



Hmong Cultural Guide

Building Capacity to Strengthen the Well-Being of Immigrant Families and Their Children: A Prevention Strategy

This is intended as an overview of selected items that are critical to understanding children and family environments of Hmong refugee and immigrant groups. Through research and field interviews, the following represents general themes for the Hmong culture and family dynamics. It is not meant to be exhaustive nor representative to every family or group. Each family and child is coming from a unique and particular experience; and should be approached in such a way.

Accurate understanding of parenting practices

Hmong parenting practices are governed by the idea that children are possessions of parents; children must listen to and obey their parents and elders. Infants are not shown physical affection for fear of spoiling them; parental love is demonstrated through gifts and the meeting of basic needs. Fathers generally exert discipline, while mothers provide nurturing care. Sons are important in Hmong family structure because they will be the caretakers of their aging parents. In turn, daughters will care for their husband's parents.

Parent and child nurturing and attachment styles

Attachment is often strongest when a child is young. Children are often most strongly attached to their mothers. However, children are expressing greater attachment with increased parental involvement from fathers. Many parents hand feed their children until approximately age 4 as a means of showing love, as well as providing a faster, cleaner way of feeding children.

Expectations of child development

Hmong parents often share the belief that schools are responsible for the education of children. Expectations of child development often fall at opposite ends of a spectrum. Some parents expect that children will not learn until they begin school, while others expect that children should be able to read and write their name before entering school. Grandparents play a role in child rearing, particularly during the school age years when parents may be working outside of the home. It should

also be noted that older siblings play a significant role with expectations in care giving for younger siblings.

Attitudes in seeking health care for children

Traditional healing practices are often incorporated into the Hmong attitudes toward seeking health care as Southeast Asian cultures hold a different concept of social functioning. Resolving the cause of an illness is central rather than just

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treating the symptoms. Personal and structural characteristics are significant determinants of service utilization; unless relatively acculturated, utilization of mental health services remains low. However, families may be more open to health services, perhaps due to increasing numbers of Hmong doctors, nurses, and social workers.

Attitudes toward emotional behavior and mental health

Perceptions of depression, mental illness, and attitudes toward help seeking depend on the generational stage of the migration journey (1st, 2nd, 3rd generation). Many have Buddhist and Taoist beliefs, which relate suffering as part of the natural order of things. Social disorders and mental health issues are often hidden and taken care of by one's family. Physical, mental, and spiritual health are viewed as one in the same; problems thus arising from one area are recognized as a lack of equilibrium

which affects all spheres of health and well-being. Problems may be rooted in an imbalance of hot and cold forces within the body, assaults to the brain or the condition of the liver which could cause helplessness or excessive crying. These symptoms may lead an individual to seek ways to remove toxins from the body by coining or herbal treatments.

Current studies continue to find high rates of mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorders, strongly rooted in the experiences stemming from the refugees' survival of war and loss in their home countries. Even after being in the United States for more than two decades, mental health diagnoses are common due to the refugee experience with trauma, loss, relocation, poverty, and loss of status and traditional roles.

Role of kin and clan networks

There are 18 different Hmong clans. Each clan has its own leadership, comprised of older men, who help to resolve problems and challenges. Clans are grouped by last name. It is not allowed to date or marry within the clan.

Support networks in coping with day-to-day challenges:

Hmong households often seek support from older generations or clan leaders. In Minnesota, the Hmong 18 Council, Inc. is the recognized organization comprised of one representative from each clan. This group helps resolve issues, such as divorce and dowry, within the community before going to more formal, legal measures.

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Intergenerational tradition and values

Hmong culture places high value on elders and their wisdom. Children are taught to respect the older generation.

Roles of men and women in their family life and socialization of the children

Women play a variety of roles in family life. Women often track and monitor household expenses and finances. While more women are employed outside the home, they also maintain responsibility for household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Hmong men are seen as the head of the household. They are largely responsible for disciplining children, particularly sons. While more men are engaging with their children's school experience, this responsibility largely falls to women.

Experiences in the migration journey

Hmong migration can be traced to China, Laos, and Thailand before arrival in the United States. Migration to the United States and throughout the world began more than 30 years ago and continues to this day. Given the varying periods of life history in the United States, the Hmong community is very complex. There are families who need adult basic education and work force training, while others are much immersed into the larger community and highly educated. In a recent needs assessment, it was found that the majority of participants still use Hmong as the primary language spoken to their children at home and did not appear to be assimilated to American customs. Many Hmong families still struggle with the challenges of language and poverty.

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