

Just Child Protection Practice for Immigrant and Racialized Families in Multicultural Western Settings: Considerations for Context and Culture

Authors : Sarah Maiter

Abstract : Heightened globalization, migration, displacement of citizens, and refugee needs is putting increasing demand for approaches to social services for diverse populations that responds to families to ensure the safety and protection of vulnerable members while providing supports and services. Along with this social works re-focus on socially just approaches to practice increasingly asks social workers to consider the challenging circumstances of families when providing services rather than a focus on individual shortcomings alone. Child protection workers then struggle to ensure safety of children while assessing the needs of families. This assessment can prove to be difficult when providing services to immigrant, refugee, and racially diverse families as understanding of and familiarity with these families is often limited. Furthermore, child protection intervention in western countries is state mandated having legal authority when intervening in the lives of families where child protection concerns have been identified. Within this context, racialized immigrant and refugee families are at risk of misunderstandings that can result in interventions that are overly intrusive, unhelpful, and harsh. Research shows disproportionality and overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities, and immigrant families in the child protection system. Reasons noted include: a) possibilities of racial bias in reporting and substantiating abuse, b) struggles on the part of workers when working with families from diverse ethno-racial backgrounds and who are immigrants and may have limited proficiency in the national language of the country, c) interventions during crisis and differential ongoing services for these families, d) diverse contexts of these families that poses additional challenges for families and children, and e) possible differential definitions of child maltreatment. While cultural and ethnic diversity in child rearing approaches have been cited as contributors to child protection concerns, this approach should be viewed cautiously as it can result in stereotyping and generalizing that then results in inappropriate assessment and intervention. However, poverty and the lack of social supports, both well-known contributors to child protection concerns, also impact these families disproportionately. Child protection systems, therefore, need to continue to examine policy and practice approaches with these families that ensures safety of children while balancing the needs of families. This presentation provides data from several research studies that examined definitions of child maltreatment among a sample of racialized immigrant families, experiences of a sample of immigrant families with the child protection system, concerns of a sample of child protection workers in the provision of services to these families, and struggles of families in the transitions to their new country. These studies, along with others provide insights into areas of consideration for practice that can contribute to safety for children while ensuring just and equitable responses that have greater potential for keeping families together rather than premature apprehension and removal of children to state care.

Keywords : child protection, child welfare services, immigrant families, racial and ethnic diversity

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