



Working With Immigrant Families

Why is it Important to Work More Effectively with Immigrant Families?

While immigrants are living in communities across the United States, California has more immigrants than any other state. **Half of all children in California have at least one immigrant parent**, while most of these children are U.S. citizens.¹ The immigration status of family members can vary widely, and *mixed-status* families, in which different members of the family have different immigration statuses (e.g., one parent is a legal permanent resident, other parent is undocumented, and their child is a U.S. citizen) are increasingly common. Children of immigrants are more likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to live in poverty² and face significant barriers to healthy development,^{3,4} which may put them at higher risk of child maltreatment.⁵ It is important that child welfare agencies understand and respond to the unique needs of immigrant families so that all families experience positive outcomes. This resource provides information on how agencies and staff can work more effectively with immigrant families.

Immigrant families have many **strengths** that can be built on to help them experience positive outcomes. They typically have a desire for a better life for themselves and their families, as evidenced by their decision to immigrate. Most immigrants have a strong work ethic and are willing to take on and succeed at tough jobs to support their families. Many immigrant families place a high value on education and want their children to do well in school. Finally, for many immigrants, the family unit is very important and they have strong family connections and cohesion.

Immigrants may experience several different **challenges** as they adjust to life in the United States, all of which can affect their ability to meaningfully engage in services. Common challenges that child welfare agencies must be aware of and address include:

- Language issues
- Difficulties with acculturation (e.g., culture shock, different societal norms, etc.)
- Changes to family dynamics (e.g., gender roles, family separations, intergenerational conflicts as children may acculturate more rapidly than parents, etc.)
- Isolation and loss of social support network
- Trauma before, during and/or after immigrating
- Lack of resources (e.g., poverty, difficulty finding work, difficulty accessing services, etc.)

1 Lou, C., Adams, G., & Bernstein, H. (2019). *Part of us: A data-driven look at children of immigrants*. Urban Institute.

<https://www.urban.org/features/part-us-data-driven-look-children-immigrants>

2 Anderson, A. (2019, April). *Among working families, children of immigrants are far more likely to live in poverty than other children*.

https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/2019/04/Data-Hit_Among-Working-Families-Children-of-Immigrants-Are-Far-More-Likely-to-Live-in-Poverty-Than-Other-Children.pdf

3 Safe Start Center. (n.d.). *Trauma informed care for children exposed to violence: Tips for agencies working with immigrant families*.

https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh76/files/programs/safestart/TipSheetFor_ImmigrantFamilies.pdf

4 Park, M., & Katsiaficas, C. (2019). *Mitigating the effects of trauma among young children of immigrants and refugees*. Migration Policy Institute.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/mitigating-effects-trauma-young-children-immigrants-refugees>

5 Velazquez, S. C., & Dettlaff, A. J. (2011). Immigrant children and child welfare in the United States: Demographics, legislation, research, policy, and practice impacting public services. *Child Indicators Research*, 4(4), 679-695. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-011-9111-9>

How Can Child Welfare Agencies Better Support Immigrant Families?

- Ensure that all child welfare services are culturally competent:
 - Provide both orientation and ongoing training to all staff on the agency's policies and practices regarding cultural competence and humility.
 - Recognize and overcome attitudes and perceptions staff as individuals may hold that could affect how they work with clients.
 - Recruit and promote minority and bilingual staff that is representative of the immigrant communities in your area.
 - Use cultural brokers to add context and enhance understanding.
 - Provide resources and information about the immigrant communities in your area.
 - Address cultural competency in any satisfaction surveys administered by the agency.
- Ensure that appropriate language services are provided to every family:
 - Ask all families about language preferences. Although they may speak English, they may be more comfortable communicating in their native language.
 - Do not use children or family members as translators, as this disrupts the family dynamic and puts the translator in an uncomfortable and inappropriate position.
 - Have written materials and forms available in a variety of languages.
 - Ensure that families understand what is going on during their case and, especially, in any court hearings. Having a translator is essential, but not sufficient - the service provider needs to clarify understanding at each step through the translator.
- Build relationships with local organizations serving immigrant communities:
 - Learn about the services that are available to immigrants in your community from both public and private organizations.
 - Have leadership at your agency speak with leadership at local organizations serving immigrant communities in order to be more informed about the current issues and needs in these communities.
- Help families access the services they are eligible for - health, behavioral/mental health, legal, education, etc.
- Use family-centered and strength-focused service approaches:
 - Include members of a child's extended family in meetings and discussions.
 - Provide services face to face whenever possible.
- Ensure that services are trauma-informed and take into account the immigration experience of each family.
 - Ask about past generations' experiences, as that can affect the current generation's experience as well.
 - Provide services face-to-face whenever possible.
- Understand that fear of authority or government may affect an immigrant family's willingness to access services and seek help:
 - Understand this may be due to previous experiences in the U.S. and/or experiences in their native country.
 - Understand they may also be concerned about the impact of such contact on their immigration status.
- Ensure that child welfare staff have a solid understanding of immigration issues, policy, and enforcement:



- Take into consideration what is reasonable in a child welfare service plan, given the family's situation and the services for which they are eligible.
- Consider having a specialized staff person or unit that serves as a point person for the agency as a whole, as immigration rules and policies are complex and ever-changing.
- Enact policies that support successful outcomes for immigrant families:
 - Place children with kin, regardless of their documentation status (if allowed by jurisdiction).
 - Allow for flexibility in service plan and reunification timelines, as accessing appropriate services may take longer.
 - Have policies and procedures in place to reunite children with parents who have been deported.

Considerations When Working With Undocumented Families

- Ensure all agency staff knows your agency's policy and state/local laws regarding reporting.
- Inform families upfront of reporting requirements regarding their immigration status and any confidentiality limitations.
- Address the possibility of detention of children and/or parents in service plans.
- Know immigrants' eligibility for public benefits.
- Know immigrants' eligibility for your community's local private/nonprofit resources.

Online Resources

- [Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services \(BRYCS\)](#)
- [California Department of Social Services Immigration Services Unit](#)
- [Center on Immigration and Child Welfare](#)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway:
 - [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#)
 - [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Caseworkers](#)
- [Immigrant Legal Resource Center](#)
- [ImmigrationLawHelp.org](#)
- [Migration Policy Institute](#)
- [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#)



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