



## Tips for Parents: Immigrant Families

Immigrant families face many challenges in making a living, making a home, and helping their children receive an education in the United States. Challenges include a lack of education, inability or limited ability to speak English, an unfamiliarity with American customs, difficulty finding work or work that pays enough for the family to live on and trouble accessing social and financial assistance programs, among others.

Raising a child that succeeds in school and in life is an important goal to many immigrant parents: they want their children to have opportunities that they themselves haven't had. But the challenges mentioned above make this goal extremely difficult. Below are a number of tips for immigrant families to surmount some of these obstacles.

### Adjusting to America

#### Make Friends, Extend Your Family

Depending on the country you've come from, American culture may seem very strange and confusing, and if you don't have family or friends nearby, you may feel isolated and lonely. Try to find fellow immigrants from your country to become friends with and introduce yourself to your neighbors and coworkers, even if they don't speak your language.

#### Watch and Learn from Americans

In the United States, many customs and ways of communicating may seem strange or even disrespectful. If you want your children to adjust well, it is important for both of you to watch Americans and learn their customs so you understand them. For example, in America:

- Teachers encourage children to raise their hands and speak confidently in class.
- It is a sign of respect to make eye contact when you are speaking with someone, even if they are your elder. However, staring is considered rude.
- Bartering is generally not acceptable. If you are in a store, you must pay the price shown on the price tag.
- It is considered rude to be late. Americans expect everyone to be on time.
- Not everyone follows this custom, but in general, Americans strive to treat everyone as their equal, no matter their occupation, gender, race, religion or handicap. They will expect this of you too.
- Being direct, honest and frank is desirable when expressed in a friendly and kind way.

## **Choose the Best of Both Cultures**

The culture from your native country is likely very important to you and you may prefer it to American culture. However, once you learn more about culture in the United States, you may find some aspects desirable and enjoyable. It is important that you preserve your identity as a person from your native country, but being an American is also going to be part of your identity, so it is recommended that you choose some of your favorite practices from American culture for your family to observe. This will help you transition to living in America.

## **Learn English, Speak Your Native Language at Home**

Many Americans expect immigrants to learn English as soon as possible after arriving here. If you can speak English, you will be at a better advantage than someone who does not. Most communities offer free or low cost classes to help you learn English. Once you know some English, you can also take other basic classes that will help you with things such as learning to read and write better, use computers, use the bank, buy a home and many other useful things. You can also attend GED classes to finish your high school education if you haven't, and can then go to college if you desire.

Your children will likely learn English faster than you, and may only want to speak English. However, it is important that they also learn your native language. You can encourage this by speaking to your school aged child in your language, and they can help you learn by speaking to you in English.

## **Your Children's Educations**

When it comes to education in the United States:

- Children can start school as early as three years old. If you don't make much money, your preschool aged child will likely qualify for a program called "[Head Start](#)." This program helps your child have a better chance for success by providing him or her with early education, nutrition and health services, and encouraging you to be involved in their education. Head Start is free if your family qualifies.
- Parents show an interest in their child's studies and help them with assignments and projects at home. It is important that you ask your child what assignments they have each day and make certain they complete them on time.
- Parents meet with teachers to discuss a child's progress, ask questions, and learn what is expected of the child during a time called "Parent Teacher Conferences." You are also encouraged to make other appointments with the teacher or principal if you have questions or concerns.
- A child must attend school regularly, not miss days unless they are sick, and arrive at school on time.
- American schools have programs to help your children learn English.
- If you don't speak English, you have a right to ask for a translator to help you communicate with your child's teacher.
- A high school education may not be enough. People have the best opportunity to earn a living and provide for their families when they go to college. In the

United States, if you don't have enough money to pay for your child's college education, they may be able to get a grant or scholarship—even if you don't have papers or citizenship.

## **Your Relationship with Your Children**

You may find that you and your children disagree about many things, such as what language to speak at home, how to dress, working, school, who your child spends time with, dating, respecting elders, and much more. Some of these disagreements may be a result of the differences between your native culture and the new culture. Children want to fit in with their peers, and so they may more easily adopt American culture than you do.

Despite these differences, your approval, support and help is very important to your children. They must know that you are the parent and they are required to respect you and follow the rules in your home, but it is also important that you listen to them attentively, show them affection, and regularly let them know that they are loved. Try to decide what issues are worth arguing about and which differences you can compromise with your child on.

Sometimes, immigrant parents find themselves relying on their children to conduct business, talk to teachers and doctors, and other adult responsibilities because they speak English and you don't. This can be a heavy burden for children to bear, so try to find another adult that can assist you if possible, and make learning English a priority if you can possibly make time. Even watching American television, listening to the radio and looking at American newspapers and magazines can help. You may also be able to get English lessons on tape or CD at your local library.

## **Asking for Help**

There are many programs in the United States to help immigrant families. Sometimes, these programs are even available to people that aren't in the United States legally—they may not ask you any questions about your legal status. If you are an illegal immigrant, but your child was born in the United States, they may qualify for help even if you don't.

Because the rules are different for different government programs, it is important to ask lots of questions to make sure that you understand the kind of assistance available and if you qualify and want to apply. Find someone in your community you can trust and ask for help in learning more.

Here are some of the programs that may be available to you if you qualify:

- Help buying healthy food with the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#).
- [Health insurance](#) for you and/or your children, paid for by the government.
- Help finding a [low rent place to live](#).
- Help paying for your heating bill.
- [Head Start](#) education for your preschool aged children.

- Healthy food for pregnant and nursing women, and for babies and children under the age of five years old. This program is called [W.I.C.](#)
- [Temporary financial assistance.](#)
- Help [finding a job.](#)
- Help paying for [child care](#) while you work or go to school.

For more information:

[School Readiness for Parents: classes help immigrant parents prepare for the U.S. school system](#)

[Culture Clash at Home: tips for immigrant families on communicating with “Americanizing” children](#)

Find literacy programs for young adults, children, GED test preparation and more in your local area through [National Institute for Literacy directory.](#)

En Español--

[Cómo ayudar a su hijo a aprender a leer. UNA GUÍA PARA PADRES DE FAMILIA DEL PREESCOLAR AL TERCER GRADO.](#)

[Como Mejorar la Educación de sus Hijos. Guía Para Padres Latinos.](#)

[La serie de Ayudando a su niño](#)

[Recursos en Español para Los Padres - Gratis](#)

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