Refugee and Immigrant Children: A Comparison

Refugee and immigrant children in Canada have significant similarities. Both groups must deal with migration, which represents a disruptive loss to one’s life. Once in Canada, they both have to endure the “push-and-pull” forces of home and school, which often work in opposite directions. At school they share with other adolescents the desire to be accepted by their peer group. At home, both groups may experience a role and dependency reversal in which they may function as interpreters and “cultural brokers” for their parents. Both refugee and immigrant children may encounter society’s discrimination and racism, and both have to accomplish the central task of childhood and adolescence – developing a sense of identity – while trying to bridge generational and cultural gaps. Perhaps the greatest threat to these children is not the stress of belonging to two cultures but the stress of belonging to none (Lee, 1988).

Successful adaptation can bring with it the opportunity for growth. How well children adapt is influenced by several factors, including age at arrival, individual resiliency, and reception by the host community and society. One key factor in determining success is the reception of newcomers by the host society. Settlement support services, schools, health and social services, and the community at large play a crucial role in assisting and supporting children to adjust and integrate into Canadian society (Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988).

Several key characteristics affect the adaptation of refugee children to a larger extent than immigrant children. First, refugee children often have experienced the tragedy and trauma of war, including persecution, dangerous escapes, and prolonged stays in refugee camps. Some have witnessed killings, torture, and rape – including atrocities against family members. Others have been forced to serve as soldiers. Some have lost many members of their families and many have lost everything that was familiar to them.

Typically, immigrants can, at least, envision the possibility of returning to their countries; most refugees cannot. It is not only natural that refugee children, along with their families, go through a process of mourning those losses. The grieving process in refugee children, however, is seldom recognized as such. This may be attributed to a long-held belief that children adapt quickly, bolstered by the tendency of children to not express their sadness and mourning in words. Although these children may not know the concept of being homesick; they feel it all the same. Although some would not talk about their experience for fear of upsetting their parents, perhaps it is also true that many do not talk because we do not listen.