

Refugee Families from Somalia

This backgrounder provides general cultural information, while recognizing that every family is unique and that cultural practices will vary by household and by generation. Several Somali community leaders were interviewed for this backgrounder. While this resource provides general information, it is best to get to know each family and learn their unique characteristics; wherever possible, ask members of the community about different cultural practices.



Background

Somalia is a hot, arid country on the eastern coast of Africa, bordered by Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. During colonization, areas of modern Somalia were ruled by Britain, Italy, France, and Ethiopia, with Somalia gaining independence on July 1, 1960. Before the war, the majority of Somalis were nomadic herders or farmers, while about 1/5 of the population lived in urban areas. Somalia

has experienced civil war on and off since 1991. As of November 2011, nearly one million Somali refugees live outside their country, and nearly 1.5 million have been displaced within their own country (UNHCR, 2011). The U.S. has resettled more than 100,000 Somali refugees across the country (Refugee Processing Center, 2012).

Practice Tip:
Somali Bantu refugees are historically, ethnically, and culturally different from other Somali refugees. The majority of this resettled group are descendants of southeastern African Bantu people who were brought to Somalia as slaves in the 19th century. Somali Bantu refugees fled Somalia in the 1990s, lived in refugee camps in Kenya, and were finally resettled in the United States between 2003-2007. For more information, see The Somali Bantu (<http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/the-somali-bantu-culture-profile>).

Due to ongoing instability in Somalia, the U.S. continues to resettle Somali refugees. Some are resettled without having relatives currently in the U.S. These are often single mothers with young children, who must rely on the wider community for support in the absence of extended family. Others have grown up in refugee camps and may not have experienced the same traditional upbringing or parenting role models as older generations.

Culture and Religion

The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims, an Islamic faith that is central to Somali culture and dates back to the 11th century.

Most Somalis will observe the following religious/cultural practices:

- Women covering their arms and legs and wearing the “hijab” (head covering) in public—and in the presence

of unrelated males at home—reflecting the values of modesty and purity.

- Abstaining from **pork and alcohol** (some Somalis may avoid products containing vanilla due to the alcohol content, or products with gelatin such as prenatal vitamin capsules).
- Eating only “halal” meat (regarding the way animals are slaughtered, similar in some ways to “kosher” meat preparation).

Practice Tip:

- Somali men and women may avoid touching or shaking hands with unrelated people from the opposite gender, particularly before daily prayers. However, some who have lived in the U.S. longer may have adopted shaking hands.
- A common greeting is “As-salamu Alaykum” [sa-lam a-lake-um], Arabic for “peace be upon you.” “Iska Waram” is the traditional Somali greeting for “How are you?”

Major Religious or National Holidays:

There are five “pillars” of Islam: 1) the Islamic creed, 2) five daily prayers, 3) fasting during Ramadan, 4) charitable giving, and 5) the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Muslims observe Ramadan for one month every year, during which they abstain from eating and drinking between sunrise and sunset. Patterns of life can change at this time, as more activities are conducted during the evening hours after the fast has been broken.

- Eid al Adha: Festival of Sacrifice, date determined by the [Islamic lunar calendar](#). It marks the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Eid al Fitr: Marks the end of Ramadan, date determined by the Islamic lunar calendar.
- Somali National Day: July 1st.

Practice Tip:

Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr are the most significant festivals in Islamic faith. Staff should be aware that children may not attend school during this time.

Family and Community

Strong social networks are an important strength of Somali culture. Somali families are traditionally large and

multi-generational. Extended family members often live together or nearby, and provide support, social identity and a source of security.

Somalia is a clan-based society, although many Somali-Americans seek to move beyond the conflicts this created in Somalia. Marriage is considered a relationship between two families or clans; however, most marriages are chosen rather than arranged. Given the nuances of clan relationships, those outside the culture are not expected to discuss these matters.

Traditionally men have worked outside the home, while women have taken responsibility for children and the household. Gender roles may change in the U.S. and can sometimes be a source of strain, especially if Somali women have an easier time finding employment than their husbands. Somali girls may have more housework responsibilities and be kept closer to home, while boys may be given greater freedom outside the home.

Practice Tip:

- Somalis typically have 3 names: given name; father's given name; and paternal grandfather's given name.
- Because women do not change their maiden name, mothers will have a different last name than their children. Additionally, the father's first name may be the child's last name. Nicknames are commonly used to distinguish between people with similar names.

Child-Rearing and Child Development

In Somalia, large extended families help one another with household and parenting tasks. Early care by family and friends is viewed as more loving and consistent with community values. Somali society is hierarchical, with a high regard for family and community elders. Respect for elders is therefore an important value to be passed on to children. Somali parents now living in the U.S. may initially prefer family child care or home visiting rather than a center-based program.

Equally important, child care within the Somali community reinforces the child's language, culture, and religion. Somali parents may be concerned that attending a center-based classroom could cause a loss of Somali language and culture, or may violate their religion.

Practice Tip:

Somali parents may be more comfortable having their children participate in programs where:

- Somali staff are employed.
- Children are encouraged to use their home language.
- Religious guidelines are understood and respected.

Guidance and Discipline

In the past, Somali children learned self-discipline from teachers, who were also the primary disciplinarians. Somali parents, who themselves were disciplined more at school than at home, or who experienced less discipline due to family disruptions caused by war, may not have role models of home-based discipline.

Somalis have traditionally used corporal punishment as discipline. Parents may be fearful of home visits by professionals, visits to the emergency room, or school involvement after learning that in the U.S., beating a child may result in the child's removal from the home by child protection services.

Somali parents in the U.S. welcome discussions about alternative discipline methods. Somali parents may expect discipline methods to yield an immediate change in behavior, rather than requiring repeated use over a period of time.

Practice Tip:

Somali parents may benefit from discussions on developmental expectations of young children to support effective methods of guidance and discipline.

School and Education

Education is highly valued within Somali families. However, the notion of "school readiness" and parents as a child's "first teacher" may be new concepts. Education in Somalia traditionally starts when a child is 5 or 6 years old. Engaging children in learning activities prior to school, and reinforcing these concepts at home, will be new ideas for many recently arrived Somali families.

In Somalia, and even in refugee camps, children were given more freedom to roam, supervised by older siblings, extended family members, and adults in the community. Development occurred naturally through daily activities of living, such as food preparation, work in farming or livestock, or household chores. In the U.S., where families may be confined to small apartments or remain inside more of the time due to colder weather, children may not have the same opportunities to develop small and large motor skills. Somali parents may not be aware of the importance of these milestones, since they did not require conscious attention previously.

Practice Tip:

- Somali parents may show their respect for teachers by not interfering and not getting involved in their children's education, since parent engagement in school activities is not the norm in Somalia.
- Encourage parents to participate in school activities by explaining the benefits to their children, providing interpreters, and helping with transportation.

In Somalia, education and cooperation are highly valued, and parents appreciate activities that reinforce children working together. American values of independence and self-reliance may be new concepts and may be viewed as conflicting with the more communal Somali world view.

Health and Mental Health

In Somalia and in refugee camps, women often gave birth at home, aided by a midwife or family members. Doctors and hospitals were for emergencies, so prenatal visits and classes may be new for many women.

Practice Tip:

Somali women in the U.S. may be interested in learning about pre- and postnatal care, provided that cultural practices are respected and that language and literacy needs are taken into account.

Some parents, particularly mothers, may experience depression due to war trauma; separation from their

children and family members; or family conflict or abuse. The stressors of acculturation can heighten feelings of depression, especially if mothers are isolated, lack English language skills, face financial or housing problems, or feel internal conflict over leaving their young children at home when they work outside the home.

Culturally, mental health is typically viewed as being either “crazy” or “sane,” rather than as a continuum of needs. Stigma exists around receiving mental health services. Depression and other mental health needs may be expressed in physical terms, such as headaches, stomachaches, or back pain. Support through social experiences (such as cooking or sewing together, sharing food and sharing stories, etc.) may be more easily received than referrals for mental health services.

Community Leadership

EHS/HS programs will find it helpful to work with leaders from the Somali community. Some tips:

- Ask community members to identify people they trust. Highly educated Somali community members are likely to be well-regarded and can act as role models.
- Include knowledgeable community members as interpreters or liaisons in enrollment sessions and other meetings with Somali families.
- Be aware of differences among ethnic groups and clans when working with the larger community.
- Contact your state's Refugee Coordinator (see References) for ethnic-based community organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, and other helpful local resources.
- Educate community leaders about EHS/HS so they can share information with the community.

Resources and References

BRYCS

- Head Start Collaboration. <http://www.brycs.org/head-start-collaboration.cfm>
- Positive Youth Development and Somali Youth: Research and Resources. (2009). <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Positive-Youth-Development-and-Somali-Youth.cfm>

- Somali Bantu Refugees: 1) Cultural Considerations for Service Providers. (2004). <http://brycs.org/documents/upload/SBantu-Service-Considerations.pdf>
- Strengths-Based Programming: The Example of Somali Refugee Youth. (2009). http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/brycs_spotsummer2009.pdf

Other resources

- Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. (2011). Somali Cultural Guide—Building Capacity to Strengthen Well-Being of Immigrant Families and Their Children: A Prevention Strategy. <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/attributes/PDF/CulturalGuide-Somali.pdf>
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (1999). Somalis: Their History and Culture. <http://calstore.cal.org/store/p-138-the-somalis-their-history-and-culture.aspx>
- CURA Reporter (Spring 2005). Somali Families and Parent Involvement in Schools. <http://www.cura.umn.edu/publications/catalog/reporter-35-2-0>
- ECHO Minnesota. (n.d.). Somali Culture—At a Glance. <http://www.echominnesota.org/sites/default/files/Somali%20Culture%20-%20At%20a%20Glance.pdf>
- Family & Children's Service. (1999). Somali Family Strength: Working in the Community. <http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/SomaliFamilyStrengthReport.pdf>
- UNHCR. (November 2011). UNHCR Somalia Briefing Sheet. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=4ed354d39&query=somalia>
- U.S. Department of State, Refugee Processing Center. <http://wrapsnet.org>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, links to State Refugee Coordinators and Mutual Assistance Associations. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>

Video / DVD:

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2010). A New Day, and Be Who You Are. <http://calstore.cal.org/store/p-194-refugee-families-youth-videos-a-new-day-be-who-you-are-dvd-in-english.aspx>
- Nashville Public Television. (2009). Next Door Neighbors—Somalis. <http://wnpt.org/productions/nextdoorneighbors/somali/index.html>

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