

Study shows immigrant parent challenges

Children assimilate faster into society, but independence is kept on short leash

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Immigrant children, who usually adapt fairly quickly to Canadian culture, often disappoint and frustrate their parents by wanting to reject their roots.

The kids' faster assimilation into Canadian society also creates a role reversal scenario, with the youngsters becoming the family interpreters and negotiators simply because they have mastered English.

While the scenario is not new, it was among the findings of a special provincial study headed by the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

The eight-month, \$330,000 study of immigrant parenting was funded by the federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration.

It was also supported by several provincial agencies, including the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement which operates out of the University of Toronto, York University and Ryerson University.

The purpose of the study was to explore the issues faced by immigrant parents and examine what support and resources would help them, said Joanna Ochocka, project co-ordinator and the Kitchener centre's director.

Ochocka and other centre researchers and staff were getting ready to present their findings at Kitchener City Hall last night, at an event called A Celebration of New Canadian Families.

Interviews for the study were conducted on 14 immigrant groups in seven languages in Waterloo Region, 12 groups in Ottawa and 24 in Toronto, Ochocka said. All the subjects had been in the country less than three years.

In the region, half the groups were interviewed with only the mothers present and half with only the fathers.

The major similarities between immigrant and Canadian families are that all the groups love their children and want them to be happy, healthy, well-educated, have good values, contribute to society and gain economic security.

The main differences were that immigrants are stricter with their children, had closer families, emphasized respect for elders and did not give their children as much independence.

As well, immigrant fathers especially, were critical of the Canadian educational system.

While the families of all groups had made major changes since coming to Canada, difficulties remain, Ochocka said.

"Immigrant families take their parenting roles very seriously. They want their children to gain from the opportunities Canada offers, as long as they retain their own cultural values.

"But parents often feel disappointed and frustrated when their children reject their cultural roots. When the children do non-traditional things, like seeking advice outside the home, the parents feel embarrassed and disempowered."

And if one or both parents are underemployed because their qualifications are not recognized in Canada, those feelings are heightened.

"They feel they are not respected, either by their children or by society," Ochocka said.

More practical support is needed, she said, but perhaps even more important would be a change in attitude towards new Canadians.

The local centre has operated since 1982. It receives no core funding, but conducts research, evaluations and program reviews for dozens of local and provincial agencies, usually on a contract basis.

Credit: Record staff

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