



Best Practices Guide for Working with Karen, Nepali-Bhutanese, Oromo, and Somali Families in Child Welfare

From the Voices of Community Members

This guide is intended as an overview of what may help and what may hinder child welfare professionals engagement with four of the largest refugee communities in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Based on interviews with members of the communities themselves, themes were identified across refugee populations and also within each of the four individual communities identified below.

Common Themes Across Refugee Populations

Lack of Awareness of the Mission and Goals of Child Protection

Prior to coming to the United States (U.S.), refugee community members lived in their home countries or camps where a system such as the U.S. Child Protection Services (CPS) was non-existent. The concept of child protection is different, and the education provided within the resettlement process about the mission and goals of CPS is incomplete. It is imperative that child protection workers communicate why they are involved and that the goal is to support what is in the best interest of the child, which includes maintaining child safety. **Workers should clearly state what the expectations are of caregivers and what each step in the process will look like.**

“Community members, they need to get more information before they just assume the worst. Which is what is happening, because a lot of times people don't know the details of what the process is like, and in the absence of not knowing what the process is like, they are filling in the gaps.

—AHMED HASSAN, MA LPCC, PSYCHOTHERAPIST, SUMMIT GUIDANCE, INC.

There is a huge dilemma understanding what child protection service is for. The perception in the community is that if you talk to your children, if you discipline your children, if your children call 9-1-1, somebody will call child protection, the monster will come and take your child away from you [...] Education is important. It also lets the community know that child protection is not the agency or the big monster that is going to come and take away your child. It is an agency for the well-being of the child.

—BULA ATOMSSA, MSW, SOCIAL WORK UNIT SUPERVISOR AT HENNEPIN COUNTY

Adult Authority is Often Undermined After Arrival

Because language and culture are easier to learn and adapt to at a younger age, many refugee families have children who speak English better than the parents and have become more acculturated to U.S. culture. This can have a negative impact on families as it negatively reverses the natural power dynamics within the family system. This shift also undermines parental agency, including their ability to discipline effectively and to advocate for themselves when working with CPS professionals. **It is helpful to use professional interpreters whenever possible.**

“Some kids grow up here speaking English and their parents are not growing up here so they don't speak English. So, communication with families can become harder. All sorts of things can cause communication problems. Sometimes children become more powerful.

—EH TA TAW ZAR, KAREN COORDINATOR, THE CENTER FOR VICTIMS OF TORTURE

Learned Distrust of Government Actors

Refugees, by definition, left a country where the government was either actively persecuting them or was unwilling or unable to protect them based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group (such as gender or sexual orientation). Because of this, many refugees have a long history of distrusting government actors for self-preservation. Even in camps and urban refugee environments, police often harassed and demanded bribes, while the host governments offered no protection. These experiences can impact the trust refugee community members have for CPS professionals who are often representatives of government agencies. **It is helpful to take time to establish trust with families by getting to know them and explaining the role of CPS and the limits of your authority.**

“The community itself actually respects authority very, very much. Also, with the history that someone from the government, security personnel, like police and soldiers, if they walk in — the first thing will be they will be afraid of all those things.

—PARMANANDA KHATIWODA, FOUNDING MEMBER, BHUTANESE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION OF MINNESOTA

Parents Feel Helpless When Unable to Use Corporal Punishment

Refugee community members report that caregivers commonly receive the over-simplified message that if you hit your children in the U.S. that they will be taken away. Most often alternative forms of punishment and methods of discipline are not discussed. Because corporal punishment was the standard form of punishment before arrival, this leaves parents feeling they are all together unable to discipline their children. **It can be helpful to provide education about the law and alternatives for parenting that support the authority of the parent.**

“That's one thing you can do, just empower the parent, you can say, 'Yes, well, you know, there is something called abuse. This is what abuse looks like. This is what discipline looks like.'

—LUL NUR, MA LPCC, MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR, SUMMIT GUIDANCE, INC.

Four Major Refugee Communities in Minnesota

KAREN

The Karen people are an ethnic group native to Myanmar (alternatively known as Burma) who were systematically persecuted by the Myanmar government and fled to refugee camps in neighboring Thailand. The largest population of Karen refugees are Christian, though there is also a Buddhist population that has resettled in Minnesota. In Minnesota, they live mainly in St. Paul north of Downtown, as well as neighboring Roseville, Falcon Heights, and Little Canada.

- *"Karen people are dealing with a lot of anxiety, worry, and then stress. That it's being through all of the war, the fleeing, the living in refugee camp, how to deal with this new country — that is a stress."*

- *"Don't just, kind of, come in and go, 'oh, where's your kid?' or, 'I want to see your kid.' That is kind of already scaring them, when you're already coming to their home — it's kind of like a scary thing. Here we are direct, like we say very directly, like 'you should not do this or you should not do that,' very direct. But for Karen, we are kind of indirect, we start talking about, we share something, and then we kind of come in to that conclusion of what that was about, like how the direction was supposed to be."*
- *"Because the CPS is a member from government, so they are, like I told the story about Thailand, Thai police, when they got caught, they were took to jail and they have to pay money to be released. For that, like, every people who are in power, they are afraid of it already."*

NEPALI-BHUTANESE

The Nepali-Bhutanese people are a Nepali speaking group that was expelled from their native country of Bhutan and spent years in refugee camps in Nepal before being resettled around the world. There are Buddhist, Christian, and Hindi Nepali-Bhutanese. In Minnesota, they live mainly in Saint Paul and surrounding communities.

- *"If you ask for some information they will be talking about how things, and make that background, before coming to a point, so it takes time. So, you might have to take a longer time to talk and communicate with them."*

- *"The sense of family, sense of care, was the whole, everybody was taking care of everybody. So, if you see a neighbor's kid there, you say, 'no don't do that, do this.' And if they did not listen, physical punishment was very common. Even in the schools, physical punishment."*
- *"Usually in the families we take off our shoes and walk in. And they will offer you tea, they will offer you so many things, and they may or may not understand whether you can or cannot accept even tea, and if you want to get more information, it may not be from the first visit, you may have to make a couple visits and may even accept tea, as not a problem."*

OROMO

The Oromo people are an ethnic group from Ethiopia that has long been marginalized and violently persecuted by the Government of Ethiopia. Oromo people can be either Christian or Muslim. In Minnesota, they live mainly in Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs.

- *"In the Oromo community, all the children are raised by family members, by village and wherever you live, you are accountable to them too. If you do anything wrong they discipline you. The elders in the community discipline you, your older brother discipline you, your family members, those who never saw discipline you."*
- *"They are very respectful for the person who is visiting their home. They may invite the social worker to have food, to have at least water. It is more as a*

sign of respect that getting something when you go to someone's house to get something. If you say, 'no, no, no,' because of you know ethics or others, they may feel that, you know, you are thinking, that you are not respecting them."

- *"When they go to their house too, most of the time, they may ask, it's Minnesota culture too, you can because of the snow or whatever, taking off your shoes is really important."*
- *"When we communicate, we may not have eye contact, sometime or most of the time. For an elderly person, you don't see eye to eye, it's considered as a sign of disrespect. [...] And to give more respect, they may not look eye to eye to the person. If they don't see that, I don't want the child protection to look, oh yeah, or maybe mainstream American culture they may think that this person is lying, or deceptive, or not telling me the truth. No, it is a sign of respect."*

SOMALI

The Somali people are natives of Somalia, a failed state in East Africa where its people have fled due to a decades long civil war, famine, inter-clan conflict, and religious militancy. Somali people are nearly all Sunni Muslims. In Minnesota, they live primarily in the Twin Cities in the Cedar-Riverside, Phillips, and Whittier neighborhoods. However, they also make up significant populations in outstate cities such as St. Cloud, Shakopee, Wilmar, and others.

- *"I have realized that sometimes CPS are involving other relatives and family members to even maybe keep the child, which I think is a very good idea, and it is in line with our tradition of having other family members to get involved*

and help the process. So I think if they can use more of that it would be a win-win situation for both CPS, but also for the family."

- *"If they're bringing in somebody to translate for them there are issues that the parents may not trust the person who is translating too, because they know the culture and they might have that fear of their privacy might be interpreted. So that is one of the fears, they might not be honest, or might not say a lot. For them to have more training, especially with child protection services, if they would train them about privacy that's very important."*
- *"You know a lot of parents go through a lot of grief. And the grief is not just losing their belongings, losing their family systems, you know, the grandparents that were helpful that are not there anymore, it is really, they are going through a lot."*

Suggested Citation: Molloy, C., Shannon, P. (2019). Best Practices Guide for Working with Karen, Nepali-Bhutanese, Oromo, and Somali Families in Child Welfare - From the Voices of Community Members. Available at: cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/families-from-refugee-populations-best-practices-guide/

This guide was published by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare [CASCW], School of Social Work, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. This project was supported, in part, by grant #GRK129722 from Minnesota Department of Human Service, Children and Family Services Division. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center, School, College, University or their funding source.