



Challenges Facing Immigrant Families

By Sheila Garcia

While this article was written in 2010, many of the central themes are still relevant today as more immigrants and migrants come to the United States. How does your community support immigrant families in your town, city, or county?

Like many immigrants, Carlos wanted a better life for his family. So, he gave up his career as an engineer in his South American country. He and his family headed to the United States. With limited English, Carlos found work in construction -- until the recession hit and the building trades dried up.

Suddenly without a steady income, Carlos joined the ranks of day laborers who were hoping for quick jobs and a few dollars. More and more the family depended on his wife's job at a childcare center.

As the recession continued Carlos grew increasingly discouraged. He wanted to return to his home country, but his wife refused to give up on their dream.

Life became even more difficult, however, when their daughter's illness resulted in a medical bill for thousands of dollars. There was no insurance to cover it.

Carlos is one of approximately 38 million first-generation immigrants living in the United States. More than one in five

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Each immigrant family tells a unique story, but while the details differ the theme is often the same: They persevere simply to get through the day, the week, the month — to survive.

For many, the challenges begin with the decision to relocate, a move that often forces the family to leave children, or a parent, behind. The separation puts enormous stress on the family, making it difficult for parents to care for their children and keep their marriage intact. To ensure that family ties are maintained, some Latino parents send a child back to the home country for a few weeks during the middle of the school year.

These long absences can have devastating effects on academic progress.

Education is key to an immigrant child's future success, but even schools present challenges to both students and parents.

One high school guidance counselor tells immigrant students, “You have to work twice as hard as anyone else.” She points out that, while all students must learn the subject matter, immigrants also have to learn the language and the culture.

Although people chuckle at “helicopter parents” who hover over their children, the reverse can be equally damaging in the case of immigrants, who often come from cultures that do



not expect parental involvement in the schools.

Many immigrant parents do not understand grading policies, PTAs or parent-teacher conferences. In their home countries they expect to defer to the teacher. The idea of “working the system” to advocate for their children, especially if they have special needs, is foreign to them.

A family’s financial struggles can also affect a student’s academic performance. Some teenagers feel pressured to work to supplement the family income.

For example, one student who routinely arrived home from his restaurant job at 10:30 or 11 at night had little time for homework. When he began to nod off in class, concerned teachers approached a counselor, who gently suggested that he limit his work hours to the weekend.

Like all families, immigrant families must deal with conflict between parents and children, especially teenagers. Immigrant youth can find themselves caught between two worlds, neither fully American nor fully part of their parents’ country of origin.

While parents try to hold onto their own cultural customs and values, children want to be like their American peers. Music,

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clothes, parties and dating can all be sources of conflict.

Some conservative immigrant parents do not want their teenagers, especially their daughters, to go out or to have friends over. Teens may react to such restrictions with extreme behavior, including drug use and poor school performance.

Another gap can occur between parents, who often hold low-paying, low-prestige jobs, and their children, who are moving in a different direction.

In school, children develop an expectation that they will earn their living with their minds and not through manual labor. Their parents’ world can seem more and more remote – and unattractive.

Language can be another source of tension in immigrant families.

Many adults find it hard to learn English later in life, and many do not have time to attend classes. Their children, who usually pick up the language quickly, can end up as informal interpreters.

Parents then become dependent on their children’s interpretation skills, which puts an unfair burden on a child or teen, especially if the issue is a difficult legal or medical matter.

In addition, the inequality of language skills can put the parent in a subordinate position.

On a brighter note, many immigrant families hold tight to their religion, which sustains and comforts them in their struggles. Latino families, for example, often identify with the suffering Jesus on the cross.

Despite the challenge, many immigrant parents successfully hand on religious beliefs and practices to their children. The celebration of such feasts as Our Lady of Guadalupe binds families together. Religious devotions that are unique to a particular culture help to preserve the immigrant family’s identity and bridge the gap between generations.

Sheila Garcia is a former associate director of the USCCB’s Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.



A Prayer for Immigrant Children

Loving Father,
in your infinite compassion,
we seek your divine protection for refugee children who are often alone and afraid.
Provide solace to those who have been witnesses to violence and destruction,
who have lost parents, family, friends, home, and all they
cherish due to war or persecution.
Comfort them in their sorrow, and bring help in their time of need.
Show mercy to unaccompanied migrant children, too, Lord.
Reunite them with their families and loved ones.
Guide those children who are strangers in a foreign land to a place of peace and safety.
Comfort them in their sorrow, and bring help in their time of need.
Show us how we might reach out to these precious and vulnerable children.
Open our hearts to migrant and refugee children in need,
so that we might see in them your own migrant Son.
Give us courage to stand up in their defense against those who would do them harm.
For this we pray through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen