

Trauma and Mental Health Needs of Immigrant Minors, Part Two

Sponsored by the Culture Consortium

As the migration of unaccompanied immigrant minors continues to unfold, the national and international media focus on the trauma endured by these youth before and during their crossing into the United States. Forced to flee social violence and poverty, the youth in the past few years have traveled from mostly Central American homes to seek refuge here.

Their vulnerability to trauma does not end at the border. In fact, residual effects of prior trauma may be intensified by additional traumatic stressors as the youth are detained, processed, and either reunified with family in America or placed in the foster care system. Once this determination is made, the youth may experience fears of deportation, substandard living conditions, and lack of social and community support.

Immigrant youth will also enter the U.S. public education system. There, depending on their previous schooling, these youth face many new challenges, including placement in classrooms based on age, which may not correspond to their level of academic achievement. They will likely be unfamiliar with school routines and expectations, may endure bullying and harassment from other students because of their cultural and linguistic differences, and face barriers to resources.

Helping children and youth with their adjustment to life in the United States entails a determined effort to support them in their communities and schools. And while the trauma they experienced before and during their journeys may be unfathomable, these youth nevertheless have tremendous internal strengths. One way to augment their resilience is to promote peer group support. Here we highlight two programs currently working effectively to diminish the social isolation of unaccompanied immigrant students and help them to thrive in the future.

La Puerta Abierta (“The Open Door”), Philadelphia, PA

According to Cathi Tillman, LSW, Executive Director, La Puerta Abierta began as a collaborative project between behavioral health clinicians in the United States and Ecuador. The project, known as the Intercultural Coalition

for Family Wellness, has since 2010 carried out its U.S.-based work as La Puerta Abierta; by 2016, this will be the organization’s rebranded identity. Its mission is to improve access to quality mental-health care for vulnerable youth and families in the Latino immigrant community through collaboration, training of bilingual clinicians, and service.

La Puerta Abierta now serves families and youth in a three-county area in and around Philadelphia, and has developed multiple partnerships with other agencies. One of its main co-locations is at Norris Square Neighborhood Project, an arts and gardening organization focused on Latino culture. There, youth participate in arts and culture and garden programming facilitated by La Puerta Abierta staff.

One of the organization’s most successful programs is the Youth Mentorship Initiative, which provides youth-driven programming to enhance emotional development for undocumented adolescents and young adults. Tillman explained that many of these youth are dealing with what author Pauline Boss has termed “ambiguous loss.” They

may be physically separated from but still have regular communication with loved ones in their home country, so it is often difficult for them to resolve feelings of grief and loss over their separation. Others have fled horrific gang violence but are unable to open up about the trauma. “Oftentimes kids and even adults do not have the language to explain what has happened to them,” Tillman said. “The events may have been internalized or normalized.” In these situations, it’s important for clinicians to be “slow and careful and to patiently navigate those conversations, respecting their readiness to uncover their pain.” In group counseling sessions, youth ages 14 to 20 share their experiences and practical means of dealing with emotional challenges.

Un Sueño Para el Futuro (“A Dream for the Future”) is a year-round program of La Puerta Abierta. Un Sueño uses creative arts projects, many of them facilitated by a local graffiti artist from El Salvador, in addition to other activities to create safe spaces for healing and fellowship. Tillman said referrals come mostly through word of mouth from the Norris Square facility, schools, and other community providers. Some of the more senior members of the group



have become mentors for younger members; others have been able to graduate from high school and enter community college. In so doing, Tillman said, “they provide a motivation and inspiration that older adults like us do not necessarily provide.”

The Community Health Advocates School, South Los Angeles, CA

The Community Health Advocates School (CHAS) is one of three distinct small pilot schools on the Augustus Hawkins High School campus in South Los Angeles.

The impetus for the Newcomer Mentoring Program at CHAS began with the realization that many newcomer immigrant students enrolling mid-year at the campus were receiving a less comprehensive orientation than students who came at the beginning of the school year. Ashley Englander, an Assistant Principal, noted, “Being brand new to the country, these students were also undergoing huge personal, social, familial, and academic transitions.” Not surprisingly, the students were struggling with attendance issues. Thus was born the idea of pairing third- and fourth-year English development students (who were former immigrants) with newcomers. The Newcomer Mentoring Program has quickly grown from an initial enrollment of 15 newcomers to 75 at present. The mentors, who are high school juniors and seniors, attend several retreat sessions where they learn basic advocacy skills, such as the ability to obtain academic resources, including translation services, for their mentees.

Patricia Hanson, last year’s internship teacher, said that the mentors “provide emotional stability for their mentees” because they share similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. In addition, Englander noted, “You cannot underestimate how powerful it is for 9th graders, who are looking for social cues, to be around 12th graders who are not concerned with being cool. They [the mentors] are serious about helping the younger kids, take high school seriously, and learn from their mistakes.” As they negotiate their own educational challenges, the mentors also become powerful role models for their young charges, Hanson added.

Claudia Rojas, CHAS Principal, added that mentors are trained to advocate for mentees’ academic needs, but are not expected to handle their emotional issues. “Ashley and Trish have trained the students that when issues come up, such as a female student experiencing harassment, that they must come to the staff. We’re very honest with our kids. We tell them that even we are not the experts and that we have on-site staff, such as a psychiatric social worker and a school psychologist, that we turn to for help.”

The mentoring program has been supported by faculty at the University of Southern California School of Social Work, who provide valuable trauma-informed professional devel-

opment for CHAS educators. CHAS is also an integral part of the NCTSN Treatment and Services Adaptation Center for Resiliency, Hope, and Wellness in Schools, a Category II site led by Marleen Wong, PhD. The faculty and students at CHAS have been active community partners with this center, providing valuable feedback on product development, participating on advisory boards, and presenting at the center’s annual Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) Summit. Students from the Newcomer Mentoring Program eloquently spoke at the 2014 CBITS Summit, describing their experiences as mentors.

Rojas noted that CHAS has begun outreach to the other two small schools at Augustus Hawkins – the Critical Design and Gaming School (C:\DAGS) and the Responsible Indigenous Social Entrepreneurship (RISE) School – to apprise instructors and administrators of the strength of the mentoring model. Outreach to the larger Los Angeles Unified School District is also planned.

The NCCTS extends a special thank you to members of the NCTSN Culture Consortium for their conceptualization of the Spotlight on Culture series, and for their efforts on behalf of unaccompanied immigrant minors. Editor’s note: Although it is beyond the scope of this series, the plight of young immigrant children should not go unnoted. Children under the age of six are among the thousands of unaccompanied minors who have crossed the border. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are highly vulnerable to the stressors of displacement – the loss of familiar places and more, exposure to violence, and a shattered sense of safety in the absence of a protective figure. Immigration is thus one more layer in the continuum of traumatic experiences for many of these children, and can have a deleterious impact on their identity and perceptions of self and others.

Additional resources:

Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services (BRYCS). *Supporting Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Schools*. September 2014. Available at www.brycs.org/documents/upload/Unaccompanied-Children-in-USSchools.pdf.

Trauma and Mental Health Needs of Immigrant Minors, Part One. IMPACT, Spring 2015. Available at www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/newsletters/impact_sp15_final.pdf.