ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development



# Immigration, Acculturation, and Parenting

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December 2020, Éd. rév.

## Subject

Over 272 million individuals worldwide are international migrants,[1] in addition to many millions more who migrate domestically. Immigration involves a displacement with significant effects on family life, not least because of the cultural shifts inherent in resettlement. A burgeoning body of research focuses on the implications of immigration and acculturation for parenting.

## Introduction and Research Context

Parenting occupies a central node in the nexus between culture and adaptive human development.[2]

Parents of each generation have the important and continuing task to enculturate the next generation: that is, to prepare children to function competently in the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations that are characteristic of their culture.[3] Optimal child adaptation is achieved through socialization and learning processes that, notably, involve inculcating culture.

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Culture-specific patterns of parenting make for variations in childrearing practices that can be patent or subtle, but are always meaningful in meeting a specific culture's needs within a unique context.[4] Parents in all cultures are expected to nurture and protect young children,[5,6] but culture influences a wider array of parenting cognitions and practices related to childrearing and child development.[7,8,9,10,11,12] Moreover, the effects of specific parenting cognitions and practices on specific domains of children's development vary as a function of specific cultural contexts, such that whether a given parenting cognition or practice is "adaptive" or "maladaptive" will differ across cultures and settings.[13,14] Parenting and its subsequent outcomes in child development are likely subjected to complex transformations when families emigrate from one culture to settle in another.

**Key Research Questions**

- To what extent do immigrant parents' caregiving cognitions and practices change when they migrate from one culture to another?
- What unique challenges do immigrant parents face in acculturating?
- How do immigration and acculturation affect parenting and, so, child development?

**Recent Research Results**

*Parental acculturation*

Immigration requires acculturation. Acculturation entails processes of cultural and psychological change – for example in customs, language, values – that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.[15,16]

Early nominal or categorical models of acculturation depicted all individuals immigrating to a new culture as experiencing one of four possible outcomes, which were distinguished by high versus low levels of acculturation to their culture of origin and to their new culture of destination.[17] As acculturation research evolved, this framework was recognized as an oversimplification.[4,18,19] The application of the *specificity principle* to acculturation science has led to a more nuanced and valid conceptualization of acculturation, one which appreciates the many psychological, socio-cultural, and biological factors that moderate the acculturation process. The specificity principle in acculturation science asserts that "specific setting conditions of specific persons at specific times moderate specific domains of acculturation via specific processes."[4]

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This framework allows for acculturation outcomes to be idiosyncratic, dynamic, and variable across domains of functioning, stipulations which more accurately reflect findings in acculturation research and the lived experiences of international and domestic migrants. Individual differences, gender, age, cultures of origin and destination, reasons for migrating, legal status in the culture of destination, and life history are some factors which vary across individuals and contribute to diverse outcomes of a transactional acculturation process as embraced by the specificity principle.

Immigration and acculturation are disorganizing and reorganizing experiences, necessitating alterations of social identity and self-image. Immigrants must negotiate new cultures and learn to navigate multiple new and different systems, often without the support of familiar social networks. Acculturation requires adjusting responses of engrained life scripts to compensate for cultural differences and disruption of familiar family roles. Immigrant parents bring with them on their journey from their original cultural context conceptual models of the successful parent and how to rear a child properly. When they migrate to a new culture, they find that socialization agents in the new culture of destination, such as other parents, teachers, and professionals, may possess different images of the successful parent and different strategies for childrearing.[4,20,21] In acculturating, immigrant parents must decide which cognitions or practices to retain from their indigenous culture of origin, which to modify, and which conventions to adopt from their new culture of destination. This circumstance prompts most acculturating parents to become bicultural in some degree, simultaneously adopting select cognitions and practices of their new culture while retaining some from their native culture.[22,23,24] Bicultural individuals, those who feel comfortable navigating within their cultures of origin and destination, may demonstrate acculturation to their culture of destination in certain domains of functioning but align more closely with their culture of origin in other domains. For instance, certain religious practices may be maintained from the culture of origin,[25] but facets of personality may evolve to fit the culture of destination more closely.[26] Cultural adaptation (to adopt some elements of the culture of destination) may be preferred in the public domain and cultural maintenance (to retain some elements of the culture of origin) in the private domain. For example, Turkish and Moroccan immigrant parents in the Netherlands attribute more importance to cultural maintenance in the home and family context but consider adaptation important to functioning in work situations.[27] Rather than any one particular pattern of acculturation being uniformly associated with all positive outcomes, high levels of biculturalism have been found to positively but selectively predict self-esteem, prosocial behaviour, adjustment, strong family relationships, and positive

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mental health in immigrants.[28,29,30,31]

Immigrants do not always or readily adopt all cognitions or practices of their culture of destination.[32,33] For example, Chinese Canadian transnational parents opt to allow grandparents to care for their infants, based on expectations and norms of their culture of origin, despite emotional hardship and disapproval within their culture of destination.[34] Additionally, and speaking generally, parenting practices appear to migrate more readily than parenting cognitions.[4] For example, some cognitions of Japanese immigrant mothers remain close to corresponding cognitions of mothers in Japan, or fall intermediate between those of Japanese and European American mothers, whereas some Japanese immigrant mothers' practices change to resemble those of European American mothers more closely than those of native Japanese mothers.[35,36,37,38] In addition, different immigrant groups retain and adopt culture-specific cognitions and practices differently.[4,39] In contrast with Japanese American immigrant mothers, immigrant mothers from South America to the United States share more cognitions and practices with U.S. American mothers in their culture of destination than mothers in their South American cultures of origin.[35,36]

*Additional challenges to immigrant parents*

Immigrant parents may be misunderstood and judged harshly for seemingly unorthodox practices by educational, mental health, or child welfare services that are not familiar with customs from the family's culture of origin, contributing to experiences of discrimination and social exclusion both for parents and children.[40,41] Immigrant parents may routinely be evaluated based on culture-of-destination customs and laws, using measures which have not been validated for use in diverse groups and so may not be adequately sensitive or effective in assessing immigrant populations.[42,43,44] Immigrant parents may further experience significant loss in their effectiveness – as a result of systemic constraints on their ability to influence their new environment on behalf of their children – as, for example, when negotiating an unfamiliar educational system.[45,46] This circumstance may be especially challenging for parents with undocumented immigration status who may restrict mobility and outreach within their communities as they fear deportation or family separation.[47] Parents with high academic aspirations for their children, but little education themselves, may be uncomfortable with the new school system. They may not be in a position to help their children with schoolwork, and they may experience cultural or language constraints in dealing with educational authority figures, and thus may negotiate with teachers and administrators less effectively.

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Moreover, peers and schools exert major socializing influences on youth, forces that can result in children becoming more quickly and thoroughly acculturated than their parents.[48]

This situation is sometimes described as "dissonant acculturation"[49]– when children's acquisition of the language and cultural maze ways of the destination culture,  and simultaneous loss of those of the origin culture, outstrip acculturation of their parents.  Dissonant acculturation can increase parent-child conflicts in immigrant families and adaptation challenges for children, including diminished academic functioning and exacerbated depressive symptoms.[50,51,52,53,54] Because immigrant families straddle two cultures, tension and conflict in the family can also arise between parents, who wish to inculcate traditional beliefs in their offspring, and children, who wish to conform to and be accepted by peers in their culture of destination.[55] Paradoxically for both parties, children sometimes act as translators or culture brokers to assist their immigrant parents.[56]

Immigrant parents' rearing children at a distance transnationally entails special challenges.[57,58,59] In the process of international migration, parents typically undergo profound transformations that can be complicated by extended periods of potentially damaging separation from their children.[57]  Separations may be voluntary or involuntary. In either case, immigration and separation entail great sacrifices made by parents for their children, often moving to a new continent and culture at great economic, physical, and psychological costs.  The decision of parents to voluntarily immigrate without their children is frequently based on their wish to ensure their children's more optimal future development by providing a better economic standard of living and access to health care as well as a safer living environment and opportunities for educational and employment advancement. For example, a current migration crisis in Latin America, emanating from rampant levels of community violence, political instability, and economic strife in the region, has seen many parents in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras undertake a dangerous journey across Central America and Mexico to the United States, where they envision a better future.[60] The constraints around migration to the United States are such that many parents make the difficult decision to leave their children behind and migrate alone; the number of mothers migrating without their children increased in recent years, speaking to a volume of families coping with the distress of separation.[61] Substantial numbers of unaccompanied minor children also make this journey, often to reunite with family across the border[62]: Between October 2018 and September 2019, over 72,000 unaccompanied children and 450,000 families were apprehended at the

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Mexico-U.S. border – these figures do not include those individuals who managed to cross without detection.[63] This is a troublesome statistic in light of the ubiquity of traumatic experiences on the overland journey across Mexico, when individuals face significant risks of exploitation and physical and sexual violence. These traumatic experiences occur in conjunction with traumas experienced prior to migration and carry substantial cumulative detrimental effects on mental health.[64]

When family separations are protracted, attachment difficulties have been noted as children miss their known caregivers and withdraw from estranged biological parents upon reunification. Resulting parental disappointment, stress, and depression are common as are difficulties in re-establishing relationships with, and authority over, children. Parents who separate from their children on account of migration are known to experience ambivalence and guilt.[34] Reciprocally, children who are separated from their parents experience a wide range of negative effects on mental health, well-being, and socioemotional developmental outcomes, effects which are pronounced when the separation is prolonged or when accompanied by additional stressors such as emotional or financial deprivation.[65,66] Governmental policies stand to compound experiences of trauma faced by many immigrant families, a prime example being the U.S. immigration policy mandating the forcible separation of children from their caregivers at the U.S.-Mexico land border.[67] Although this policy was revoked, ongoing efforts to detain and deport unauthorized immigrants in the United States has resulted in further familial separation when the parents of U.S.-born children are sent back to their native cultures. Forced separations are highly detrimental to the mental health of children and may be particularly harmful when occurring as a result of a legal process such as deportation, due to the concurrent negative impacts of shame, stigma, loss of social support, and trauma.[68] The persistent threat and worry about deportation contribute to a climate of fear in immigrant communities which has further negative effect on the mental health of children, parents, and communities.[61]

**Impact of immigration and acculturation**

There is a growing, but still limited, body of knowledge about the influences of immigrant status and acculturation on parenting young children.[69] We know that immigrant parents are exposed to numerous acculturative stressors and are often at heightened risk for parenting stress and other mental health vulnerabilities.[70,71,72] Furthermore, migration often brings parental adaptation difficulty, lack of time with their children, and language barriers that can destabilize parent-child relationships.[73,74] However, immigrant parents may also gain access to new resources following

migration which facilitate their ability to parent effectively, and those parents who follow a bicultural trajectory and integrate within their cultures of destination, compared with those who do not, may enjoy important benefits, such as greater frequency of positive and sensitive interactions with their children and better academic outcomes for children.[4,75]

**Research Gaps**

The study of the interplay among international immigration, acculturation, and parenting is ongoing and constantly affected by current events and so naturally suffers gaps and unanswered questions. Ideal research is especially challenging because it would be longitudinal in nature and designed to include pre- and post-migration assessments using three groups (comparing otherwise equivalent families who emigrate from a culture of origin, families who stay in that culture of origin, and families native to the culture of destination). This research would optimally go beyond self-reports to include independent reports, observations, and experimental data.[4,76]

- What advantages / disadvantages does parental acculturation to the culture of destination offer the children of immigrants?
- What factors moderate the relation between parental acculturation and child developmental outcomes?
- How do shifts in parental cognitions and parenting practices pay off?
- How do immigrant parents feel about changing their parenting cognitions and practices?
- Do immigrant parents change their parenting cognitions and practices consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and adventitiously?
- What reasons do immigrant parents give for holding on to or abandoning parenting cognitions and practices from their culture of origin?
- How do cognitions and practices from immigrant parents' culture of origin become integrated into their new lives, and do they play a fully or partially useful role in the culture of destination?
- How can receiving cultures be more open to the integration of parenting cognitions and practices stemming from immigrants' cultures of origin?

**Conclusion**

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Immigration and acculturation are major transforming forces on families. When parents migrate to a new culture, they carry with them from their culture-of-origin implicit knowledge of childrearing and goals for the development of their offspring, but they encounter new implicit cognitions and explicit practices concerning childrearing in their culture of destination. Acculturation therefore involves negotiating parenting cognitions and practices of the two cultures. There are large individual and group differences in the ways people acculturate, in the degrees to which they achieve satisfactory adaptations, and in their paths to adaptation. As international migration is burgeoning in the 21st century, more research is needed to gain a deeper appreciation of the impact of immigrant status and acculturation on parenting and child development.

**Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy**

Adequate community support services must be made more widely available and accessible for immigrant families to enhance immigrant children's circumstances. Parents who immigrate initially find themselves confronted with unexpected challenges to their parenting, challenges which stem from or relate to acculturation. In addition to the loss of existing social networks and struggles inherent in resettlement, migrating parents often have to deal with critical appraisals of time-honoured practices by (even well-meaning) authorities in their culture of destination … and sometimes their own children. Service providers who engage with immigrant parents need to strike a balance between supporting families in acculturating and respecting valued aspects of parents' cultural heritage. Clinicians need to be aware of the limitations of the still largely Eurocentric norms and standards from the fields of parenting and child development. They should be educated in and respectful of the meanings of parenting cognitions and practices from cultures other than their mainstream culture. Effective programming for immigrant families should recognize culturally derived knowledge, skills, and strengths, and build on parents' existing assets rather than supplanting them in the interest of Eurocentric parenting. To achieve these goals will also involve orienting children of immigrant parents to the customs, traditions, and language of parents' cultures of origin so that children are comfortable navigating multiple cultural paradigms they encounter at home, in school, and around their community. Programming for parents should be adapted to meet needs specific to individual cultural and immigrant groups and move away from a one-size-fits-all approach that still characterizes many contemporary parenting programmes. Consistent efforts are needed to integrate culture-specific parenting cognitions and practices into the mainstream – when appropriate – especially those

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ultimately geared to optimize children's life chances. Finally, governmental immigration policies must be advanced in the best interests of the child and facilitate family reunification.

*Acknowledgments:* This research was supported by the Intramural Research Program of the NIH, NICHD (Marc Bornstein) and the Centre of Excellence for Research in Immigration and Settlement (Yvonne Bohr). Address correspondence to: Marc H. Bornstein, *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, 8404 Irvington Avenue, Bethesda MD 20817, U.S.A. Email: marc.h.bornstein@gmail.com

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