

Case Study

A Multigenerational Enculturation Group for Jewish Immigrant Families from the Soviet Union

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At the Virginia Frank Child Development Center of the Jewish Family and Community Service in Chicago, we have been offering family life education groups for the past 15 years. To aid families with children from birth to age 6, we offer both counseling and family life education groups focusing on those formative years. In 1980, in the midst of the earlier wave of Soviet immigration, a group entitled "Raising Children in Chicago" was developed to meet the needs of newly arrived Soviet young families. It is now offered to Soviet families in the first 6-12 months of the resettlement process.

The goal of each group, which meets for six 1½-hour sessions, is to provide basic facts about bringing children up in Chicago. Each group is co-led by one resettlement worker and one social worker, one of whom translates the proceedings into Russian. During three of the sessions, a guest speaker provides information of concern to the par-

ticipants for about 30-45 minutes, which is followed by group discussion. All six sessions end with 15 minutes of organized "rug time"—finger plays, songs, and small group activities for the children on the rug led by one of the group co-leaders.

The groups are truly multigenerational in composition. An average of seven to ten grandparents and several fathers attend each session. Children play in the same space with the adults during the entire session. The group is held in a large nursery school type of room that is set up with a doll corner, play kitchen, truck and block area, small dollhouse, and a small slide. At each session, there is a table activity, such as play dough or stickers, that the children can do so that they are busy and quietly occupied while still being near their parents and grandparents.

The families are referred to the group by their resettlement workers. The Russian-speaking co-leader contacts each referred family, explaining the purpose of the group and asking if they are interested in making a commitment to attend the six sessions.

Of great concern to the parents and grandparents participating in the group sessions are issues of health, nutrition, and their Jewish heritage. Three of the six sessions begin with a presentation by an outside speaker who is knowledgeable about the issue under discussion—a physician, Jewish educator, and nutritionist. The pediatrician describes the American health care system. Participants are first told about procedures for obtaining services from the two medical clinics in the Chicago area that serve Soviet immigrants. Then, differences in how American parents care for their children's health are discussed. For example, Soviet parents tend to keep their children home much longer for minor illnesses, such

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as colds or fevers, than do American parents. In the United States, once a child is fever-free or on an antibiotic for 24 hours, he or she usually returns to school or is allowed to play with other children. In contrast, Soviet children stay home for a period of about 3 to 7 days. There are several reasons for this longer period of confinement. In the Soviet Union, leaves from jobs to stay home with a sick child are much easier to secure than in the United States. Too, central heating and antibiotics are not consistently available in the Soviet Union.

A nutritionist is another featured speaker of great interest to the adult group members, many of whom take notes on the presentation. Because of the scarcity and limited variety of food in the Soviet Union, especially of fresh fruits and vegetables, the Soviets are very interested in learning basic nutritional facts: how much should be eaten from each food group and what is best for growing children.

Another area of keen interest is addressed by speakers from the Jewish Community Center, who come to talk about the Jewish heritage and Judaism in the United States in contrast to the Soviet Union. The Jewish backgrounds of the participants vary widely; some are very comfortable with Jewish prayer and study and observance of Jewish holidays and customs, whereas others know virtually nothing. The specific Jewish interests of the participants include holiday observances and customs, understanding Orthodoxy, and the differences between Jewish day schools and afternoon Hebrew schools.

In the three sessions in which there are no outside speakers, the group discusses what free cultural and recreational activities, such as museums, parks, and zoos, are available in Chicago for children and the similarities and differences between raising children in Chicago and in the Soviet Union.

Because the group is held in a child development center that is part of a family service agency, the group leaders have the

skill base to view parent-child interactions as a reflection of the children's adjustment to the major life transition of resettlement. We look with a diagnostic eye at just how the children negotiate the space in our meeting room and use the adults in their lives, both old and new. Most of the children ages 2-5 have been able to negotiate the space well, using the toys, moving away from their parents and grandparents, and returning for refueling. For the most part, these children are well attached. Those few families who have required professional intervention, specifically on attachment/separation issues, have been referred for family counseling within our center and subsequent therapeutic day care at a sister agency, the Jewish Children's Bureau.

A VIGNETTE

A vignette that illustrates the universal issue of separation/attachment occurred in the group this past winter.

Leonid, a handsome 3-year-old boy, and his mother participated in the group, and were sometimes joined by her in-laws. During a session at about the midway point in the group, I saw that the mother was beginning to gather her belongings. She made what appeared to be a quick goodbye to her son and was about to leave the room. At this point, I asked my co-leader, who spoke Russian, to ask the mother what was happening. The mother explained that she had a job and was leaving early but that her in-laws would stay with Leonid. I then asked my co-leader to explain this again to Leonid, who had a rather puzzled, soon-to-be tearful look on his face. She did so and I showed Leonid where his grandparents were sitting. His grandmother responded by getting up and moving toward him. He began to cry as his mother once again said goodbye, and then turned to his grandmother, stuck out his hand, and waved her away. His mother then left and he cried for just a bit longer. Then, one of the other children approached with some idea for a game and he regained his composure. Later he was able to go to his grandparents for some comforting.

This scene illustrates the importance of parents telling children when they, the parents, are leaving. When parents leave, children often have strong emotional reactions. It is important for children to feel that their parents can "hold" or manage their anxious feelings. Young children do not yet have the internal capacity to handle the stress and anxiety of a pending separation or an unknown situation, whether it be entering school, being left with a babysitter, or visiting a physician. They often become aggressive or withdrawn or display other atypical behavior when confronted with the unknown. It is at these times that parents do best to recognize the child's different behavior and then to relate it to the new situation. In our vignette, both Leonid's mother and grandmother needed to explain what the plan was to be and

then to be available to handle his tears and comfort him.

CONCLUSION

When the first wave of Soviet immigrants arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some professionals who worked with them made statements to this effect: "The Soviets are close to us (the Jewish community) in the beginning. Then they go away for about 5 years and establish themselves. They get jobs, make money, some buy homes—then they come back to us" (the Jewish community at large). During this current wave of immigration, a concerted effort is being made to keep them near us throughout all the process of resettlement. The group, "Raising Children in Chicago," is one component of this community-wide effort.