

Autism in the context of humanitarian emergency: the lived experiences of Syrian refugee parents of children on the autism spectrum

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Lay Summary

Research Team

This project was completed in partial fulfillment of Abdullah Bernier's Master of Science in School and Applied Child Psychology. The research team included this student trainee and:

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Lay Summary

Key Findings

- Each participant had unique individual experiences alongside several shared experiences. Analysis yielded seven shared themes to which each parent related.
- All parents felt that the Syrian crisis had disruptive impacts on their child, family, and/or resettlement experience. Given the nature of COVID-19, parents also experienced additional barriers to gaining support and services due to the global pandemic.
- Parents varied in how they viewed culture to be important and relevant to the supports and services offered to their children. This variability highlights the need to explore cultural sentiments on a per-family basis.
- Parents experienced negative treatment and stigma toward their autistic children prior to resettling in Alberta, which negatively impacted both parents and the children.
- Overall, parents felt happy, satisfied, and thankful for resettling in Canada and accessing supports and services for their autistic children.
- Parents experienced support and service gaps contributing to unmet needs for their children. Upon resettling in Alberta, parents had an overall sense of satisfaction with the available supports and services with several areas not yet addressed.
- There were several everyday barriers to daily living that impacted participants adjustment outcomes, including learning English, completing paperwork to access autism services, commuting, finding accommodation, and becoming familiar with society.
- Establishing social and having family networks eased resettlement difficulties and had positive impacts on the overall resettlement experiences for families.

Implications & Recommendations

- Parents suggested further areas of support and service need in Canada, including more vocational (work and volunteering) opportunities for their autistic children, reduced appointment wait times, and supports focused on the whole family instead of only the child.
- Parents suggested providing autistic children who had experienced war with initial language liaison support in school and with professionals reduce barriers associated with being in a novel society.
- Establishing parental support groups for refugee parents of autistic children may foster a social network, bolster social integration, and enhance engagement in informal information sharing of available supports and services.
- Increasing volunteering opportunities can help bolster resettlement outcomes for parents. For parents of autistic children, offering volunteering opportunities with local autism organizations can enhance their informal understanding of available supports and services.
- Using pre-migration orientations can help offset the initial information overload upon arrival to a host country. Orientations should also include information on navigating paperwork, current understandings of autism, and contact information for local autism agencies.
- A recent study showed that providing parents with psychoeducational resources, behavioural strategies, and social support in a crisis-sensitive way enhanced positive outcomes.



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