

## **Hints On Working With New Arrival Refugee & Immigrant Families At Your Library**

. **Use translated materials whenever possible.** Even if a parent is not literate in their home language, they probably have a family member or friend who is, and who can read the information to them. Occasionally, ask for feedback from parents about translated materials - sometimes the translation may not be correct or may convey misinformation. Remember, many concepts and vocabulary words may not translate well into another language; some vocabulary words may have to be "invented." It also helps to provide a notice with English on one side and the translation on the other side, so parents can get assistance from bilingual friends or family members.

. **Use signs in the home language.** If you have information that is important for your library, such as rules, procedures, directions, etc. in English, then it is important enough to have translated into the dominant languages used by your library patrons. For information that you are unable to translate, try to at least attach a note in the home language that states something to the effect that "This notice is important, please have someone translate/interpret this for you." Please use graphics whenever possible! It is much easier for non-literate patrons to understand pictures, arrows, and other indicators than text. Make your library a welcoming place from the moment a family enters the door!

. **Use bilingual staff.** Having bilingual staff is a great asset to your library, and demonstrates your commitment to serving bilingual or LEP (Limited English Proficiency) families. Remember that each country has its own dialects and regional differences, so there may be differences in language even when staff and parents share common countries of origin. If you have agreements with bilingual staff to provide interpretation or translation services, encourage them to become certified and have their bilingual ability assessed, so that you provide the highest quality services to your families. Don't use the child to convey information to the parent, it puts the child in a power position with the parent, and the information may not reach the parent or it may not be correct. Have an interpreter or bilingual staff person call the family if it is necessary to convey important, serious or time-sensitive information to the parents or guardians.

. **The more familiarity and contact you have with families, the more trust is developed.** Developing trust is an investment with all families who utilize your library site. Refugee and immigrant families want to know what kind of person you are, what your education is, and what your position is at your job. These are all indicators of status in their home countries, and knowing this about you, helps to place you in a familiar context for them. Remember, you are not only a stranger to them, you represent someone in power and there may be distrust about your role and why you need to know so much information about their family. If you require that a parent or family member sign paperwork, provide them with copies of what they have signed, and clearly explain the reason for needing a signature, and how they can revoke their permission, if they so desire, in the future. *Even if you are having trouble communicating with family members,*

*try to keep your cool and stay respectful.* For many cultures, losing your temper is an indicator of lack of education or poor character in an individual. You will gain much more respect in return if you demonstrate quiet, but firm, authority and knowledge.

**. It's important for families to know the staff, their roles and hierarchy of the program.** They will be unfamiliar with American libraries, and the borrowing system. In their countries, libraries were often non-existent, or not free, or had very limited access for patrons. They may have needed to even "bribe" library staff to have access to the materials, and they could have had their records and use of materials monitored by government officials. They need to know what the role library staff play...are they like teachers? are they government staff? are they something else?

**. Understand the "power" of the printed word.** In many countries, there may be much illiteracy, especially in rural areas, and even very little print materials available for general use. What print materials people may come into contact with may be religious in nature or come from the government or military. Therefore, the printed word may be revered, respected or honored. It could also have a negative connotation; in non-literate societies, the use of documentation, such as with land ownership, taxation, legal residence, etc. has been used to exploit and harm people who could not read the documentation. And in living memory, some people have even lost their lives due to being literate or having "non-approved" print materials in their possession (such as during the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia), and therefore, print materials may bring fear. So be aware that New Arrival families may bring their own feelings about using the library with them and this may have an effect on their use of it.

**. Use nametags for authenticity.** Families come into contact with many social service, medical, housing, and other agencies. Some are legitimate, some are not. Some families with limited English ability have been scammed by Americans who have obtained their personal information; families need to be empowered to withhold personal information except when necessary, and be cautious when allowing strangers to ask for too much personal information.

**. When New Arrival families come to the library, talk to both of the parents, but elders first.** Often New Arrival parents are working many hours, sometimes during second or third shift jobs, and this may be difficult for them to arrange time to come to the library with their children. But it is important that when they do come to the library, you demonstrate your acceptance of the household authority and hierarchy whenever you make contact with the family. Generally, address your remarks to the oldest member of the family (male elders first, then fathers or uncles, then female elders and finally the mother), even if another family member with more English is speaking to you. If you don't know who is who in the family, generally it is best to start with the eldest male or female. Remember that in many New Arrival families, the older children may serve as "substitute parents" while their parents are working, or because this child has the best English. Even though they may not be an "adult", realize that they are serving in this role for their parent, and be flexible in working with them. Don't insist that they bring their

parents to solve a problem instead if the child indicates that this is not possible, and try to think of other solutions to solving the issue.

If you have some questions or business with the family, spend some time to get acquainted first before you launch into "business." Inquire about their children, ages and which schools they attend, ask the names of all the people present, answer questions they may have, and then talk about the immediate problem, concern or task that the family came for. LEP parents often misunderstand the American need to conduct business quickly and efficiently for a lack of feeling towards the family or unfriendliness on our part. Even though your time is limited and you are "multi-tasking", take the time to listen carefully and give them time to state their reason for being there. When they have finished talking to you, restate what you have heard in order to check comprehension and indicate your understanding of the problem or question.

**. Be prepared to educate parents on the purpose of American libraries.** They need to know that children are not monitored by library staff while in the library. In other words, although their children could be reprimanded if they break a rule, but they will not be "baby-sat" by staff. New Arrival parents may see library staff as "substitute teachers" and expect that staff will make sure that their child is safe and monitored while in the library. New Arrival parents need to know the difficult truth that many kinds of people visit a library, some which might also potentially be dangerous for their child. They cannot expect library staff to make sure that their child is not talking with or leaving with a non-approved adult or child, but they may not be aware of this. They may also be expecting that library staff will monitor the use of the computers at the library. If New Arrival parents were to find out that their child had accessed pornographic, lewd or dangerous web-sites at the library, they may well revoke their child's library privileges altogether, thus shutting their child out of the opportunity to use a valuable resource. Please tell parents that their children need to follow their parent's rules and it is best if there is an adult with the child at all times, even in the bathrooms, at the computers and in the children's section of the library.

**. Be aware that often cross-cultural mistakes will happen.** Some behavior by New Arrival parents may be perceived in ways different from its original intent. Some communication may seem abrupt or rude, lacking in courtesies, or even seem challenging. When you are learning a new language, it takes time to learn the subtleties of a language and the cultural nuances. When parents have limited vocabulary, they have to "get to the point" or may raise their voice to be understood (haven't you witnessed Americans talking louder to limited English speakers as if they only lacked hearing skills, not language skills?) and they may also feel as frustrated as you are in trying to communicate. So try to always approach confusion with an open mind and assume the best intentions of the speaker. Of course, people will be rude at times, but again, you will be a better representative of the library by being polite and keeping calm. And remember that when you do not know another language well, you depend on non-verbal language and subtle cues, like tone of voice, to help you understand what is being said. Be aware that a negative message can be given out simply by demonstrating impatience through curtness, the way you hold your body, or what your face shows. And when people get offended or have their feelings hurt, they will not show up again! Think of customer

service as "selling" the library to new families, families who may have no knowledge about the value of what you have to offer.

. **Parents are very protective of their children.** A child is considered an "extension" of the mother, and this bond is very strong and very special. New Arrival parents may have a magnified vision of the amount of crime and accidents which occur in the U.S., that they get through watching T.V.; they may greatly fear the dangers that can affect their child. They will often be very strict with their children in comparison to the liberties that American children may have. Especially with young girls, many New Arrival parents may suspect that the library is a dangerous place for their daughters, since they may meet and talk with boys there. Many immigrant girls struggle with their parents in order to get permission to visit the library, even for school assignments and homework purposes. Although they generally trust teachers to take care of their children, they may still be apprehensive about what their child is being told to do or being allowed to do outside of the family, knowing that it may conflict with what is being taught at home.

. **Parent involvement is no indicator of parent concern.** Immigrant and refugee parents are often working two or more jobs and may have little time to give towards accompanying their child to the library or even visiting it for themselves. When not working, they may have large families to cook for, a home to clean, errands to run, etc. They do care greatly about their children, but they must support their families and cannot risk losing their jobs. A parent may not expect to be involved, since this may be perceived as them "not trusting" the staff to do a good job with their child. Lack of English skills also inhibits parents, and it may be shameful to them to not be able to speak English fluently. When limited English-speaking parents are queried about their wants, or their input into policies or activities, this may be misunderstood. They may become concerned about the ability of the staff, otherwise, "why are they asking me to tell them what to do?!"

. **New Arrival parents have different values and different expectations about their children.** Individualization is threatening to the cohesiveness of many Asian and African families; the American valuing of socialization of the child and having good social skills may not be a high expectation of refugee and immigrant parents. Children are expected to be successful academically, demonstrated by good grades, lots of homework, and dedication to studying. Children are expected to fulfill their debt to their parents by supporting them in their old age; they shouldn't be "wasting time" by playing around! If New Arrival parents perceive the library to be a place for their children to "just play," and not as an asset for homework and school, then they may very well restrict their children from its use (especially for pre-teens and teen-agers). They don't want them using the library to socialize!

. **Parents need to understand the reasoning behind library rules, especially concerning the checkout and fines policies.** Many New Arrival parents have kept their children from using the library after their child lost a book or had overdue materials that required payment. There is often very little money to spare, and a parent does not want it wasted on fines when their child should have taken care of the book. Their solution to

this is to often just tell their child to never check out a book again, or to stop going to the library. And many households are filled with blended family members and children, so the child may not always be able to "protect" their checked out materials. While a child is at school, other toddlers or visitors could get a hold of the materials, drawing in them, ripping them, borrowing them, etc., putting the child in the difficult position of explaining the loss or damage to library staff and parents. Make sure that parents understand the policies concerning damage, loss and late materials, and when there might be "amnesty" periods so that this can be resolved with a minimal of trauma.

**. Try to have flexibility in issues of "culture vs. policy."** Even if you don't initially understand why a parent may make a certain request, take the time to find a "cultural mediator/interpreter" to help you understand the reason for the request before denying this request due to "rules." Don't be surprised if a parent expects you to give them reports about their children's behavior while in the library, or expects you to serve in the role of advising their child. You represent an authority figure, like a teacher to them, and they may see you in this role. Be aware that many New Arrival parents may not be familiar with computers and the cataloging system, and may always need to get help from staff at every visit. It is difficult to navigate a new language and new systems, but helping them to enlarge their knowledge and their world through the incredible resources at your library is worth the effort! Don't be surprised if a parent becomes offended by the materials in the collection and conveys this to you - explain patiently the need to have a variety of information for many people and for many uses, even if the parent does not agree with the content.

**. Make a "long-term investment" in LEP families.** If your library intends to serve refugee and immigrant families, then it is worth your time and monetary investment to get school signs, notices, calendars, policy and rights, etc. translated, and it is even more important to find reliable interpreters to use. If you help support these families, they will continue to support and use your library. If you demonstrate concern and sensitivity to their needs, they will be more willing to participate. Don't rationalize that having only a few families is "not worth" the cost of interpretation. Try to get input back from the families about the quality of the bilingual services you offer them. Often, we have discovered that a mis-interpretation has occurred on a form or a sign, and until a family expresses a concern, we were not aware of it. It is important that we explain that we make mistakes, too, and we are willing to learn from the families in our program in order to improve and assess services. *Have flexibility!* Be prepared to meet parents at their level, whether it means accommodating them with their work hours, with interpretation support, with more or longer time to communicate, with more explanation and more patience. The investment in time and the willingness to be open to another point of view is invaluable!