

TRANSITIONS: Meeting the Needs of Iranian Families Facing Separation and Divorce



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

There is general agreement in the divorce literature that it is not divorce per se that creates difficulties for children but rather, the associated cumulative stresses that make adjustment more difficult. Anecdotal evidence from families we work with suggests that variables such as immigration and refugee status may contribute to parents deciding to live apart. The literature has been relatively silent regarding how ethnicity and settlement-related challenges influence a child's response to divorce. There has been some speculation that culture may influence the impact of transition for children and parents.

This collaborative project was sponsored by **Families in Transition (FIT)** and the **Community Action Unit (CAU)*** to learn more about culturally competent services that foster child adjustment to family change. Our primary goal was to ensure the provision of high quality evidence-based services that promote child adjustment to parental divorce. CAU identified the high number of parental divorces within the Iranian community. This phase of the project consisted of a needs assessment that focused on the impact of divorce and settlement-related challenges within that community.

We assumed this work would provide a basis for building culturally competent models of service delivery with other communities. The data from this project assisted us to develop recommendations for program, practice and policy. The full project report includes a literature review, a detailed description of the methodology, data analysis, recommendations, and the full reference list.

Project Design and Methodology

Building on previous work done by the agency, we conducted a Community Oriented Needs Assessment. This approach considers people to be experts about their lives and able to identify their needs as well as potential intervention strategies. Data from key informants is a critical component of the needs assessment process because it can yield a comprehensive view of the community and its cultural values.

The questions that guided the needs assessment process were:

- What is the cultural context for divorce in the Iranian community?
- To what extent are typical divorce-specific themes relevant to the experience of Iranian children?
- How do other factors such as refugee status, settlement experience, and community support impact on an Iranian family's experience of divorce?
- What service-related issues do Iranian children and parent identify?
- What services would key informants recommend be offered to foster child adjustment?
- What are the systemic barriers to service utilization for children and parents?
- Are significantly different interventions needed or would modifications to current interventions suffice?

A total of 41 people in the Toronto area participated in focus groups for mothers, fathers, youth and community informants or in an individual interview. 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 on average 3 years and resided in Canada between 1 and 10 years. Participating fathers were separated on average 7 years and resided in Canada between 11 and 17 years. No one particular type of parenting plan predominated. The community informants work in the areas of public health, mental health, education, settlement and social services.

Several challenges were encountered in the recruitment process. This reflects the differences between how the Iranian and the mainstream cultures view sharing family issues with non-family members. The shame and stigma associated with divorce and mistrust of the system may have also discouraged some potential participants.

Data was collected on five variables: separation and divorce history, relationship between family transition and immigration/settlement, systemic barriers, influence of culture, and applicability of a traditional model of service. All interviews were taped, transcribed and translated and a thematic analysis of the data was conducted.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Iranian families face dual challenges of divorce including loss and grief and the dislocation and integration that are part of settlement. Most families report experiencing high conflict divorces that result in strained family relationships.

Young people and parents report experiencing a heightened sense of loss, shame, sadness, hopelessness, stigma and isolation. Family members feel depleted by the experience and have fewer internal resources for coping and problem solving.

Youth often feel isolated and caught in parental disputes. They may have limited opportunities to discuss their confusion and distress and are more at risk for depression.

Mothers describe struggling with child management issues. Divorce and father absence creates new tasks for the single mother and is a negative influence on family dynamics. Parents describe feeling inadequate in the areas of parenting and child management.

Fathers report feeling they have lost their pride and standing in the community as a result of divorce. Ongoing parent conflict, limited understanding of the Canadian family law regime and children's needs in post-divorce families can lead to fathers withdrawing from children's lives.

Competing cultural values (Canadian vs. Iranian) create tension and increase the likelihood of disputes among family members. Systemic barriers such as culture, language and geography prevent families from accessing existing services.

Existing mainstream divorce-specific services are limited in meeting the requirements of cultural competent service delivery.

IMPLICATIONS

- Normalizing the experience of divorce and settlement reduces stigma and enables families to begin decreasing parent conflict and strengthening problem-solving skills.

- Preventive interventions provide an opportunity to explore emotional reactions and develop coping strategies.

- Counselling and support groups provide an opportunity for youth to discuss family change and other important life events that interfere with their ability to master normal developmental tasks.

- Educational programs that focus on children's reactions to divorce enhance a parent's ability to support children and teach skills for enhancing post-divorce family life.

- Specialized programming for fathers that provides information about the divorce process and children's needs helps to reduce fathers' sense of shame and parent conflict. Programs for fathers can also teach ways for reconnecting with children.

- Community-based programming that reflects the language and cultural values of service users is more likely to attract children and parents.

- FSA takes the initiative to work collaboratively with stakeholders to explore ways of building a culturally competent model of service in the Iranian community.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected during this project, we recommend that:

- ◆ services be located within the community, whenever possible to encourage utilization.
- ◆ the development of bilingual services (English/Farsi) be encouraged so that participants can work in the language most likely to allow them to benefit from the intervention.
- ◆ programming incorporate ideas that are highly valued in the Iranian culture.
- ◆ services including educational programming, counselling, and support groups are required to help Iranian families understand the impact of divorce and the divorce process under Canadian law, challenge the stigma of divorce and dispel common myths and preconceptions about family transition, increase parenting skills, and encourage fathers to remain involved in their children's lives after divorce be developed.
- ◆ concurrent but separate therapy and support groups should be offered for youth, mothers and father to allow them to explore issues from their own perspective.
- ◆ family law materials be translated and disseminated in a variety of languages including Farsi. A complementary outreach strategy to raise community awareness of the issues, available materials, and programming is required.
- ◆ FSA take the initiative to work collaboratively with stakeholders to explore ways of building a culturally competent model of service in the Iranian community. During the implementation phase, factors affecting the community and service providers in this process should be explored.
- ◆ building on this work, we recommend that a review be conducted to determine the

applicability of this approach to other ethnoracial communities.

Summary

Our needs assessment confirms that Iranian youth who experience parental divorce are a vulnerable population. This report identifies the limitations of mainstream programs and the systemic barriers for the Iranian community. Key informants 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. Our findings indicate the need for an enriched approach to treatment and the importance of culturally competent resources that foster positive outcomes for youth and their families in the Iranian community.

* FIT and CAU are departments of the Family Service Association (FSA) of Toronto. FSA is a leading non-profit non-sectarian voluntary organization supported by the United Way. In addition to our community-building work and employee assistance programs, we provide individual, couple and family counselling. We are recognized by Family Service Ontario. FSA welcomes diversity and is committed to a policy of anti-oppression.