



SESSION 9: Social Adjustment

OBJECTIVES

1. To give an understanding of social guidelines in the United States.
2. To give an understanding of phases of adjustment.
3. To assist clients in developing adjustment strategies.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:

Flipchart
Markers
Copies of “Refugee Adjustment and Adaptation” (attachment 29)
“Simulated Culture Clash” (attachment 30) (optional)

HOW TO DO IT

DISCUSSION

- Discuss, using the following questions:
What is the social structure of your community?
What is the role of each family member in your community?
Do you think that the social structure of families and communities in the United States may be different?
What traditions and ceremonies are important to you?
What are some of the rules in your community?

Discuss “culture”: a community’s language, art, attitudes, practices, etc.—everything that makes a community unique. Having a cultural heritage is important – a strong culture helps children build identity; cultural traditions are a way of passing down generations of knowledge. In the United States, there are many different cultures. For example, communities in the Midwest will have different stories, art forms, and ways of talking than people in the Northeast.

SOCIAL GUIDELINES

- Discuss rules and customs in Somalia, Kenya and the United States; identify similarities and differences.
- Review the following guidelines set by the U.S. government. Some of the following social guidelines may vary from those of Somalia and Kenya; however, they are set by U.S. law, and it is important to follow them. If U.S. residents break these laws, they may be arrested or deported.

Parents are held directly responsible for supervising their children: Although the exact definition of child abuse

varies from state to state, at minimum it is “any act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm,” as defined in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.

In Somalia and Kenya, families may send their young children out to play knowing that others in the community will help to watch them. In the United States, individuals often do not feel a responsibility for other families’ children. The neighborhood may be a very dangerous place for young children to play unsupervised – they may be injured or killed by a passing car, they may become lost. You may hear stories of kidnapping in the United States, where children are hurt or killed. Young children must be under competent supervision at all times.

Parents may not injure their children: A spanking or beating is considered child abuse if it results in an injury such as a bruise, a scar, a broken bone, etc. Many people in the United States choose to use non-physical forms of discipline – such as a “time out,” where everyone is given the opportunity to think about what happened, and to cool down before moving to a physical form of violence. Many parents fear that spanking will teach their children to use violence.

Women are equal to men: It is not legal to discriminate against someone on the basis of their sex. In the United States, women have rights equal to men – in the workplace, a woman may supervise men.

Family members may not injure each other: Men may not beat their wives; wives may not beat their husbands. Domestic violence is physical or mental harm between family members – this is a very serious offense in the United States.

Men may have only one wife: Polygamy, or the practice of a man having more than one wife, is not legal in the United States. Refugees in polygamous relationships must choose one union to legally recognize before entering the United States. If a man has had children with more than one woman in Somali and Kenya, he may be required to provide financial support for all of his children.

Men over the age of 18 are not permitted to have sex with women under the age of 18: Statutory rape varies from state to state, but generally a man over the age of 18 may not have sex with a woman under the age of 18. The same is true for women; generally a woman over the age of 18 may not have sex with a man under the age of 18.

Persons of different ethnicities are equal: It is not legal to discriminate against someone on the basis of their race or country of origin.

- Discuss the “good and bad of life in the United States.” Computers, televisions, magazines, etc. are wonderful tools for communication and learning, but parents should limit children’s access. There are pornographic websites, videos, and magazine; many movies and television programs are violent. Children may have access to drugs and guns in school. Clients should watch for “get-rich quick” scams.

CULTURAL TRANSITION

- Distribute “Refugee Adjustment and Adaptation” (attachment 29), and review.
- Discuss what your clients may feel as they go through phases of social adjustment:

Parent and Child: Parents may feel frustrated and angry that their children are adapting Western ways – children may disrespect their elders, they may want to go out on dates, they may not want to help with chores at home, they may think that it is “not cool to be smart” (a common attitude among U.S. schoolchildren). Parent may also feel a role reversal when their child learns English more quickly than they do, and interprets for them, rather than the parent communicating for the child.

Children may feel frustrated and ashamed to be so different from their peers at school, and they may feel pressure to adapt. Children may feel as if they have to be one person at school, one person at home – they may feel that they have to choose between the two cultures. They may feel overwhelmed by their new role

in this country and by their future and all of the career options available to them. Being a child in school is difficult, particularly if a child is going through a stressful period of cultural adjustment.

Husband and Wife: Men and women may feel sad if a husband has had to choose one legal wife, and the family unit is no longer together. Men may feel frustrated if they made a legal commitment to more than one wife, and now these unions are not recognized in the United States. Men also may feel discouraged if they cannot support all of their wives and children in the United States. They may be unsure of their new social role in the United States.

Men may also find it difficult for their wives to work outside of the home. In the United States the majority of working-age women do work outside of the home – women sometimes make more money than men. This is common in the United States, and is not shameful.

Women may feel scared if they are no longer legally married, and now do not know how to support their children. They may feel overwhelmed if they were previously sharing household responsibilities with co-wives. They may feel surprised that they must leave their home to go and work. They may be unsure of their new social role in the United States.

Community: The community, after being physically moved to a new place and a new culture, with geographic distance between families, may not be as close. Elders may not feel as respected, leadership roles may change. Some cultural practices once considered integral to the community – such as female circumcision – will be abandoned while others – such as dance and ceremony – may not be practiced as often.

NOTE to CO Facilitator

Often, a Somali Bantu nuclear family will consist of Aunts, Uncles, and Grandparents – be aware of this extended social structure. Recognize that extended family or community members may wish to take part and may be able to assist in solving family disputes.

Do not use children as interpreters – this may interfere with the quality of interpretation, as parents may be uncomfortable with sharing information with children. This also reverses the usual parent-child role within families.

- Emotions that often appear during this adjustment period include sadness and loss, uncertainty and anxiety, and worry that one will not be able to adequately adjust in a new culture. Clients may feel more tired than usual, and may not eat or sleep well. These are normal emotions that will fade to a degree as clients adjust to the culture. If the difficult emotions continue, however, there is no shame in talking to someone about them. People in the United States often talk to their families, friends, and others when confronting new challenges and concerns.

ADJUSTMENT STRATEGIES

- Discuss adjustment strategies. Many of the strengths of the Somali Bantu community will be very important in adjusting to life in the United States – for example, the Somali Bantu are known to value family and community, education, and hard work. The Somali Bantu are also admired for being able to overcome obstacles, and for being able to adapt to new environments. Ask your clients to identify other community and individual strengths that will help them to adjust. Also review the following strategies:

Learn English

Identify specific goals, and pursue them

Pursue education and encourage your children to do the same

Encourage your children to identify their strengths and to pursue their goals

Eat nutritious foods that your family enjoys

Exercise, both individually and as a family

Gather as a community to practice traditional ceremonies

If an important ceremony is not legal in the United States, observe the occasion with a different, legal ceremony

Connect with the local Muslim community

Pray and meditate

Introduce yourself to your neighbors

Acknowledge that this is a difficult period of time

SIMULATION

- Simulate a culture clash (attachment 30). (optional)