigrant teens. Immigrant community-based organizations, either as program sponsors or in partnership with mainstream agencies, can contribute needed expertise.

Strategies for Work with Teens:

Effective programs build on the assets of immigrant teens and are staffed by supportive adults, who are knowledgeable about their community and speak their language.

- *Programs for youth from one country or region* increase pride in a specific bi-cultural identity.

- *Programs for youth from multiple cultures* promote cultural sharing, underscore common immigrant family challenges and offer advocacy opportunities for addressing general anti-immigrant attitudes in the mainstream culture.
- *Programs offering youth opportunities to teach their language or culture* build leadership skills and foster a tolerant environment.
- *A youth community advocacy project* links teens and adults in respectful relationships. Teen-developed surveys can document community strengths and challenges.

“The first few years in America, it was very essential for me to try to adapt to the new culture. Realizing classmates took advantage of my poor English and made fun of me, I made attempts to better my image in the eyes of my new peers. This was very difficult, and sometimes undoable, because of the significant culture clash. Since I was slowly giving up my Arab culture (which included the Arabic language), I was lost because I was still searching for the possible American in me.

...The tragedy of September 11th was a definite turning point. I immediately felt fingers pointing at me by those who surrounded me. My pride in my heritage seemed to quickly bloom, but I had to face a great deal of responses from my parents. My mother was forced to remove her hejab, or head covering, and she warned me not to reveal my ethnic background...I felt that lying about my identity was not an option.

Activism, especially educating people about Arabs, Muslims, and other ethnic groups, has become a great priority in my life. I've been in two documentaries regarding Muslims and Arab youth living in America. The most significant activity for me is being involved with the Arab American Family Support Center, particularly in my high school's Arab American Youth Club. This organization provided me with resources to grow by giving me many opportunities to pursue my goal of educating others about my ethnicity. Our image is usually degraded by the media, which results in offensive acts and stereotypes. The Arab American Youth Club helps us cope with such cases by providing education concerning immigrant rights.”

Phatin Jarara, immigrant from Palestine.⁶

“It’s bad enough for teenagers to just find who they are living in one culture, but I have been blessed with the difficult task of finding who I am with two cultures. I have to find balance between the American and Bengali parts of me. This includes how I dress, behave, talk, eat and many other things.

SAYA! (South Asian Youth Action) has allowed me to realize the advantages I have in America as a South Asian immigrant and to accept myself. I met other young South Asian immigrants who were dealing with similar questions, and I no longer felt lonely and alienated. I came to the beautiful realization that I am unique because my beliefs, ideals, values and behavior are a magnificent fusion of the two cultures.

SAYA! instilled confidence in me to the extent where I’ve began making speeches in front of crowds. More importantly, the adults that I met in SAYA! were so empowered, intelligent, confident, driven and simply cool adults that they became my role-models. They made me believe that I can do anything that I wanted to and use my abilities and passions to achieve great things just as they were doing at SAYA! I have led a conversation group to teach immigrants English in the Adult Learning Center. I entered and won the school-wide contest to live a week with the Navajos in Arizona in the Global Ambassador program. And I am a SAYA! youth board member.”

Saila Moni, immigrant from Bangladesh⁷

Strategies for Work with Parents:

All parents find the adolescent years a challenge, but for immigrant parents the gulf between traditional expectations and mainstream US youth culture can become a chasm. For example, parental expectations are significantly impacted by gender in all cultures. US society, itself in transition on gender issues, often holds young women and young men to different standards. However, on issues from sexuality to use of limited educational resources, immigrant parents may see gender differences even more sharply – leaving teens caught in the middle. **Effective parent programs strengthen parental support and guidance by involving parents, youth and program staff in communication about cultural expectations.**

- **A parent support group** can help concerned immigrant parents understand they are not alone in experiencing conflicts with their children. Program leaders who respect the families’ ethnic identity can heighten parental compassion for the peer pressure challenges their children face. Emphasizing youth strengths, program leaders can help parents see their children in a new light.

- **A youth-parent dialog program** can help teens appreciate the value of some culturally traditional approaches and help parents understand that their children are trying to find solutions acceptable in both their worlds. Program staff become “culture brokers”, helping both youth and parents understand each other better.
- **Sharing information with parents on language accessible, culturally appropriate health or mental health services** can link youth with needed assistance. Some services – for children with disabilities, mental health or substance abuse problems – may not have been available in the family’s country of origin. Encouragement to utilize community assistance, when necessary, may be useful when traditional culture stresses strictly family reliance and responsibility. When appropriate community resources are not available, programs can involve parents in advocating for needed services.

Strategies for Work with Schools:

A sense of “school connectedness”, important for youth development, can be a major challenge for immigrant teens. Students’ school attendance, perception of closeness to teachers and students, and feeling that other students are not prejudiced against them seem to protect against many harmful behaviors including early sexual intercourse, cigarette use, violence and alcohol use.⁸ Youth programs can help schools transform their world to provide immigrant youth with a sense of belonging.

- **Partner with schools to develop culturally appropriate classroom and after-school learning experiences.** Youth programs can link schools with immigrant community-based organizations, to help all students value immigrant cultures. Tutoring or other opportunities to use language and cultural skills in school and after-school settings will empower immigrant teens and assist other students. Teens will experience responsibility, teamwork, giving back to the community and trying out leadership skills.
- **Increase parental access to the schools.** All youth need parental involvement in their education. Belief in the importance of education is not an obstacle for immigrant parents – in fact, there are few parents more convinced of the value of education. Youth programs can help schools change practices which exclude immigrant parents, like English-only notices – from announcements of parent-teacher conferences to information on educational options. In a recent study by the NY Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children, 47% of NYC immigrant parents reported not receiving translated notices from schools and 56% indicated that they had never or rarely received translation services for school-related activities.⁹

- **Involve both teens and their parents in education advocacy.** Youth feel supported by their parents' concern and can partner in advocacy efforts. The 2003 protests in NYC's Chinatown, by parents, teachers and community leaders supporting bilingual education, communicated powerfully to youth that adults in their community valued their future.
- **Create a safer school environment.** For immigrant youth, anti-immigrant bias, too often socially condoned, can add another layer of fear to the bullying and sexual harassment present in all schools. Youth programs can help schools prevent bias-violence and create an immigrant-friendly environment.

Assistance Available

This publication is authored by **Voices for Change: Immigrant Women & State Policy**, which works statewide to provide public and private organizations **training, research, demographic information and advocacy** on challenges facing immigrant families. Voices for Change is a program of the Center for Women in Government & Civil Society at the University at Albany. For further information, contact Maud Easter at 518/442-3887 and Easter@albany.edu, or Dina Refki at 518/442-5127 and DRefki@albany.edu.

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⁵Phatin Jarara's complete presentation at April 2004 Voices for Change training available from drefki@albany.edu.

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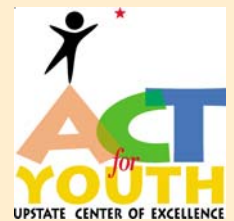
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⁹Advocates for Youth of NY & NY Immigration Coalition (February 2004). *Denied at the door: Language barriers block immigrant parents from school involvement.*, New York, NY: Advocates for Youth of NY & NY Immigration Coalition.

The Upstate Center of Excellence invites you to visit the ACT for Youth website where additional copies of this newsletter and many other youth development resources are available.

www.actforyouth.net



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