

TRANSITIONS

Meeting the Needs of Iranian Families Facing Separation and Divorce



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March 2002



Family Service Association of Toronto
a member of
The United Way Toronto

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This project was completed with financial support from the
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support and participation of all those who contributed to the success of this project.

Financial support from the United Way enables FSA to provide quality services and programs through *Families in Transition* and the *Community Action Unit* in the areas of divorce-specific and community development programs. The FSA Innovation Fund provided financial support for completing the project and writing this report. We are grateful to the Innovation Fund Committee for their encouragement.

Also, we are immensely grateful to Rhonda Freeman, FIT Director, for her ongoing support and commitment to this project. Her initiative, insightful guidance and considerable research skills have been invaluable in conducting and completing the project.

We would also like to acknowledge Laurel Rothman, Director of Social Action and Community Building and Amanuel Melles, CAU Manager, for their interest, assistance and support. We value their commitment and dedication to building the capacities of ethnoracial communities.

The Toronto District School Board has supported this project from the outset and allowed us to conduct interviews with youth in the comfort of their own schools.

We are especially appreciative of school principals Grant McPherson, Hodgson Senior Public School; Sue Gross, Davisville Public School; and Gerry Barker, Woodbine Junior High School for demonstrating a deep understanding of the issues and for their spirit of collaboration. Also, a special thank you to Homa Forozan, SEPT Settlement Worker for her caring support and referrals.

We are indebted to all the parents and youth who courageously shared their personal life stories, views and suggestions. We would not have been able to complete this project without their participation.

This research project would not have been possible without the cooperation of Iranian service providers and community informants: Garmen Eliehnazlo, Bayview Community Centre; Sosan Etrat, Thorncliffe Neighbourhood, SEPT Program; Fereshteh Golzari, Public Health Dept.; Hassan Hassanzadeh, FSA Iranian Advisory Council; Kobra Hosseinpour, Public Health Dept.; Nasrin Javanfar, Catholic Community Services of York Region; Mansureh Khatam, Family Service Association of Toronto; Ashraf Mansouri, Catholic Community Services of York Region; Afkham Mardukhi, Toronto District School Board; Carmen Naazloo, Griffin Centre; Negar Sadeghi, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health; Parvin Samadzadeh, Family Service Association of Toronto; Massoumeh Tatari, South Asian Family Support Services; and Tina

Tehranchian, FSA Iranian Advisory Council. They generously shared their experience and knowledge of the Iranian community and contributed greatly to this project. Their input has helped to shed light on the complex challenges for families settling into a new land and the impact on their family relationships.

Many thanks to our colleagues in the CAU and FIT for providing constructive feedback and for their collaborative team work. We also appreciate Janice Crymble and Maria Leynes's administrative support and Kathryn Kennedy's editorial notes.

In addition, we would like to thank Afie Mardukhi for skillfully translating part of this report.

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Program

1. We recommend that every effort be made to locate at least some services within the community.
2. We recommend that effort be made to ensure that some, if not all, services are bilingual (English/Farsi) so that participants can work in the language most likely to allow them to benefit from the intervention.
3. We recommend that services incorporate ideas that are highly valued in the Iranian culture.
4. We recommend that services include a community outreach component.
5. We recommend that an initiative be developed to encourage Iranian fathers to remain involved in their children's lives after divorce.
6. We recommend that an educational outreach initiative be developed to challenge the stigma of divorce and dispel common myths and preconceptions about family transition.

Practice

7. We recommend that services include educational programming, counselling, and support groups.

Educational Programming

8. We recommend that educational programs focus on the impact of divorce, parenting skills and the divorce process.

Counselling

9. We recommend that concurrent but separate therapy groups be offered for youth and parents.

Support Groups

10. We recommend separate support groups for mothers and fathers to explore issues that are relevant to each group.

Policy

11. We recommend that the government translate and disseminate key family law materials in a variety of languages including Farsi. We also recommend that an outreach strategy be created to support this initiative and raise community awareness of the issues and the availability of the materials.
12. We recommend that FSA take the initiative to work collaboratively with stakeholders to explore ways of building a culturally competent model of service in the Iranian community.
13. We recommend that during the implementation phase, all factors affecting the community and service providers in this process be explored.
14. Building on the work from this project, we recommend that a review be conducted to ascertain the applicability of the model of service to other ethnoracial communities.

"If you tell them you got a divorce, they look at you differently. They think you are not human. It is like in Iran, divorced people are not human."
(10-year-old boy)

INTRODUCTION

This project is the result of a collaboration between Families in Transition¹(FIT) and Community Action Unit,²(CAU) of Family Service Association of Toronto³. The purpose of the project was to explore the impact of divorce and immigration within an ethnoracial community. We also expected that this work would provide a basis for building culturally competent models of service delivery in other communities. The data from this project assisted us to develop recommendations for program, practice and policy.

Background⁴

The divorce literature has grown exponentially since 1970. Nevertheless, there has been little attention paid to the impact of race and culture on divorce adjustment. Even the newest additions to the literature (i.e., year 2000-2002 publications) do little more than suggest this is an important area for investigation. Clinical experience and earlier research conducted at FIT concluded that the increasingly diverse nature of Toronto and surrounding communities make it imperative to understand what divorce⁵ means in different cultures. We have come to understand that race and culture shape and influence the experience of divorce (Freeman, 1995).

There is general agreement in the divorce literature (Freeman, 2000) that it is not the event of parental divorce that creates difficulties for children but the cumulative stress that makes adjustment more difficult. Anecdotal evidence from FIT and CAU staff suggests that variables such as immigration and refugee status may contribute to parents deciding to live apart (Dilmaghani, 2000). Behrman & Quinn (1994) note that little is known about variations in response to divorce by children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. On the other hand, as Amato (1994) points out, culture may, in some instances, mediate the impact of transition for children and parents. Analysis of

¹ FIT provides preventive divorce specific services for people living or working in Toronto that focus on supporting child adjustment to separation, divorce and remarriage.

² CAU utilizes community development strategies to promote community capacity building and improve the quality of life of ethnoracial communities and marginalized families.

³ Family Service Association is a leading non-profit social service agency that provides various types of counselling and community development programs to help people cope with difficulties in their lives.

⁴ The sections entitled Background, Preliminary Work and Goals and Objectives were drawn from a project proposal written by Rhonda Freeman, Families in Transition, 2001.

⁵ For purposes of this proposal, divorce means parents living apart. From a child's perspective, the legal status (i.e., married, common law, separated, divorced) is not the central issue.

exit evaluations completed by FIT clients indicates that children and parents from ethno-racial communities do not appear to be dissatisfied with current interventions.

FIT clients are drawn from many different ethno-racial and socio-economic groups in the Toronto area. An earlier project done in conjunction with the Somali community, coupled with a qualitative review of clinical cases, suggests that there may be ways to increase the impact of FIT's current intervention armamentarium⁶.

Consequently, in 1998 FIT and CAU explored the possibility for collaboration that would result in increasing the effectiveness of services to changing families. There was agreement between the teams that this was an important initiative to pursue. In order to test the necessity of developing models for culturally competent divorce-specific services, a small pilot project was established.

Preliminary Work

In early phases of this project, a tool was designed to capture data that would be useful in selecting a community in which to base the pilot project. CAU staff utilized the tool to summarize divorce issues for the communities in which they were working.⁷ Subsequently, interviews were conducted with several social service workers in the Iranian community who corroborated the need for divorce specific services. Based on perceived and identified need and knowledge of service utilization, it was mutually agreed to locate the pilot project in the Iranian community

Moghissi & Goodman's more recent work (1999) supports this choice. They contend that Iranian women cope better with the difficulties of migration and displacement while Iranian men feel more isolated and lonely and are more apt to experience racism, unemployment, and loss of social status. They conclude that this shift in perspective correlates with family violence and separation/divorce. Moghissi & Goodman argue that the health care system, legal resources, therapists, shelters, etc. need to be more attentive to the specific needs of minority women.

⁶ For example, recent research done in Ontario concluded that poor immigrant women face systemic barriers in accessing divorce-specific services (McDonald, 1999).

⁷ Statistics Canada does not report divorce statistics by ethno-racial community. However stakeholders consulted in earlier phases of this project commented that the incidence of divorce may be as high as 50% in the Iranian community.

Several reasons informed our choice of the Iranian community including:

- CAU staff's reported that to the best of their knowledge there are no divorce-specific services in the Iranian community and no related services in the Toronto area available in Farsi.
- Internal agency data suggests that relative to the reported divorce rate for members of this community, we would expect more service requests from Iranian children and parents.
- There is a strong partnership between the agency and the Iranian community.

Goals and Objectives

The long term goal of this project is to ensure the provision of high quality evidence-based services that promote child adjustment to parental divorce. Building on previous research conducted (Freeman, 1984, 1995, 2000), FIT and CAU staff designed a project to investigate the need for culturally competent services that foster child adjustment to family change. The goal of this project is to explore the impact of divorce and immigration for Iranian children and parents.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

In this chapter, we will review the divorce literature to provide a context for this project. We also briefly highlight relevant cultural values and practices of the Iranian community. Understanding the complex nature of the tasks faced by families experiencing divorce and migration is a major endeavour. Adding the specific cultural needs of a given ethnic community creates a significantly more complex picture.

Snapshot of the Iranian Community

Statistics Canada (1998) reports that Canada is home to 64,405 Iranian refugees and immigrants. The two major events that lead to mass migration of Iranians were the emergence of the Islamic government in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war of the early 1980's (Behjati-Sabet, 1990). Fifty-six percent (n =36,255) of all Iranians live in Ontario. The majority, 80% (n =28,850), live in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 1998). The migration trend has continued over the last five years. Iran is amongst the top ten source countries of immigration to Canada, providing 5,598 immigrants in the year 2000 (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2001). Most Iranians are first generation immigrants who share many of the same beliefs and values as their compatriots in Iran (Behjati-Sabet, 1990).

The majority of Iranians living in Toronto are originally from urban centres and have a high level of education and professional status. In spite of this, adults and youth experience a greater rate of unemployment and underemployment than immigrants of European descent.⁸ Orenstein (2000) conducted a study of ethno-racial inequalities in Toronto and found that child poverty reached 64% in 1996, as compared to 21% among children from a European background. Orenstein concludes that the Iranian community is one of the most disadvantaged groups in Toronto. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2002) reports that in 1998 the poverty rate for all recent immigrants was 27%, double the 13% rate for other Canadian families.

In the Iranian culture, the family is considered the most important social structure and includes both nuclear and extended members. The family relies on its connections and influence to provide security for its members. The Western concept of individualism is foreign to Iranians (Behjati-Sabet, 1990) who will sacrifice a great deal to ensure the protection of the larger family unit. Marriage is expected and almost universal among women (Aghajanian, 1997).

On the whole, the Iranian culture is patriarchal and dictates a strict code of conduct and responsibilities for men and women (Aghajanian, 1997). Men are traditionally the head of the household and are a powerful and authoritative presence. Women manage the

⁸ According to Orenstein (2000) the unemployment rate among Iranian adults was 21% as compared with 8% for Canadians from a European background. The unemployment rate for youth was 27% versus 15% for Canadian youth from a European background (pp. 57-58).

home and children and defer to the needs of their husbands. While mothers are the primary caregivers of the children, the father is the ultimate authority. In the absence of the father, the eldest son is usually in charge of the family's affairs. Usually, male and female children are treated unequally. Male children are granted special privileges and freedoms. It is important to note that not all Iranian families live within this strict family structure. Some families living in Canada have embraced a more liberal way of life and their familial relationships are more democratic.

The family is extremely influenced by class, religion, ethnicity and political affiliation. Notwithstanding this diversity, there are several characteristics common to most Iranians. Behjati-Sabet (1990) suggests that these developed as a means of self-preservation resulting from many years of political instability. Iranians are an extremely proud group, dislike admitting mistakes and have a strong need to save face. Iranians have been described as distrustful and suspicious of those who are outside the circle of the family and close friends. There is a strong sense of duty and loyalty to the family (Behjati-Sabet, 1990).

For the majority of Iranians, western culture is perceived as being too liberal and permissive, particularly as it influences children. There is a feeling of fear and threat about the values inherent in Canadian culture. Iranian families are often unaware of their rights and of services that are available to them in Canada. However, they make good use of the various health services. The notable exception is mental health services. There is still considerable uncertainty and stigma attached to them (Behjati-Sabet, 1990).

For the most part, divorce is seen as a last resort in Iran. Although the practice has increased in past years, it is still viewed largely as unacceptable. The stigma of divorce brings shame upon the entire extended family, particularly to the fathers and brothers of the couple. This extends to other male relatives. The women are expected to do everything possible to keep the marriage together. Typically, they are blamed if the marriage ends. In general, an Iranian woman's economic situation will deteriorate upon divorce (Aghajanian, 1997) similar to that of women in Western countries.

Behjati-Sabet (1990) argues that there has been a "drastic increase in the rate of separation and divorce in Iranian immigrant families" in Canada. She cites several factors contributing to this increase including change in gender roles, loss of status and un- or underemployment, isolation, generation gaps and conflicts with more Westernized children, loss of male self-esteem, increase in women's power and independence and loss of support of extended family. Bagheri (1992) cites research in Sweden that reports the rate of divorce among Iranian immigrants at 59%. She writes, "Unfortunately, in view of the fact that the Iranian family is not completely familiar with the concept of divorce and is unable to come to terms with it easily as a fact of life, divorces and separations are usually very dramatic and accompanied by violence, coming to blows, and the struggle of each parent to pull the children towards themselves. This causes pressure and mental and emotional anguish in the children as well as the spouses" (p.41).

Upon request, the law in Iran awards custody of the children to the father. Typically, after divorce, the children are raised by the father's family (Behjati-Sabet, 1990). Aghajanian (1997) suggests that, in practice, many men will give custody of the children to the mother in order to remarry without the encumbrance of the children from the first marriage.

While children are viewed as an integral part of the perpetuation of the family, they "are the least respected and enjoy limited freedom...Since children have very little say in major family decisions, they are usually not consulted and communication between parents and their offspring remains minimal...Children are usually kept in the dark about the family's financial and emotional problems" (Behjati-Sabet, 1990, p.103).

The intense stigma of divorce prevents most women from remarrying in Iran (Aghajanian, 1997). Their options are limited to "temporary" marriages or marriages as second wives. Migration to Canada has had little impact on this taboo and remarriage eludes most women.

Observations of the Iranian community in Toronto indicate that the stigma associated with divorce is changing slowly. It appears that for many in the community, particularly longer-term residents and the younger generation, the stigma of divorce may be diminishing due to inter-cultural influences. However, the community is far from viewing or accepting divorce as socially acceptable.

Impact of Divorce

The phenomenon of divorce shows no sign of abating. In 1998, more than 38,000 new children (representing 21,448 divorces with dependent children) experienced parental divorce (Statistics Canada, 2000, Table 10, p.28). It is a conservative estimate of the actual number of children whose parents no longer live together because it only includes divorces finalized in 1998. When census data for 1991 and 1996 (most recent data available) are compared, the population in Ontario increased 10.8%. The number of lone parent families increased 12% (Statistics Canada, 1997).

During the last three decades, a substantial literature concerning the impact of divorce on children and their families has emerged (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996; Kalter, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Regardless of age, children and parents face many challenges. It is generally recognized that children from divorced families experience a variety of social, emotional and financial difficulties as compared to their peers in two-parent families (Pruett and Santangelo, 1999).

"The research literature leaves no doubt that, on average, children of divorced parents experience more emotional and behavioural problems and do less well in school than do those who live with both biological parents."
(Cherlin et al., 1991, p.1386).

Amato (1994) concurs and writes that "children in divorced families, on average, experience more problems and have a lower level of well-being than do children in continuously intact two-parent families." Amato & Keith (1991) conducted a review of 92 studies and concluded that children of divorce are negatively impacted in areas such as academic achievement, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, symptoms of psychological maladjustment, and conduct problems. Just as no two children are alike, neither is their road to recovery. Many variables will impact upon a child's adjustment and may include stress, relationship changes, reorganizations, and divorce-related events experienced by the children (Grych & Fincham, 1992).

There is wide recognition that children of divorce experience adjustment difficulties when parents live apart. We have come to understand more clearly that divorce is not a single event but "...one in a sequence of transitions and family re-organizations to which parents and children must adjust" (Hetherington & Furstenberg, 1989).

There is considerable debate about the long-term consequences of divorce for children (Hetherington & Furstenberg, 1989; Weiss et al., 1989). Amato (1993) argues that while divorce does not necessarily ruin the life of every child, we cannot ignore the significant impact upon the children. In spite of the debate on the long-term impact of divorce, there is general agreement that the consequences of divorce continue into adulthood, for a significant number of children. A child's ability to adapt after divorce is influenced by the number and severity of losses and her ability to manage emotional distress (Freeman, 1995).

Children and parents experiencing divorce face challenges. Freeman (1989) suggests the following factors influence children's adjustment:

- Parental conflict,
- Parenting capacity, in particular that of the residential parent,
- Quality of the relationship between the child and the non-residential parent,
- Adequacy of the economic resources available for child rearing,
- Role confusion and boundary violations,
- Predictability of routines,
- Divorce environment (i.e., presence of additional divorce related stressors such as remarriage or parental dating), and
- Cultural context.

The research states conclusively that parental divorce has the potential to seriously challenge the needs of even the most resilient children. Children may experience changes in their emotional and psychological well being as well as lifestyle and financial circumstances (Behrman & Quinn, 1994).

Impact of Immigration

The settlement process for any immigrant involves a multitude of challenges that are complex and often have a negative impact on health. The incidence of mental health difficulties is higher among immigrants and refugees than their native born counterparts. The process that uproots a person's economic, social and emotional systems produces incalculable social stress (Noh and Avison, 1996).

The Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees (1986) identifies several factors that increase the risk for mental health and family problems:

- Drop in personal and socio-economic status following migration,
- Inability to speak the language of the host country,
- Separation from family,
- Lack of friendly reception by surrounding host population,
- Isolation from persons of similar cultural background,
- Traumatic experience or prolonged stress prior to migration, and
- (Adolescent or senior) Age at time of migration.

Other authors suggest that feelings of displacement, low self-esteem, lack of knowledge of the host country, conflicting cultural values, social integration, identity crises, lack of social support, and systemic and individual discrimination are also important predictors of emotional distress among newcomers (Noh and Avison, 1996; Perez Foster, 2001; Kerr & Lewis, 1991).

The stressors related to immigration and settlement increase the likelihood of divorce, mental health difficulties, domestic violence and substance abuse. The addition of pre-migration stressors (socio-political and economic conditions of the country of origin) compound an already delicate process of settlement. Not all transitions from one country and culture to another threaten one's mental health. "The mental health of immigrants and refugees becomes a concern primarily when additional risk factors combine with the stress of migration" (The Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988, Executive Summary, p.1).

Moghissi (1999) describes the forces of change as being irresistibly powerful. "Sometimes they are expressed through increased family tensions, domestic violence and growing divorce rates - a major concern of the Iranian community in North America and Europe" (Moghissi, p.212). The family unit is faced with gender role changes among its members, resulting in shifts in the parent-child relationship and the larger family unit. For example, Iranian women adjust to their new country faster, partly because they are more willing to accept menial jobs to provide for their families. A woman gains a sense of power with her new status and income while her husband's

sense of authority and power diminishes. Her new role conflicts dramatically with traditional cultural values, creating tension and imbalance within the couple.

In another project, a needs assessment of Toronto's Iranian community (Dilmaghani, 2000) revealed that 46% of respondents identified conflict within the family as a serious problem. The data illustrate other types of difficulties including high unemployment, poverty, and lack of social and emotional support. Dilmaghani recommends programs aimed at improving spousal and parent-child relationships.

The process of migration is inextricably linked to major adjustment difficulties in multiple migrant communities both in and outside of the United States. "The impact of these stressors on mental health are variable and complex" and include "anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and higher prevalence of serious psychiatric disorders" ((Perez Foster, 2001, p.154).

Culturally Competent Models of Service Delivery

Despite three decades of divorce research, there is a marked absence of research regarding divorce and ethnoracial communities. Few authors describe divorce-specific programs that are delivered in a culturally appropriate manner (Freeman, 1995; Behram & Quinn, 1994; Sue, 1998). The community development literature identifies a number of variables that impact on service delivery within diverse communities.

Divorce research emphasizes that adjustment to family transition is a complex process and there are no "one size fits all solutions" (Freeman & Freeman, 2001). Grych & Fincham (1992) note many variables influence children's post-divorce adjustment. Therefore, it is critical to identify how different experiences shape children's adaptive processes and provide interventions that support the process.

The community development literature describes how the decision to migrate, and the immigration and resettlement process complicate the difficulties faced by immigrant families experiencing divorce. Pre-migration trauma, coupled with the challenge of settlement, creates risk and increases vulnerability. Families may be unable to cope with the resulting stress. "It is not migration alone but, rather, traumatic or derailing events before, during, or after dislocation that lead to psychological distress of clinical proportions" (Perez Foster [2001] quoting Desjarlais et al. (1995), p.155).

The types of systemic barriers described in the literature include language, the stigma associated with mental health issues, and the fragmentation of service (Kerr & Lewis, 1991). Simply providing an interpreter, may be insufficient (Yelaja, 1990). Several authors conclude that traditional clinical models of service may be an inappropriate response to the complex needs of immigrant families (Kerr & Lewis, 1991; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] (2001). For example, traditional mental health agencies typically provide diagnosis and treatment consistent with the clinician's values and beliefs and divergent with the client's. The risk of this possibility

increased when the cultural backgrounds of the service provider and the client are dissimilar (ibid. 2001).

Minorities appear to have less access to, and are less likely to receive, mental health services. Treatment is often of poor quality (DHHS, 2001). "Racial and ethnic minorities collectively experience a greater disability burden from mental illness than do whites. This higher level of burden stems from minorities receiving less care and poorer quality of care, rather than from their illnesses being inherently more severe or prevalent in the community" (ibid. Main Findings, p.3).

Where community services are available, barriers exist. The stigma associated with the use of mental health services for most immigrants is formidable. Some parents may not be aware of a child's psychological distress, others may find it difficult to detect due to their own emotional state (Hodes [2000] citing Sack et al., 1996). Some cultures have a very different understanding of psychological distress and may not distinguish between physical and psychological symptoms (Hodes 1992); the latter requiring specialised services. Negotiating a complex service system in a different language, locating child care and actually travelling to the appointment are all substantial barriers (Hodes, 2000). For many refugees, clinical interviews may be perceived as interrogations and raise fears about safety and confidentiality.

There is debate about whether clinicians must be drawn from the same culture or community as the client group. Sue (1998) observed that when this is the case, clients had lower dropout rates and remained in the programs for a longer period of time than a similar client group using mainstream services. "The fact that clients stay in treatment longer may mirror the greater rapport, comfort, or cultural consistency of the ethnic specific services" (p.9).

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Framework of Study

Family Service Association (1994), advocated the Community Oriented Needs Assessment (CONA) approach because it involves the community provides information and resources for community members, and empowers the community to identify its own needs and take action to make changes (FSA, 1994, p.25). It is also consistent with the agency's publicly stated policy of promoting healthy communities by developing and maintaining strong and mutual partnerships. CONA "is a strategy for a participatory needs assessment. The community and the agency work as full partners in all phases of the process. It allows community members to learn about their needs and about existing human and institutional resources available to meet these needs" (ibid, 1994, p.22). CONA endeavours to learn about the client and her community and link it to "the larger social, political, economic, and cultural structures within which the individual or community is situated"(ibid, 1994, p.22). CONA works on the assumption that people are experts of their own lives and are best able to identify their own needs and propose solutions. We chose this methodology because it met the goals of this project.

A successful needs assessment "recognizes the importance of the cultural framework of the particular needs assessed"(ibid, 1994, p.26). This process is a critical part of the development of a culturally informed model of service. A "need" is in fact a value judgement expressed by those who define the need. Value judgements contain people's experiences and the circumstances in which they live." These circumstances include values and systems, its history, and its experiences after migration" (ibid, 1994, p.28). Community focus groups then become a critical component of the needs assessment as it represents a comprehensive view of the community.

Research Questions

This project was designed to explore a number of pertinent questions:

- *What are the needs of Iranian children and families after parental divorce?*
- *What types of services do members of the Iranian community identify as useful?*
- *What are the barriers that prevent Iranian families from accessing services?*
- *To what extent do current FIT interventions address the needs of ethno-racial communities?*
- *Are significantly different interventions needed or would modifications to current interventions suffice?*

Methodology

The process of gathering information from members of the community regardless of age or position gives "the community a much more significant stake in the needs

assessment process and its potential outcomes. This method of information gathering can also contribute to community development.” (ibid, 1994). Given the scope and resources available for this needs assessment, focus groups were selected as the primary research method.

Due to the stigma attached to divorce and concerns about confidentiality in the Iranian community, flexibility in the methodology was essential. In addition to the focus groups, individual interviews were offered to anyone concerned about discussing family issues with other people present. All participants received an honorarium and a resource kit with relevant literature and a list of bilingual resources. Parental consent was obtained for youth involvement. Separate focus groups were organised for Iranian single mothers and community/social service workers. Fathers were interviewed individually. All participants were assured that their responses were confidential and that only aggregate data would be reported. Three youth focus groups were conducted for participants between 10 and 18 years old. We also conducted a survey to gather additional data from the Iranian Advisory Council.⁹ Five focus groups and five individual interviews were conducted involving a total of 41 people.

Participants had the option to speak in English or Farsi. Some groups were facilitated entirely in English, while others switched between these languages. The fathers were interviewed in Farsi. Many youth and the parents identified confidentiality as a critical issue and requested there not be any identifying features in any written documents.

Variables

We speculated that the following variables were critical to understanding the complexities involved in ethno-racial families experiencing at least two major transitions:

- Separation and divorce history,
- Relationship between family transition and immigration/settlement,
- Systemic barriers: literacy and language, unfamiliarity with counselling, location of service, perception of cost,
- Influence of culture,
- Applicability of a model based on a more traditional, westernized approach (family counselling, groups and educational programs).

The project was designed to collect data about these variables.

Sample Generation

A variety of outreach strategies were utilized to generate as representative a sample as possible. The Iranian culture values personal relationships that are based on trust and a sense of familiarity. We used our community partnership to reach out to potential

⁹ The Iranian Advisory Council is a group of volunteers representing a cross section of the Iranian community. They provide feedback to FSA’s Iranian staff and help build a bridge between the community and the agency.

participants. Community workers, including social workers, settlement workers, and community development workers, and school principals were asked to facilitate referrals. In addition, the Iranian Advisory Council and community media sources were used to publicize and to recruit participants.

Youth participants were recruited through the school system. Schools located in an area heavily populated by Iranian families were targeted. With the permission of the Toronto District School Board, the principal investigators met with the principals of these schools to explain the project and to devise a process to recruit youth that respected confidentiality. A bilingual (Farsi/English) information package was sent home with all Iranian children. It contained a letter to parents outlining the project and inviting their child to attend a focus group. Parents were informed that an honorarium of \$30.00 would be provided to participants.

Parent participants were eligible to participate in the project if they were living separately from their child's other parent and had at least one child. Community workers referred parents. One of the co-principal investigators contacted these parents and provided additional information about the project and what was involved. Interested parents were invited to attend a focus group.

Settlement workers, social service workers, community development workers active in the Iranian community were informed about the project. They were invited to attend a focus group.

Data Analysis

All interviews were taped, transcribed and translated. A thematic analysis of the data was presented to staff at FIT and CAU (FSA, 1994, p.70). At a joint meeting, staff provided feedback drawing on their respective areas of expertise. The process proved invaluable. Obtaining this combined feedback allowed us to explore a combination of theories and ideas.

Ethical Considerations¹⁰

Based on FIT's prior research experience, we expected that as a result of talking about their divorce experiences, some project participants might require clinical or educational services. FIT and CAU worked with the intake department at FSA to ensure that language was not a barrier for the potential clients and that service requests emanating from participation in this project were given priority. We are aware that the activities involved in this initiative may also serve to heighten the community's expectations of the agency. As noted above, a resource kit was distributed to all project participants and to the extent possible, materials were bilingual (English/Farsi).

¹⁰ This section was drawn, with some changes, from a project proposal authored by Rhonda Freeman, (2001).

It has also been our experience (Freeman, 1984) that asking children and parents to talk about their experience of separation/divorce becomes an intervention. For example, in FIT's first major research project, the control group also improved (but to a lesser degree than subjects in the experimental conditions) between the pre- and post-test. Research subjects reported that they "felt better" as a result of meeting with the research assistant who was collecting the data. It made a difference to them that someone demonstrated interest and concern in their situation.

RESULTS

Overview

Participants in all the focus groups were eager to share their thoughts and ideas. They were particularly pleased that there was a genuine interest in the needs of their community. It appeared to be a very empowering process, especially for the youth. All the sessions were lively and generated a lot of discussion and debate on very difficult issues.

None of the participants was screened for their ability to articulate or for their comfort level in a group format. Given the close nature of the community, many of the participants knew each other. Some of the youth knew each other from school or the neighbourhood, the mothers knew each other from the community, and the community informants worked together in an umbrella organization regarding resources for the Iranian community. The community informants knew the Iranian group facilitator. Despite this familiarity, participants responded comfortably and openly.

The groups and interviews focused on Iranian families' experiences of divorce and divorce within the community. Almost all participants broadened the topic to speak of related issues such as child and spousal support and the role of Iranian women in both Iran and Canada. The youth had an extensive awareness of their parents' financial affairs and about how oppressive regimes treat women.

Limitations

Our small sample is an obvious limitation of this project. The difficulties we experienced in recruitment are indicative of the differences between the Iranian and mainstream cultures, especially in relation to family issues. We faced the following challenges in the recruitment process:

- Shame and stigma associated with divorce,
- Basic denial of marital problems,
- Reluctance to talk about family and marital issues with “strangers”,
- Concerns about confidentiality and mistrust of the system.

The Iranian community workers enlisted to help with recruitment informed us that although their clients confide in them about divorce issues, they were not willing to discuss their problems with anyone else. This is consistent with the community's need to keep personal issues within the family or a trusted person. Unless there is an identifiable crisis, seeking outside help is generally not seen as a realistic option.

For the most part, Iranian fathers view separation and divorce as a personal failure, damaging to one's pride. Similar to other cultures with strong social conditioning,

Iranian men, as compared to the women, find it more difficult to discuss their feelings, attachments and personal relationships.

Another limitation that is reflective of divorcing families has to do with adding yet another task to an already burdened family. Recruitment will always prove difficult when the population you are seeking to interview is in the midst of personal and family turmoil. During a time of intense family transition and settlement, the family's focus is on providing for immediate needs and attempting to solve problems as they arise. The tendency to avoid talking about painful experiences, coupled with apathy for participation in a project that does not provide immediate assistance, prevents people from donating their time to the project.

Lastly, the ability to generalize from a small sample is limited. We can draw generalizations about a community's beliefs and practices, but this does not mean that we can expect all Iranians to hold the same beliefs. There is much diversity in the Iranian community.

Description of the Sample

Fathers were a particularly difficult group to recruit. The majority of Iranian fathers have limited access to their children after divorce. As a result, only a few fathers were willing to speak to us. Those who participated were very involved with their children. One father had decision-making responsibility for the child – a much less common occurrence. Confidentiality and privacy were so important to these fathers, that we abandoned our original plan for a focus group.

Community participants were drawn from an established working group comprised of Iranian social service providers, community development and settlement workers in the group and areas of public health, mental health, education, settlement and social services. Members of the Iranian Advisory Council were invited to participate via a survey.

There was a wide variety of children's residential schedules. Most of the youth had minimal or unpredictable time with their fathers. The youth ranged in age from 10 to 18 years old; were between 2 to 16 years old when their parents separated; and resided in Canada from 9 months to 11 years. Participating mothers were separated between 1 and 9 years; the average length of separation was 3 years. They resided in Canada between 1 and 10 years and were married between 5 and 18 years. The average length of marriage was 11 years. Participating fathers were separated between 1 and 12 years; the average length of separation was 7 years. They resided in Canada between 11 and 17 years and were married between 3 and 20 years. The average length of marriage was 14 years.

Synthesis of the Data

The results presented below represent a synthesis of the themes raised in the focus groups and individual interviews. As outlined earlier in the review of the literature, focus group participants' thoughts, ideas and opinions reflect multiple layers of loss and the challenge of divorce coupled with immigration. This has the effect of exacerbating negative human conditions. In addition, almost everyone interviewed characterized the family transition as high conflict, a situation that creates additional challenges.

A summary of the data follows. A full report of the data is provided in Appendix 1.

Youth

"I remember all the sarcastic remarks and nonsense they told each other. All the fights, screaming and swearing...I was a nervous wreck." (Boy, age 10).

The youth in the project expressed many feelings universally felt by children whose parents divorce, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender or socio-economic status. These include feelings of guilt, self-blame and sadness. The difference for this group of children is that their sense of hopelessness and feelings of depression were heightened due to the ongoing pressure associated with high conflict divorce, increased poverty, and lack of security in their new country. Moreover, the youth experienced a different quality of stigma and shame owing to the culture's strong belief that divorce is unacceptable. It left the children terribly isolated and shamed.

A youth's desire to integrate in Canadian society and their parent's pressure to maintain cultural practices and beliefs increased the level of conflict in families and further strained the parent-child relationship. In Iranian families, divorce has the effect of reversing both the parent and child roles within a family, creating imbalances and altering power dynamics.

Generally, the expression of feelings is not encouraged in Iranian families and most children had no one to talk to about their strong feelings. Many of them used the focus groups in a quasi-therapeutic way to unburden themselves. It was obvious how much the children requested the opportunity to express themselves and discuss family issues. Divorce appears to change that and they become involved in the conflict. This is a new experience for the youth, who do not have the skills to cope with this additional pressure.

"The only thing that parents can do is at least not to involve children in their fights. They would make us sit in the room and listen to their arguments. He told me to listen to them and make a judgement. How can I do that?" (Girl, age 12).

Language appeared to be a barrier for the few children who were not very verbal. Some of these youth were trying to "keep up" with their peers who had an excellent grasp of English, even though there was always the option to speak Farsi. Clearly,

there was a perceived pressure to speak English for some of these children, which limited their ability to participate in the focus group. We speculate that these children probably experience other daily situations in the same way.

The sense of loss of their father was almost palpable. While many youth expressed a great deal of anger towards their father's negative behaviour, it was often masked by a larger sense of loss and disappointment. Many divorce researchers have reported on the considerable negative consequences for children who lose their relationship with their fathers upon divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). The research in the immigration/refugee field has pointed to the family as a mediating factor in the face of war or other trauma. Several studies concluded that families are an effective protective factor for children faced with war-time stresses or natural disasters (Hodes [2000] cites Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Garmezy & Rutter, 1985). A more recent study found that parental attention could be indispensable for immigrant children. In many cases a parent's availability to a child can mediate the impact of serious family stressors that can threaten a child's development (Beiser et al., 2002). Our findings are consistent with the research. These youth become even more vulnerable to the combined impact of immigration and divorce without strong, but separate, support from each parent.

"My father's problem is that he has rejected us. But he doesn't want to let go either." (Boy, age 15).

The youth overwhelmingly endorsed the idea of counselling groups for youth and spoke strongly for the need to be understood in a cultural context. Many identified their parents' needs for counselling. Overall, these participants often painted a difficult life fraught with conflict, turmoil and confusion.

"Since my parents went through divorce, my behaviour has changed a lot. I was very quiet and soft-spoken. But now I speak very loud. In school everyone thinks I am screaming." (Girl, age 16).

Mothers

"Divorce has been very hard on my child - bad dreams, missing his dad. I tried to make him happy. Kids hear hurtful things." (Mother of 7-year old boy).

Iranian women struggle to reconcile three competing issues: desire to integrate, providing safety for their children and creating a quality of life that is free of conflict and violence. Regardless of which parent makes the decision to separate, the stigma of divorce and the sense of shame are strong for an Iranian woman. She loses her standing in the community and endures isolation and loss of self-esteem in a way that other women do not. This prevents her from seeking services for her family and herself. She is often fearful of using the system, which is unfamiliar and has many barriers to access (i.e., language, geography and culture).

The loss of the father and his status in the family has many ramifications for Iranian single mothers. The role of the father is that of provider, authority figure and disciplinarian. His absence creates a void in the family and the result has been the emergence of child management and parenting problems. Mothers consistently report that the children do not listen and they feel ineffective as parents. Diminished parenting capacity has been identified in the research as another consequence of divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). When fathers are present, the ongoing high parental conflict leaves mothers emotionally depleted and less able to deal with children who have also been negatively impacted by the conflict. The loss of income after separation results in women taking on more jobs or returning to school, and being less available to supervise their children. This often leads to an increase in the children's behavioural problems.

The women we interviewed were not aware of the services at FIT and stated that they would have used them had they known about them. These women had lived in Canada on average 4.5 years. Their level of English and familiarity with Canadian culture was excellent. For them, the barriers discussed in this chapter were not as serious. However, it should be noted that all the women in the focus group had sought and received services in Farsi at a social service agency. It is likely that more recent immigrant women may require a model of service that incorporates the linguistic and cultural component.

Fathers

"The emotional problems of us Iranians are acute. Unfortunately, the problem with us men is that we escape from problems." (Father of 2 boys).

One of the themes that were identified by almost everyone we interviewed is that fathers often appeared "lost" after divorce. Fathers lose their professional and provider status upon immigration and then feel that they have lost what is left of their control at the time of separation. Like many other cultures that have traditional gender roles, Iranian fathers are not expected to develop skills for child rearing. Parents may have very different ideas about their parental responsibilities.

As mentioned previously, the fathers involved in our project were unusual in that they maintained an ongoing involvement with the children. These fathers expressed a strong desire to learn more about raising children within both Canadian and Iranian cultures. Some fathers in our project had found mainstream services to be unhelpful. For example, a father with a teenager sought help around the child's rebellious behaviour. The counsellor failed to inquire about the father's cultural values and expectations. Only the youth was seen in counselling. The father was disappointed, as they were not given an opportunity to make changes and re-connect with each other. Without the broader understanding of the culture, fathers were left feeling confused and angry about their loss of control and status, and their former partner's independence. This anger and confusion seems to fuel the animosity between the parents.

"Divorce is a crisis for Iranian families...I think services are desperately needed."
(Father of 2 children).

"Iranian counsellors could help youth with the sense of 'self' and to create confidence in who they are." (Father of 2 girls).

Community Informants

"While fathers are responsible for discipline, they do not raise the children. So, visitation and shared parenting become very difficult. Most fathers don't know how or what to do with the children." (Social worker).

The community informants reiterated the themes raised by the parents and the youth. They identified major issues requiring attention:

- Stigma, shame and isolation,
- Feelings of sadness, loss of self-esteem, guilt, hopelessness,
- Competing cultural values,
- Loss of father,
- Lack of social and emotional supports,
- Impact of poverty,
- Gender imbalances and role reversals,
- Lack of parenting skills,
- Barriers to the legal and social service systems,
- Trust and confidentiality outside the family,
- High parental conflict,
- Domestic violence,
- Lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

The community informants stressed that the Iranian community is highly under-serviced. They spoke of the need for an educational program that would normalize the divorce and immigration experience to help make it acceptable to talk about these difficult issues. The focus of other programs should be on parenting, the impact of divorce on parents and children and negotiating the family law system in Canada. There is a need for culturally competent counselling for all family members. A specific outreach program for fathers was recommended, since they are hard to engage and both parents are essential to the adjustment of children after divorce.

"In Iranian families, children blame themselves for their parent's situation. They think because of what they did, this happened. Unfortunately, there is no one to tell them they are wrong." (Social service worker).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The goal of this project (refer also to Chapter 1) was to identify the needs of Iranian families when parents divorce. Research questions were developed to support the needs assessment process. As indicated earlier, the needs of separated families in ethnoracial communities are complex. Therefore, it is important that research and service delivery focus on the challenges faced by immigrant populations experiencing multiple levels of loss, trauma, stigma and fear. The discussion and recommendations that follow are based on the qualitative data collected. Each of the research questions will be discussed in turn.

Research Questions

What are the needs of Iranian children and parents after parental separation?

Our data indicated that, in general, Iranian youth experienced similar or heightened adjustment challenges as the general population of youth from divorcing families. (Kalter, 1990; Kelly, 1993). As might be expected, the highly conflictual relationship between divorcing Iranian parents results in youth experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. The situation is exacerbated by diminished parenting capacity, child management problems, strained parent-child relationships and absent father-child relationships. Youth were preoccupied with the ongoing parental dispute and described being alienated from one parent. Symptoms of depression and hopelessness were common.

These variables are characteristic of high conflict divorces (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). While the divorce literature suggests that the majority of divorces are not high conflict (Ahrons, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), this does not appear to be characteristic of the Iranian community. Our concerns about outcomes for Iranian youth are increased because the literature suggests that children who experience multiple stressors and life transitions are at a higher risk of developing emotional difficulties (Freeman, 1998).

What types of services do members of the Iranian community identify as useful?

Most participants described the importance of culturally appropriate services. Where necessary, such services should be available in Farsi, or participants should have the choice of language.

Services should be located in or near the community to ensure easy access and increase the likelihood that youth and parents will avail themselves of the opportunities. Three types of services were identified as high priority: education for divorcing parents, counselling for youth and parents, and ongoing support groups.

What are the barriers that prevent Iranian families from accessing services?

Three types of systemic barriers were identified during this project. First, the data appears to support our speculation that services need to address issues of culture in addition to the subject area (i.e., parental divorce). Culture is inextricably linked to thoughts, perceptions and actions. Families who are still in the process of acculturating or who strive to maintain their culture in a substantial way are not likely to benefit from services where the issue of culture is either not a priority or absent. Weller et al. (2001) report that a California family court mediation service did not prove to be useful for a large number of Latinos. The program failed to comprehend how the Hispanic culture informs family relationships. Consequently, few of the Latino parents in the study achieved the stated goal of creating a parenting plan. Useful discussions about the concept of family transition require an understanding of the deeply held beliefs of the family.

A second barrier is language. Linguistic or literacy needs increase the likelihood that newcomers will find services inaccessible. Some people, regardless of their period of residency in Canada, may prefer to speak about difficult issues in their first language. Struggling for the proper words and understanding in a second language (learned later in life) adds another layer of complexity to an already difficult situation.

The third potential barrier is geography. The pressures of daily life experienced by immigrant families may make it difficult or unrealistic for parents to access services outside of their community. In addition, new immigrants may be reluctant to withdraw youth from school to attend counselling because of concerns that time missed will impact on academic performance and success (Hodes, 2000).

To what extent does the FIT model address the needs of ethno-racial communities?

The combination of tasks required of families experiencing separation and immigration increases vulnerability. Our data suggests that successful interventions need to incorporate culture and language while maintaining a child focus. For example, Kerr & Lewis (1991) call for "...an emphasis on the necessity of using several different models of service delivery to respond to the needs of ethnocultural communities" (p.2).

The final research question posed in Chapter 3 was: *Is a significantly different model needed or would modifications to the current model suffice?* Briefly, the FIT model involves providing "...specialized interventions for divorcing families. Each intervention has a specific purpose. The primary goal of our work is to support children's adaptation and adjustment to family change" (Freeman, 1995, p.13).

As is often the case, there will probably never be enough resources to create parallel services in every ethnoracial community. Nor is this strategy necessarily desirable.

Increasingly, as Kerr and Lewis (1991) point out, we are “moving towards community-based services, recognizing that services must respond to the needs and characteristics of specific communities in order to be maximally effective” (p.8).

Drawing from the data collected during this project, we respond to this question and outline recommendations for programming and practice as well as possible next steps in meeting the needs of Iranian families who divorce. Our cautionary note relates to the limitations of the project described in Chapter 5.

Program

The data indicates the importance of developing services that address the systemic barriers noted above as well as the needs of Iranian youth and parents. **We recommend that every effort be made to locate at least some services within the community.** This will help to increase awareness of the issues and encourages youth and parents to participate.

The lack of fluency in English prevents many families from accessing mainstream services. **We recommend that effort be made to ensure that some, if not all, services are bilingual (Farsi/English) so that participants can work in the language most likely to allow them to benefit from the intervention.** Providing the opportunity for parents and youth to speak in their mother tongue establishes more comfort and trust in the service and at the same time decreases the sense of isolation.

We recommend that services incorporate ideas that are highly valued in the Iranian culture. There needs to be an opportunity to acknowledge and discuss different points of views and values. For example, in the Iranian community, the functioning of the family unit seems to be a critical variable and it is identified as a focal point of family life and the community. Interventions need to address this variable.

We recommend that services include a community outreach component. Existing partnerships provide an important foundation for beginning this work. The goal is to encourage community involvement in defining needs and developing possible solutions. The support of key community stakeholders enhances a program's attractiveness and encourages families to trust the emerging resource (FSA, 1994).

In Chapter 5, we described the difficulties encountered in recruiting Iranian fathers to participate in this project. **We recommend that an initiative be developed to encourage Iranian fathers to remain involved in their children's lives after divorce.** The outreach initiative needs not only to attract fathers' attention but also to encourage them to utilize services that will support their continuing involvement in the lives of the children.

In the previous chapter, we noted that participants identified how difficult it is to talk openly about issues such as divorce. **We recommend that an educational outreach initiative be developed to challenge the stigma of divorce and dispel common**

myths and preconceptions about family transition. The purpose of the initiative is to:

- Create an open dialogue that allows youth and parents to normalize immigration and divorce, and
- Increase the community's level of comfort in discussing family issues with non-family members.

Practice

Drawing from the data, the initial service delivery needs to incorporate three types of interventions. **We recommend that services include educational programming, counselling, and support groups.**

Educational Programming

The data suggests that educational programming should focus on understanding children's needs when parents divorce, parenting skills, and demystifying the Canadian legal system. Parents require information that will help them support and encourage their child's adjustment through the transition process. We described the importance of enhancing the parenting skills of both Iranian mothers and fathers. Seminars about the legal system in Canada would provide important information for divorcing parents about their rights and obligations. **We recommend that educational programs focus on the impact of divorce, parenting skills and the divorce process.**

Hodes (2000) argues that primary prevention programs reduce stress and adversity for new immigrants. Preventive interventions involve the provision of specialised counselling, but Hodes citing Papadopoulos (1999), cautions that the approach should not "psychologise inappropriately". Citing Tolfree (1996), Hodes advocates for community and school based services and "group approaches that build on community strengths" (p. 65). Using the professional expertise of community members to provide culturally appropriate counselling can be extremely effective (Hodes, 2000 citing Dihour & Pelosi, 1989) and will facilitate the availability of bilingual services.

Counselling

Individual and group counselling have proved to be effective interventions for families experiencing the challenges of divorce. Counselling has the ability to improve child coping and behavior, parent and child anxiety and co-parental relationships after divorce (Freeman, 1995). The goals of this intervention would be to:

- Provide a safe and confidential forum to discuss private issues,
- Help parents and children to understand the impact of divorce and immigration on each life and on the life of the family,
- Improve coping and overall functioning of all family members, and
- Secure and improve parent-child relationships.

We recommend that concurrent but separate therapy groups be offered for youth and parents. The group format appealed to most participants. This modality has the ability to be a powerful intervention, particularly with respect to normalising feelings, diminishing isolation and challenging myths and stigma (Kalter, 1990). Participants suggested that parent groups could be mixed gender. Nevertheless, based on our experience, we have concerns about whether this is practical. More research is required with respect to this strategy.

Individual counselling provides a way to meet the needs of community members who are not yet able or comfortable to participate in a group intervention. It also provides a means of respecting the community's values concerning confidentiality and privacy.

Support Groups

Support groups differ from counselling groups as they are usually facilitated by a member of the community and not by a professional. They are usually less structured and group participants define the agenda. Support groups can be highly effective in bringing together people with common concerns and experiences and have the ability to be very empowering. The less structured format facilitated by one or more community members is another way of creating a safe and trusting environment to talk about difficult issues with others who share these experiences.

The goals of a support group are to:

- Reach out to parents who would not normally access mainstream or traditional counselling models,
- Re-establish a sense of community while overcoming isolation, and
- Provide a supportive forum that is culturally appropriate in both language and geography, accessible and inexpensive.

At the present time, until additional research is available, perhaps different groups for mothers and fathers are required, given their different needs and issues related to parenting. Furthermore, the strict gender roles inherent in the Iranian culture may prevent men and women from being open about their parenting difficulties if groups mix men and women.

Iranian mothers identified specific concerns regarding their children including family of origin in Iran, struggle to integrate, and adapting to the possibility of more personal freedom. This is overshadowed by the intense isolation reported by most mothers. These types of issues are best approached using support groups that incorporate a self-help format. ***We recommend separate support groups for mothers and fathers to explore issues that are relevant to each group.***

Policy

Divorce specific services are limited and they tend to be available in one or both of the official languages. For example, the Province of Ontario's new Family Law Information Centres provide parents with materials and government publications pertaining to family

law matters. We contacted the Centre in North York (located nearest to where a sizeable number of Iranians live) and learned that their materials are not multi-lingual. The Province of Ontario's video *Separate Ways* (Ministry of Attorney General, 1998) is an excellent example of how the systemic barrier of language can be addressed. In addition to the official languages, the video is available in many other languages. However, it is not yet available in Farsi.

We recommend that the government translate and disseminate key family law materials in a variety of languages including Farsi. We also recommend that an outreach strategy be created to support this initiative and raise community awareness of the issues and the availability of the materials.

FSA works from an anti oppression framework that guides our programming and services. Consequently, we will advocate for this initiative. We believe it is an important step to addressing the types of systemic barriers identified by participants in the needs assessment.

This portion of the project is the first step towards addressing the impact of divorce in culturally diverse communities. The intention is not to develop parallel services, but to respond to the three major barriers described in this report (i.e.: culture, language, and geography).

We recommend that FSA take the initiative to work collaboratively with stakeholders to explore ways of building a culturally competent model of service in the Iranian community. This recommendation is consistent with FSA's stated mission¹¹ and policies.

Implementation of a culturally competent model of service involves identifying the resources, implications and factors which have an impact on the community and service providers. ***We recommend that during the implementation phase, all factors affecting the community and service providers in this process be explored.***

Building on the work from this project, we recommend that a review be conducted to ascertain the applicability of the model of service to other ethnoracial communities.

¹¹FSA Mission statement: Strengthened families & individuals in just and supportive communities.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This project involved an exploration of how Iranian families experience the dual challenges of settlement and family transition. It confirmed the universality of the divorce experience for children and parents, regardless of culture. Differences were also identified. The confusion created by competing cultural values hinders the ability of families to adjust to the many changes after divorce. Divorce research indicates, and the needs assessment confirms, that children in changing families are a vulnerable population. This report identifies the limitations of mainstream programs as they relate to Iranian children and parents. It also describes the systemic barriers that key informants encounter when they attempt to access culturally appropriate services. Parents, youth and community members identified the need for community based services that link their culture and values with divorce-specific services including outreach and education, counselling and support groups.

Based on the data collected during the needs assessment process, twelve recommendations are outlined above. They provide a direction for service planning and service delivery and take into account the systemic barriers identified in the needs assessment.

Canada has embraced an immigration policy of inclusion and integration and Toronto is home to a culturally diverse population. "Immigrant children are the fastest growing component of Canada's child population. Their successful adjustment and development will have profound impacts on Canadian society" (Beiser et al., 2002). Many of these same children are also experiencing parental separation at a high rate. Our findings indicate the need for an enriched approach to treatment and resources to support child and family adjustment in the Iranian and other ethno-racial communities. This approach is consistent with our Agency's position regarding diversity and our anti-oppression policy.

The message from our youth participants was clear and direct:

"At the end, I couldn't take it [the fighting] no more...In the end, I wanted to leave home and live by myself."

(Boy, age 14)

"The counsellor should be someone that is from your country and someone you can trust and has some similarity to you."

(Girl, age 11)

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APPENDIX

Appendix I – Focus Groups

Youth

What do you remember about your parents' divorce? What was it like for you?

Without exception, all participants described high conflict divorces, characterized by ongoing parental conflict, continued disputes over custody, access and child and spousal support, mental illness and parental abandonment. The level of knowledge of, and involvement in, parental disputes were remarkable. There was a sense of hopelessness about parents' ability to cooperate after divorce. Most participants described feeling a lot of anger over the divorce. "They shouldn't stay together because what is the point. They are going to fight all the time." *There was general agreement that children have a need and a right to information that would help them to make sense of their parents' divorce. They felt strongly that ongoing parental conflict creates a great amount of stress, tension and confusion in their lives. Youth felt that parents must consider the implications of their actions upon their children.*

There was much evidence of one parent alienating a child from another parent. Few parents attempted to protect children from the disputes and in fact, involved them in the conflict in some way. The result is that many participants appeared to be influenced against a parent. One youth described an absent mother in very derogatory terms at the same time as holding back tears. This youth later argued for the right of children to see both parents and the need for joint custody. Another youth states, "My dad, my grandmother, everybody told me stories about my mom that she was a bad person. I never had a chance to talk to her to hear what she has to say."

How is your life different now that your parents live apart from each other?

The great majority of youth living with their mothers had little or no contact with their fathers. Most of the fathers had abandoned or limited contact with their children after divorce, many moving back to Iran or other countries. Some youth suggest that fathers limit contact with their children, as the parental conflict becomes unmanageable for the parents. "My father's problem is that he has rejected us, but he doesn't want to let go either."

Participants described strong feelings when speaking about parental divorce. "So what has he done for me? He's done nothing. I told him I don't want his money. This is so nerve wrecking." Another youth stated, "The divorce from my dad has been extremely difficult, but we have to tolerate it. If I hear a music that reminds me of my dad, or receive a letter from my dad, I feel very bad, I miss him so much." *There was a general longing for absent fathers and in some cases, mothers. Participants described confusion and anger over parental abandonment.*

Several youth spoke of families living in harmony in Iran, only to find disappointment and confusion in Canada. "When he (father) came to Canada, he lost himself. He tells me since I've come to Canada I have become too westernized. But it is he who has changed so much. He has put everything aside for another woman." There was much discussion of the problems arising from families attempting to cope with very different sets of cultural values. *There was general agreement that competing cultural values created tension and conflict amongst all family members.*

Feelings of guilt and shame about parental divorce were evident for most of the youth. "When my friends ask, I tell them my father has gone to Vancouver and he travels to other countries." Another states, "If you tell them you got a divorce, they look at you differently. They think you are not human. It is like in Iran, divorced people are not human," and another, "I make my parents fight."

Several participants courageously spoke of their altered behaviour as a result of their changed lives.

What can parents do to make it easier for children?

A theme that was raised over and over again was the distress of being exposed to continuous parental conflict. Youth expressed deep confusion and distress regarding their roles in their parental disputes. Exposure to parental conflict resulted in feelings of anger, depression and hopelessness. *There was general agreement that parents should not involve their children in their disputes in any way.*

Most of the participants found the transition of divorce so difficult that many suggested parents should not be permitted to divorce for the sake of the children. There was strong consensus for parents to provide information to the children that would help them make sense of the changes in the family. Some youth felt that they should be able to make decisions regarding their residential schedule; others felt that children should not have to choose between parents. One participant aptly described her confusion, stating "Sometimes I want to know (about the dispute) and sometimes I really don't want to know because that would get me more worried and everyone is going to act crazy." *There was general agreement that parents should provide appropriate information so children can begin to cope with future changes in their lives.* This youth sums it up and stated: "I also think you should talk to relatives and see if before you were born something else was going on. Because you may think that they got a divorce because of us."

Many youth described having a need to talk to someone about these issues, but having no one. The participants felt that they had little or no emotional support through the process of divorce. The stigma of divorce prevented many from reaching out for support. One youth commented, "Can I tell them (friends) that my parents separated? If I do, then this will echo every where that I won't have a father." Several youth identified the need to express the many confusing feelings, ("talk about it!") while acknowledging that it is rarely done. Another participant agreed and stated, "It's easier

to talk to others your own age.” *There was general agreement that parents are not able and lack the energy or confidence to help their children cope with their strong feelings.*

Many participants expressed a strong desire to see both parents often and consistently upon divorce, especially their father. “Seeing your father, you get to know more about him and his family.” Another stated longingly, “I think they (parents) should spend time with their kids.” However, where parent-child relationships were difficult or fragile, the participants stated adamantly that they did not wish further contact with this parent. Many described very difficult and conflict laden relationships with their fathers. The ongoing parental conflict and the father’s lack of parenting skills rendered any future relationship with the children almost impossible.

What advice would you give other children whose parents are separating?

Our participants advised other children experiencing parental divorce to ask questions in an attempt to understand the reasons for divorce. The participants involved in difficult, high conflict situations advised fellow youth to “choose one parent and forget about the other.” Several insightful youth stated, “don’t take your anger out on the kids” and “tell your parents to live with the pain and solve it.” One participant suggested seeking the assistance of an elder. Others reiterated the theme that children need to see both parents and should avoid taking sides. Some simply stated that there was no advice to give since there is nothing kids can do with warring parents. *There was general agreement that children have many questions about the divorce. These questions often remain unanswered.*

What should separating parents think about when they make decisions about their children?

Parents should be thinking about the impact of the parents’ ongoing arguments and behaviours. There is a fear that if this could happen to parents, it can happen to their children as well. One youth summarized this thought, “they should pay attention that when they fight, this could influence their children.” Exposure to parental conflict affects how people think about themselves in relation to their gender. “If you are a boy and it is your mother’s fault, then your attitude about women changes. If you are a girl, then your attitude about men will be different. All the impact of fighting always remains in your head. For example, the girl will never trust a man because she thinks all men are like this.”

There was a sense of disbelief at parents’ inability to treat each other with civility. “At the end, I couldn’t take it no more. I couldn’t do anything. I wanted to throw myself from the balcony, so I would be relieved of the burden. In the end, I wanted to leave home and live by myself.” *There was general agreement that parents have a responsibility to place their children’s needs before their own.*

Do you think it would be helpful for youth to have a place to talk about divorce, like group counselling? Should the group be only for Iranian youth?

Overall the response was very positive. Almost all of the participants felt there was a strong need to talk amongst others who share the same problems. Interestingly, several youth suggested the need for parents to participate in their own groups as well, so they can see the impact of their actions. There were strong feelings expressed about the value of sharing feelings amongst other Iranian children. One youth suggested that the counsellor should be “someone that is from your country and someone that you can trust and has some similarity to you.” However, there were several reservations regarding group counselling. There were concerns about trust and fear about the rest of the community becoming aware of your personal and shameful problems. *There was general agreement that counselling is a necessary resource that should be available to help with children’s recovery after divorce.*

Mothers

Do you think separation and divorce is an issue in the Iranian community? If yes, in what way?

All participants stated unequivocally that divorce is a large issue in the community. *There was general agreement that the stresses of accommodating both the “old and new” culture upon immigration causes great family upheaval, contributing to parental divorce.*

What is your experience with separation and divorce?

The women all stated that it was extremely difficult to make the decision to separate. “Iranian men think we come here and separate for nothing. Everything is based on our culture. As women, we must always listen first to our fathers and then to our husbands.” Many women described their low self esteem and their fear of countering their husbands’ opinions. *There was general agreement that the women had no family support upon divorce and often faced alienation from their families.* Many spoke about their isolation, and one mother commented that “My family would not deal with anything emotional and refused to accept my decision to separate.”

The women described feeling a great deal of shame because of their divorce and found it hard to tell their extended families. The sense was that “she went to Canada and changed.” The onus and blame was placed firmly on the women.

The women expressed a sense of relief and gratitude when they recall becoming aware of an Iranian community worker in their local school.

What is the level of parental conflict in your family?

The level of conflict for most families is very high. Ironically, the level of conflict diminished when the father no longer had any involvement with the family. Families experienced a decline in their financial situation. With respect to child support, the mothers reported that no one received any payment. One father abandoned the family after she requested support, one mother was still litigating and one woman stated that her husband doesn't earn anything. *There was general agreement that all parental divorces are high conflict.*

Several mothers described their former partners as being unable to separate adult issues from their children's needs. There were stories of fathers using the children to gain access to the mothers, resulting in children witnessing more verbal abuse and harassment.

In your opinion, what was the most difficult situation you or your child faced after divorce?

Some children witnessed their mothers being verbally or physically abused. Most of the other children witnessed a great deal of arguing between the parents. One mother stated, "My kids hated the fighting. He betrayed me so many times. The kids know about his other women." Another described the difficult position faced by many children, "It's hard on the kids not living together. But if there's fighting, they don't want it." *There was general agreement that children were not protected from parental conflict. This fact coupled with father abandonment created enormous obstacles to adjustment after divorce.*

Mothers described father abandonment as one of the hardest thing for their children. One mother stated "My kid doesn't want to say he lives in a fatherless home," and another stated, "He abused my kids, but they still need both of us. They love him."

What would have helped you to cope better with your separation/divorce?

One mother summed up their need perfectly, "It is necessary to have a warm, trusting place for newcomers. Women need other Iranian women to talk to. But after awhile, they can sit with other women." Without extended family, the isolation is very great. There was lively discussion about Iranian men and women's traditional roles and the extent to which women are controlled by men.

What would have helped your child(ren) after or during separation/divorce? What services would be helpful?

Women expressed a strong need for counselling, especially to deal with their children's behavioural problems. It is very difficult practically and emotionally to attend appointments. Women who are isolated and have been abused have extremely low self

esteem and find it hard to get out of the house. It was suggested that social workers could make home visits.

The difference in cultural values with respect to gender was a source of great stress for most families. *There was general agreement that all family members could benefit from counselling. There needs to be help available to help parents deal with the competing cultural values and pressures.*

Families in Transition offer specialised services for families experiencing separation, divorce and remarriage. Have you heard of FIT? Would you use or recommend the services at FIT? In what way can FIT improve or adjust our model to better suite the community's needs?

None of the participants had heard of FIT. While they strongly lamented the lack of available services, some women conceded that they might be reluctant to seek counselling for several reasons. Fear was the biggest reason cited. Participants spoke about the difficulty reaching out to someone other than your family, fear that no one will understand your situation, and the stigma associated with counselling.

The participants stated unequivocally that services must include their culture. Some commented that they received a form of therapy in English and it was “useless.”

What other services would be helpful to you or the community?

Support groups for women would be helpful to break the sense of isolation and guilt experienced by many, provide an opportunity to share ideas and resources and to provide support. It would also provide an opportunity to speak in a language that feels richer to them. Keeping the culture alive for the children was seen as a very important but difficult task. However, several women stated that the children are much more westernized and could integrate into a mainstream counselling group much more easily than they could.

There was general agreement that Iranian men required specialised service to assist them to take responsibility for their children and to work on their parent-child relationships and their parenting skills. “ Our culture doesn't value fathers having relationships with their kids. Fathers are designed to take care of the family.”

Do you have any other suggestions?

Services that have lengthy waiting lists are useless. This was cited as another barrier to accessing services. Culturally sensitive counsellors are needed to help women to reach out to their extended families about the divorce to try to salvage their relationships. Extended family members feel very shamed because of a relative's divorce.

Women who come to Canada and have young children have very little opportunity to get out as day-care is unaffordable, or to take courses and improve themselves. Mothers cannot access services if they essentially shut-ins.

Is remarriage an issue? Is it common? What concerns do you have regarding blended families?

Remarriage is not accepted and most women do not remarry. Their focus is trying to stabilize their lives.

Fathers

Do you think separation and divorce is an issue in the Iranian community? If yes, in what way?

Fathers believed that the rate of divorce in the Iranian community is extremely high. *There was general agreement that a high level of family conflict and breakdown can be attributed to the immigration and settlement experience.* There was a feeling that the Canadian government lacks the commitment to provide adequate services to address settlement issues, particularly employment.

Previously, cultural norms and traditions prevented couples from separating, forcing unhealthy marriages to remain intact. Some fathers expressed dismay at the Canadian practice of divorce and the ease at which it can occur.

What is your experience with separation and divorce?

There was general agreement that separation and divorce is a traumatic event for all family members. Two fathers described the experience of their wives leaving as upsetting and distressful. Others stated that attempts to reconcile and work on their marriages were exhausting. Regardless of who instigated the separation, the experience was described as difficult and overwhelming.

What is the level of parental conflict in your family?

There was general agreement that most divorces result in high conflict between the parents. One father described the shame of marital difficulties and his attempts to cope: "My marriage was high conflict, but because I didn't want anyone to know we had problems, I would compromise a lot."

In your opinion, what was the most difficult situation you or your child faced after divorce?

There was general agreement that the separation from their children was the most difficult issue faced by fathers. One father articulated, "My goal in life was to bring up my children well. I didn't come to Canada so my children would lose their family."

Fathers worried about the ability of the children to cope with the conflict and some described withdrawal from the family unit as a youth's attempt to cope.

Several fathers spoke about the difficulties of dealing with intense emotional feelings and cultural confusion, which can lead to mental health problems and thoughts of suicide. *There was general agreement that fathers experience a great deal of shame and stigma as a result of the divorce and are perceived differently in their community.* A father talked about this experience and stated, "The main role model and pattern is that parents live together until they die. So I have to do the same. If you are any different than that, then you are a failure. You make a mistake and you have to be ashamed of it."

Fathers worried about the emotional impact of divorce upon children due to ongoing parental disputes. There was discussion of interference by extended family, exacerbating the already strained relationships. Some parent-child relationships were adversely affected by the divorce, but for the most part, the fathers in this focus group maintained positive relationships with their children over the years.

What would have helped you to cope better with your separation/divorce?

The responses varied. Some fathers felt that some type of therapy would be helpful, while others had a negative experience with mainstream counselling. Another father spoke about the virtue of tolerance as a coping mechanism. One participant expressed a sense of hopelessness given the high level of persistent conflict in his family.

What would have helped your child(ren) after or during separation/divorce? What services would be helpful?

For the most part, fathers did not appear to have a good understanding of their children's needs. However, there was a general recognition that there needs to be less parental conflict and more effort placed on the parent-child relationship.

The idea of counselling raised a lot of issues. One father felt very strongly for the need for professional intervention arguing that it can help dispel the stigma around divorce, "they (counsellors) can make parents understand that separation is not shameful, it is not a matter of losing face." Others felt misunderstood by the counsellor (one counsellor was Iranian, while the other was not). *There was general agreement that some type of intervention would be helpful as parents find it difficult to prioritize their children's needs during a time of crisis.*

Families in Transition offer specialised services for families experiencing separation, divorce and remarriage. Have you heard of FIT? Would you use or recommend the services at FIT? In what way can FIT improve or adjust its model to better suite the community's needs?

Fathers were not familiar with FIT or any divorce-specific services in Toronto. *There was general agreement that mainstream counselling services do not meet their needs due to the cultural disparities between counsellor and client.* Several fathers described feeling unfamiliar and uncomfortable with non-Iranian service providers. One father stated that mainstream counselling is based on western norms and values, which is irrelevant to his life and parenting practices. Another father saw the merit of having mainstream and Iranian counsellors work together because they can compliment each other. However, Iranian counsellors for youth was advocated as "(Iranian counsellors) could help youth with the sense of 'self' and to create confidence in who they are." *There was general agreement that services were needed to help children cope.* Fathers described youth struggling with depression and drugs, "separation is a crisis for Iranian families...I think (services) are desperately needed."

Several fathers emphasized their discomfort with the whole counselling process. Talking about private issues outside of the family is not encouraged in Iranian culture. However, as the community becomes more settled over the years, they may be more open to learning new ways of reaching out and helping themselves. One father remarked, "It is up to you (FSA) to dispel the myths about divorce and break the negative image."

What other services would be helpful to you or the community?

All the participants unanimously expressed an interest in parenting courses, while several father suggested counselling as well. There was considerable discussion about the need to integrate Canadian and Iranian cultures in the context of parenting.

Do you have any other suggestions?

Several participants spoke about the confusion inherent in trying to cope with both immigration and separation and the complexities of these challenges. Fathers often felt overwhelmed with these tasks. "The emotional problems of us Iranians are acute. Unfortunately, the problem with us men is that we escape from problems." Another parent described his desperation: "My purpose was not to bring two children to this world and then sit in a broken ship in the middle of the way." *There was general agreement that education is desperately regarding both divorce and immigration.* There needs to be some assistance available to develop resources which enables the community to help itself.

Lastly, it was felt that male workers could be very beneficial when working with fathers.

Is remarriage an issue? Is it common? What concerns do you have regarding blended families?

There was general agreement that remarriage is not widely practiced. This could change in the future, with longer periods of settlement and acculturation.

Community Informants

How is divorced perceived in the Iranian community?

While the stigma is still strong, divorce is a real option in Canada. Divorce becomes feasible since it is possible to secure financial stability, even if it is only social assistance. More liberal Canadian values also contribute to a parent's decision to end the marriage. As one participant stated, "In Iran, if they're divorced they're disconnected from society and you don't have the respect as a married woman."

There was a complete consensus that all divorces are high conflict. The new culture of the home country conflicts with the more traditional values creating confusion and ambivalence. Some participants argued that divorce is prevalent in the Iranian community because there is more freedom here that the commitment to marriage diminishes and that couples cease trying in their marriages. Others argued that women opt to get out of turbulent, often violent, marriages because they now have the resources to support themselves, unlike in Iran. "In Iran, you have a wife until you die. It is culturally not acceptable to divorce. The perception is changing because now we don't encourage people to stay in relationships at all costs."

While there were many reasons offered for the high incidence of divorce, there was general agreement that divorce is a very serious social issue in the community and has a large negative impact on all those involved.

What contributes to parental conflict?

Families struggle with the many different and competing cultural values. Families come with their own traditional values, which are challenged upon arrival in Canada. This creates a lot of internal tension. Families begin to experience problems and resort to blaming one another. One participant explained, "We always blame others for our problems. Our understanding is that if it ever happens to you it's someone else's fault." Another explained, "They come here with hopes that lots of things will change. They may not understand a situation and then blame each other for not being able to overcome it." *There was general agreement that newcomers lack the structures of one set of values, thus creating tension, which contributes to parental conflict.*

Like many families, newcomers had problems in their home country, which remained unresolved when they immigrated. The problems persist and are compounded by the many challenges of settlement. If the problems are large enough, some parents will exercise their new-found rights and leave the marriage. "Some people will come forward with all the pain, to seek a different and better direction in their lives."

There was much discussion about the inequity in gender roles. A participant summed it up and stated, "For men it is the age of liberation, he can do more of whatever. For the women, it is looking after the kids, hanging onto a job and running the household." Living in Canada does not ensure equal rights for both men and women. Culturally,

divorce occurs when the man requests it. Upon divorce, the woman loses the right to return to Iran where she will be ostracized and lose custody of the children. In practice in Canada, if a woman declares a desire to separate, the man feels she has no right to make that decision, fuelling his sense of injustice and rage. *There was general agreement that unequal roles and responsibilities between men and women create parental conflict.*

Many participants spoke of the impact of wife assault in the Iranian community. For most families, like their Western counterparts, the decision to separate is an agonizing one. However, many women will exercise that option where verbal or physical violence exists.

What is the biggest challenge for children upon parental divorce?

The loss is huge for the children since they have already endured much loss upon immigration. The children no longer have the support of their extended families and friends. Children have very few avenues to talk about their feelings. The parental conflict undermines their sense of security. *There was general agreement that parental conflict and ongoing loss negatively affect children. There are very few resources available to children.*

What are some of the sources of conflict for parents?

One source of conflict is non-payment of spousal and child support. Power imbalances are created when women have a measure of economic security, as they are more willing to work at menial jobs, thereby undermining the men's traditional source of power. This also affects the children's perception of how power is held in the family. Men's sense of self worth and self esteem is deeply affected as his role in the family is minimised.

Women's new-found independence and power confuse men. "The society is patriarchal. The father figure is a very dominant figure in the family. I think that's why children are rebellious after divorce because the father's role as disciplinarian is tarnished or taken away." The participants reported that most men do not pay spousal or child support feeling confused by their wives' ability to leave while being obliged to support them financially. *There was general agreement that many Iranian men are unfamiliar with women's new-found power and it results in conflict between the parents.*

How does divorce change parent-child relationships?

Parent-child relationships change dramatically upon divorce. The result is a very serious breakdown in the father-child relationship as fathers lack the necessary parenting skills to ensure a meaningful relationship. This situation combined with fathers' sense of injustice and rage often leads to fathers' abandoning their children both emotionally and financially. This is an enormous loss for the children on many levels. The other consequence is that mothers' experience great difficulties in child

management as she lacks authority with her children in matters of discipline. Lack of financial support forces women to work at several jobs, leaving the children on their own for large periods of time. Lack of supervision allows the children to get into trouble more often. *There was general agreement that children's' relationships with their parents are seriously compromised by the many changes in the family and lack of emotional and financial support.*

Children often stop confiding in their parents as their parents are wrapped up in their own turmoil with each other. The children are left to figure everything out on their own. One participant commented, "From the kids point of view, they feel a deep loss. They feel they cannot trust their parents with their problems because their parents couldn't solve their own problems. They cannot go to them for any help with their social life. They feel their parents are people who are very selfish. *There was general agreement that the children experience the most loss in divorce, as parents are unable to protect them from their own rage, so children remain exposed to toxic conflict.* One participant stated that exposing children to parental conflict amounts to neglect.

What services would be helpful to Iranian families who separate?

All participants agreed that the community is in dire need of programs to assist parents with parenting skills, reduce parental conflict, and counselling for both parents and children to help families adjust after divorce. *There was general agreement that all programs need to be both community based and culturally appropriate.* There was strong agreement that educational outreach in the community is crucial as a first step in the process of normalizing and understanding divorce and the impact of conflict upon children.