
Volume 2005

Number 15 *Perspectives on Family, Friend, and
Neighbor Childcare: Research, Programs, and Policy*

Article 7

December 2005

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Recommended Citation

Argo, M., Chan, H., & Malecka, C. (2005). Lessons From the Field: Culturally Competent Support for Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregivers in Seattle. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2005 (15). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2005/iss15/7>

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LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: CULTURALLY COMPETENT SUPPORT FOR FAMILY, FRIEND AND NEIGHBOR CAREGIVERS IN SEATTLE

mergitu argo & hueiling chan with christina malecka

Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA)¹ has worked in the area of family, friend and neighbor care since 2004, and is already serving over 70 caregivers through workshops focused on raising children to become bicultural, CPR and safety issues, nutrition, child development, school readiness, and discipline and guidance. ReWA has twenty years of experience working with Seattle/King County's East African, West African, Southeast Asian, Chinese, Latino, Russian, and Bosnian immigrant and refugee communities. In addition to workshops for caregivers, ReWA is training a group of twelve trusted advocates from immigrant/refugee groups to be peer educators on the topic of family, friend and neighbor care. Chinese Information and Service Center (CISC)² has more than thirty years experience working with Seattle/King County's Chinese and Taiwanese immigrant community. Its program to support family, friend and neighbor caregivers started in 2001, and currently serves more than 200 caregivers and children through workshops, play groups, and multilingual tools and guidebooks. Programs are offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Toisanese dialects, as well as in the English language.

ReWA and CISC are participating in a four-year-old initiative to support family, friend and neighbor caregivers and promote the value of kith and kin care. This Family, Friend and Neighbor Resource Network @ King County is a project of the SOAR Opportunity Fund³, a public-private partnership among local governments and corporate, private, and public foundations that supports programs that benefit King County's children and youth.

Over the past four years, we have learned valuable lessons about culturally respectful, empowering, and meaningful support and communication with caregivers. We've experienced our share of struggles: there is never enough money or staff time, and working in a multilingual context can be challenging and frustrating. Staff at both ReWA and CISC learned to be patient with low attendance in our workshops during their initial phases, and experienced some disconnect between what we wanted to teach and what caregivers wanted to learn. Yet, rather than getting bogged down by our struggles, we prefer to learn from them and persevere. It is our hope that the lessons learned through trial and error can help other programs across the country. In this paper, we highlight the nine most important factors we've found for creating a culturally inclusive support program for family, friend and neighbor caregivers.

Understand that Family, Friend and Neighbor Care is the Preferred Form of Care in Most of the World

Traditionally, Chinese, Southeast Asian, African, and Latino families have

¹ www.rewa.org ² www.cisc-seattle.org ³ www.philanthropyw.org/opportunityfund

relied on informal networks of friends and family to help with child rearing. Within immigrant communities in the U.S., nothing seems more natural or right than relying on family, friends and neighbors for many types of support, including child care. In Chinese families, grandmothers and aunts are the preferred caregivers: why send your child to be cared for by a stranger when they can spend time with a loving grandma? East Africans define family well beyond blood relationships, and it is common for them to refer to each other as “cousin,” “brother,” or even “Ma,” based on feelings of kinship rather than formal ties. Additionally, licensed child care is expensive, and the subsidy system is confusing and difficult to access. Many refugee and immigrant parents work several jobs; often their hours include nights and weekends, times rarely offered by licensed care. Most importantly, immigrant parents are deeply concerned that their children retain their home language and culture while also learning English and American traditions.

Start with Questions, Not Answers

When ReWA started our family, friend and neighbor child care program, we intended to focus on development and school readiness. Yet, when we asked participants what they wanted to learn, it became clear that they desired basic information about safety and nutrition. We adjusted our curriculum to meet participants’ needs first, and as a result, we were able to lay the groundwork for later discussions about child development and school readiness.

View Mistakes as Learning Opportunities

When CISC first started its program, we decided it would be best to conduct home visits with known caregivers in the Chinese immigrant community. This turned out to be a total failure! Caregivers viewed home visitors with their clipboards and checklists as “inspectors.” Some feared they would be turned in to authorities for providing child care without a license. In hindsight, we realize that not only was this culturally inappropriate within our own community, but also that just about anybody would be turned off by someone coming into their home with a checklist and an agenda for “teaching” them how to care for children. Through this debacle, we re-learned the importance of establishing relationships before doing any type of home visit.

Programs for Culturally Specific Communities Are Most Effective When Delivered By Members of Those Communities

Imagine yourself an immigrant in a new country, with limited resources and no knowledge of the language or culture. Where would you turn? Most likely you would look for an organization that serves immigrants from your country or has staff who speak your language. The same goes for the communities with which ReWA and CISC work. The strength of our programs is that they are run by organizations and leaders that are embedded in the communities we serve. We know and respect the populations with which we work, because we are part of those populations.

Relationship-Building and Support Networks Are Key to Success

Both ReWA and CISC have a goal to make every workshop or play group an opportunity to build community, and something that participants look forward to. We include food, fun, and informal time in our events whenever possible. One of the biggest successes for both of our programs has been the support participants have created for each other. For example, Seattle/King County's Chinese population is geographically scattered, and we were delighted to notice participants in CISC's play groups and workshops becoming resources for each other.

Because many recent immigrants are illiterate in their own language, or simply prefer verbal over written communication, translated flyers and brochures have limited usefulness. Instead, ReWA has built programs through one-on-one communication and relationships. Mergitu, for example, is a recognized leader in Seattle's East African community, and does not draw a strict boundary between her role as a ReWA employee and her role as a community leader. Because she is willing to be a visible community leader at the grocery store and at New Year's celebrations as well as in her office, she builds trust and interest in the programs ReWA has to offer.

Language Need Not Be a Barrier

Neither CISC nor ReWA allows spoken language to be a barrier to empowering caregivers: there is always a way to communicate with someone, even if it is initially only through a smile, nod, or touch on the shoulder. At CISC, we offer our programs in English as well as three distinct Chinese dialects. In any given ReWA caregiver workshop, we may provide simultaneous interpretation from English to Oromo, Amharic, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Mandarin—and back to English again. Yes, this is chaotic, and sometimes nuances and exact wording are not precise. But learning still takes place, and relationships are formed. What is missed verbally is more than made up for in nonverbal communication that is rarely present in a group where everyone speaks the same language. Because participants must carefully observe each others' facial expressions and patiently await interpretation, powerful ties are formed across cultural and language barriers. This more than makes up for any difficulty with verbal communication.

Translate *Culture*, Not Just Words

We always attempt to “translate” western ideas about how to connect with and teach children in ways that are culturally appropriate. At CISC, we've devoted hours to creating materials that present child development and school readiness concepts with respect to Chinese culture and tradition. For example, we changed the game “Simon Says” to “Grandma Says” in recognition of vertical authority structures in Chinese family relationships and the important role of grandparents in Chinese children's lives. By introducing everything we do as an opportunity to prepare children for school, we have introduced concepts of play and child development that were unfamiliar to Chinese grandparents. At first, grandparents were reluctant to get on

the floor to play with children, or to allow kids to get messy, or be sloppy. By modeling play behavior, and explaining the connection of creativity and fine motor skill development to school success, we were able to help grandparents understand the value of play.

At ReWA, we know that in Cambodia and Vietnam, it is not appropriate for parents to sit on the same level with children in play. So, we teach caregivers that children learn and get ready for school by helping with tasks like counting socks while folding laundry or identifying fruit at the grocery store. For East Africans, a more appropriate form of adult-child interaction is the transmission of oral history, so we adapt western ideas of “play to learn” as story-telling activities.

At the same time, both CISC and ReWA work to demystify western culture for caregivers, and to explain why it is that Americans do what they do. We teach the value of western concepts of play, emotional coaching, and a more demonstrative emotional and relational style, with the understanding that, like American parents, the caregivers and parents in the communities where we work love their children fiercely and want what’s best for them. This is not about replacing a traditional set of skills or values with a new set. It’s about using the best of both worlds and increasing everybody’s tools and options.

A Shared Goal: Bicultural Children

We are aware of how frightening some aspects of Western culture look to immigrant parents and caregivers. Over the years, we have learned to work with caregivers’ fears and values and to help them make decisions about what will work best for the kids in their care. We recognize that immigrant parents are faced with a balancing act every day in deciding what they want their children to retain from their home culture and to acquire from this new one.

Most three- to five-year-olds who come to CISC’s play groups do not yet speak English, and playgroups are conducted in Chinese and English. We might read the same story in English and Chinese to help kids connect words, concepts, and pictures; or we might teach “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” in English and Chinese. Caregivers enjoy these English lessons as well, and they increase their own confidence by encouraging kids to be bilingual.

At ReWA, we have focused on demystifying the American school system for caregivers and parents to bridge the gap between immigrant families and public schools. In many cultures, it is not appropriate for parents to play an active role in their children’s school or academic life, so immigrant families are unfamiliar with the value or purpose of the PTA or homework assistance. We share the local indicators of school readiness, like knowing the ABC’s and numbers, as well as obtaining immunizations by contextualizing them with more familiar examples.

At CISC, we share with caregivers that, while in many Asian cultures it is inappropriate for children to make direct eye-contact with adults, American teachers may perceive lack of eye contact as a sign of autism or lack of assertiveness that

could create a barrier for kids. In one ReWA workshop, when participants were reluctant to let children use scissors, a caregiver shared a story about a child being placed in special education because she could not use scissors!

Don't Compartmentalize Services

People will be less receptive to child development information if their basic needs aren't met, and at ReWA, we make a point to notice when people seem upset because they are faced with barriers to survival or well-being. It is not enough to simply refer someone to a food bank. Sometimes it is important to help caregivers navigate a foreign social service system for the first time, to introduce them to families in their community who share their culture and language, or to simply lend an ear to fear or isolation.

At ReWA and CISC, we never cease to be awed by the wisdom and commitment of the caregivers with whom we work. They have taught us more in the past four years than we could ever hope to teach them.