

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

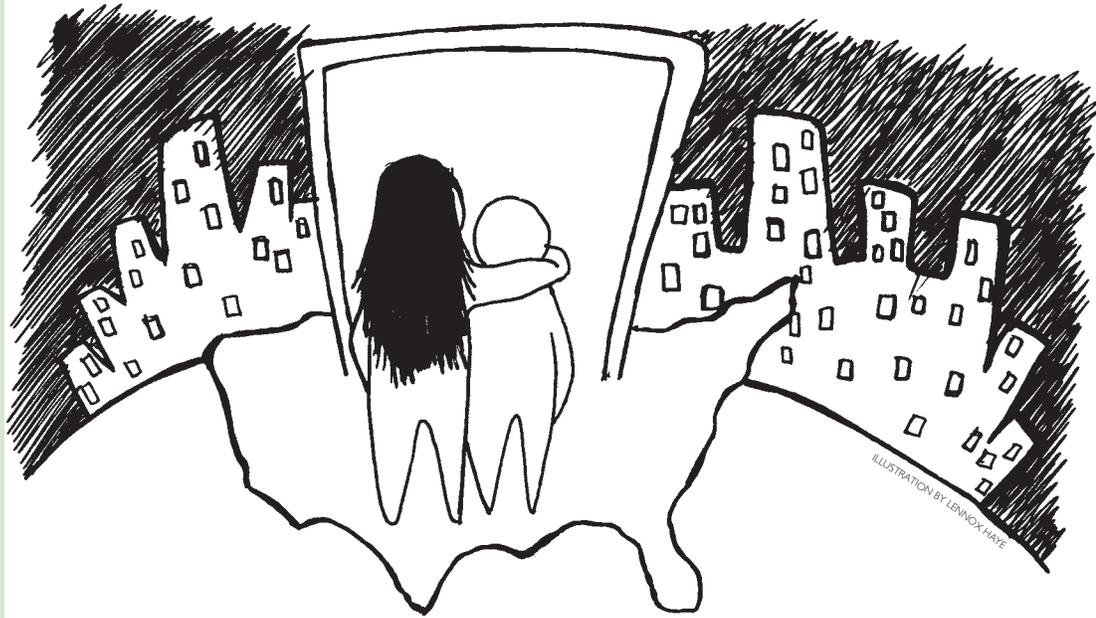
ISSUE NUMBER 9, SPRING 2008

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Raising Children in a New Country

Immigrant parents who are investigated by the child welfare system often need extra help understanding their rights and getting proper services. They may not speak English, understand American laws or customs, or fear accessing services to keep their children safe at home.

In this issue, immigrant parents write about protecting and strengthening their families while struggling to understand an unfamiliar system and culture.



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True Stories by Teens

Far From Home

I needed help that my family couldn't give me.

BY EVELYN SALAZAR

Translated from Spanish.

Two years after my son was born, I decided I couldn't continue my relationship with his father and we separated. I was sad and confused, but Rene and I were arguing all the time and I knew ending it would be the best for my son and me. I said to myself, "Don't confuse a fear of loneliness with love."

It was one of the most difficult moments in my life, especially because I was far from home with few friends to lean on. I'd come to New York from Mexico with only my cousin when I was barely 16 years old. My mother asked me to come here so I could help our family economically.

When I first arrived, I felt sad but excited to be in another country earning money for my family. I found a job and made a group of friends

that I had fun going out with. Then I met Rene and we had our son, Dylan. Soon I became distant from my friends without realizing it, and my son and his father became my world.

More Alone Than Ever

After Rene and I split up, it was difficult to wake up knowing that I was alone in New York without my mother, siblings or friends, without my father who died when I was young, and without Rene by my side. I came here full of dreams, feeling strong. Only six years later, I found myself without the friends I'd made or the family I'd created, sad and disillusioned. I felt unsure of how I could move forward without anyone to confide in or to support me, and with my beautiful baby depending on me to provide for him.

I thought about returning to Mexico. But I told myself, "Evelyn, what are you going to do there? It will only be

harder to help your family economically if you go back home."

I also told myself that I would not flee my problems. I would face the challenges in front of me. I wanted to teach Dylan that no matter what happened his mother was going to fight to get ahead.

'If My Mama Was Here...'

Dylan and I moved to the only apartment I could afford—we share it with three strangers. I brought Dylan to a babysitter every morning and I worked at a coffee shop from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. so I could spend afternoons with him.

At first, simple things felt so hard without a partner. If I had to go to the corner store because Dylan wanted his glass of milk before going to sleep, I'd have to take him with me, even in the winter when we had to wrap ourselves up in heavy clothing. I

worried about Dylan while I bathed. Always I returned to the same thing: "If my Mami was here maybe she could stay with him and I would have time and freedom."

I could hardly find time for myself and I couldn't distract myself from my worries like I could when I was single. At times, I had invitations to go dancing, to eat out, or simply do something quiet. It was frustrating to turn down the things I craved.

Feeling Stuck

Sometimes I felt angry at Dylan, at myself, and at my family in Mexico. As a single mother and an illegal immigrant, I was struggling with the fear that I couldn't follow my dream of going to college and finding a better job.

Then I could only say, "Oh my God, forgive me, Dylan, please, my baby, I feel bad for thinking that, because now that I am not a free woman, things can't go as easily for me."

I'd feel a terrible sadness for thinking that my child was impeding my progress, because in truth, I felt fortunate to have a son, especially one as enchanting and marvelous as Dylan.

I felt as if I had one side of a coin and I wanted both and was going around and around all the time. I loved when I could stop a moment and look at my baby. At times I would say, "Dylan," and with his little boy voice he'd answer, "What, Mama?" I'd look at his eyes and wonder if there was sadness in his heart. My eyes would feel weak and before a tear could run from them, I'd say, "You know what, my love? You're the love of my life, my great treasure."

'You Can Do It'

To find a better job, I went to a center in my neighborhood where they help people find work. But because I don't have papers, they couldn't help me. They told me about other free services that I could get despite my immigration status, such as English classes, help filing taxes, or family counseling.

I thought a counselor could help me because I didn't have many friends

and I wanted someone who could listen objectively to my story. I didn't speak with my family about my sadness and loneliness. Every time I spoke to them they were so focused on unburdening themselves of their own problems or looking to me to help them, and I preferred to keep my sad feelings to myself.

So I began going with Dylan to counseling at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. My counselor, Liza, took the time to listen to me and help me with my decisions and thoughts. She also helped me find a good daycare for Dylan and he thrived there.

Counseling gave me time to get to know myself better. I had so many

Sometimes I felt angry at my son, myself, and my family in Mexico. As a single mother and an illegal immigrant, I was struggling with the fear that I couldn't follow my dreams.

things on my mind, and so much to do, that I hadn't taken time to relax and make myself think more calmly about my feelings and priorities. Liza encouraged me, saying, "You'll be OK, keep going. You can do it, you are doing it and you'll achieve your goals." For me these words were incredibly important and validating.

Connecting Little by Little

Little by little, I also started to make a social life. You meet so many people, but only with a few are you going to find a real closeness. I said to myself, "If the people who invite me out take off because I have a son, I'm better off even though it hurts. I don't need to be with someone who doesn't understand me or make me feel good."

I found that while some turned their backs, others opened their doors for me and my son.

I don't have too many friends now, but the ones I have are good friends. They are people in whom I can confide and who also confide in me.

Over time, my relationship with Rene has changed, too. We appreciate

each other now as friends. I am very proud of him as a father.

It took us a long time to get to this point. At times I felt like my efforts were useless, but I kept going and told myself, "Even if he doesn't want something good, I do, and I will keep trying." Now he takes Dylan twice a week, and he knows me and cares about me as a person. He tells me, "Evelyn, you're a good, smart, strong girl. If anyone deserves for good things to happen to her, it's you."

Many Steps Forward

Last winter, I took a big step toward reaching my dreams. I enrolled in college, and I've been taking three or four classes a semester since then.

I am very happy that I am studying because this is something I always dreamed of, but it's also a difficult task to study, work, and be a mother, friend, and daughter at the same time without allowing myself to fall at the

first obstacle.

We have so many more expenses now that I'm paying for school and books. I am ineligible for financial aid because of my immigration status, so I have to pay the full bill. But I am able to afford school because our rent is low. The main drawback is that I can't send much money to my mother. I try to send her money for special occasions or in an emergency.

I go to school three times a week, usually bringing Dylan to the daycare there. It would be better if he didn't have to spend so much time in school and daycare, but I don't have many options, so I follow the phrase, "Quality is better than quantity." The days I am with him I am by his side the whole time.

Our Own World

Now when it's just Dylan and I, it's like we're in our own world. He likes to ask me strange and serious questions, like, "What if the moon was in a different space? And why is it always following us?" or, "What does the word 'criminal' mean? Because I heard it in the movie Spideyman." These questions throw me for a loop, but I search for words that, at his age, he can understand.

In nice weather we go to the park,

Rise

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ISSUE #9

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ride bikes, skate, or go to the playground. At home, we play with toys, draw, watch TV, read, sing and sometimes exercise together—we do Pilates. Some days I have too much homework and can't give him my time all afternoon, so I tell him, "Ok, Dylan, we'll play but only for a short time because then Mami has to do something else." While I do my home-

every problem right this minute. I try not to stress myself out thinking about what I want and can't have. I am trying to take things more calmly and to go forward little by little.

Some days I feel angry at the injustices I face. If I could become a legal citizen, I know I would be able to do so many things. I feel powerless know-

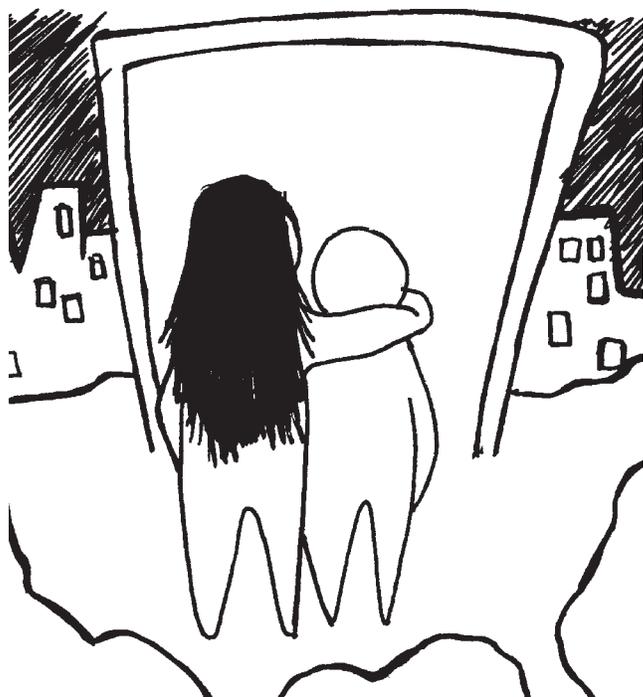


ILLUSTRATION BY LENNOX HAYS

work, he does his, or he draws, and afterward we eat together and go to sleep.

I try to bring my son happiness every day. When I'm reading him a story, I try to perform each of the characters with enthusiasm. Many times I'm very tired, and at first it wasn't easy for me to make time, but both he and I are adjusting.

Dylan and I are calmer now and our relationship is more stable. We chat more together and play more pleasantly, and at the same time, I don't feel I'm neglecting myself as I used to.

A Chance to Grow

I have so much more I want to achieve. I would like to move to a better apartment and find a better job. But I can't solve

ing that I can't do anything to change my immigration status. It's out of my hands. I only hope with great faith that one day my immigration status won't stand in my way.

When I am thinking positively, I look back on this painful time and say, "Maybe I needed some solitude to focus on my son and myself." I don't feel as strongly that becoming a single parent is holding me back. These years have helped me grow as a woman and a mother.

Los cuentos en esta revista de Rise fueron escrito originalmente en Español. Para leer los cuentos completos en Español, visita a nuestro sitio del internet: www.risemagazine.org/pages/en-espanol.html

Climate Change

Immigration's impact on child welfare.

There's been a dramatic growth in the number of different immigrant communities in the United States over the past 20 years. Yali Lincroft, a member of the Migration and Child Welfare National Network and the immigration consultant for the Annie E Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative, explains how that has made it challenging for child welfare agencies to work with immigrant families.

Immigration is a big issue facing the child welfare system because immigrants arriving in this country speak so many different languages, come from many different cultures, and are moving to areas of the United States that have less experience with immigrant communities. It used to be that most immigrants settled in big cities like New York and Los Angeles. Now, like other Americans, immigrants are moving to new parts of the country to find jobs and cheaper housing. States like Georgia and North Carolina are seeing big increases in immigrants in their caseloads, which is new for those child welfare workers and agencies.

Fears and Barriers

Immigrant families enter the child welfare system for the same reason as other families—substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and poverty. But it can be more difficult for them to find help. Many don't have the family and community support they might have had in their home country. They may not understand our laws and customs around discipline, school attendance, or childcare. They also may fear asking for government assistance. Some have left war-torn countries where there is great fear of government officials, and others may fear deportation.

When families are investigated, they face difficulties getting interpreters or help understanding the child welfare system. Even though it's illegal, it's very common to have children interpret for their parents. That's a very dangerous practice, because it puts kids in the position of having to learn information about their parents that they shouldn't have to worry about and interpret terms they don't understand. It's also important that parents facing an investigation understand exactly what's going on.

It's also more difficult for parents to get services when they are not citizens, and if they can't get services, it's very hard for them to reunite with their children or keep them out of care during times of family stress. Finally, when children do go into care, it's often difficult to place them with relatives or foster families that are sensitive to their culture. Many families don't have relatives in this country. Now some child welfare agencies are exploring placing children with their relatives in Mexico and other countries, for example, but that is very complicated.

Sharing Expertise

For policymakers, one challenge is that we don't have good information to help us understand the experiences of immigrants in the child welfare system, because systems don't keep track of whether parents are immigrants. From a small study in Texas, we have learned that first generation immigrant children there end up in foster care at a lower rate than other children. When they do go into foster care, however, they tend to go in at an older age, and are mostly placed in group homes or institutional care, not with relatives or in foster homes that are generally better for children.

To help systems improve their work with immigrants nationwide, we're trying to help agencies with experience, like those in New York and California, share what they've learned about working with immigrant families. We also encourage child welfare agencies to partner with community organizations that have experience working with immigrants. When staff speak the same language, and come from the same culture, they're going to understand better how to help parents negotiate the system.

Justice for All

Despite my fear, I took my landlord to court.

BY ELIZABETH MENDOZA

Translated from Spanish.

Many immigrant families live in dangerous conditions because we don't know that we have rights as tenants. In my case, I confronted my landlord's abuse.

The apartment was completely renovated when my family moved in, but in six years, humidity led to mold and mildew, the paint was peeling, and we'd had cockroaches, rats and heating problems. The landlord only fixed the one room that was most damaged, and afterward she said, "It's perfect, and there's nothing more I need to fix." She responded to our requests with insults and threats.



A few months before my son Angel was born, I asked her to make repairs. Two weeks before I gave birth I demanded it, telling her, "If you don't come this weekend to make the repairs, I'm not going to pay the rent."

Unsafe for a Baby

They fixed the floors and painted, but the repairs were inadequate. When Angel arrived, everything was a wreck. All of our clothes, beds and furniture were in the living room and kitchen, completely covered in plastic to protect from the dust. All of the things for my baby were in boxes. I was furious, because my home was not secure for a baby.

I knew that I could call the New York City hotline, 311, and complain, so I did. They connected me to the Fifth Avenue Committee, a local advocacy organization, which told me I could take my landlord to court even though I am undocumented. They visited my home, tak-

ing photographs and explaining my rights. I felt afraid that my landlord would kick me out, but all the discomfort that we'd suffered through gave me strength.

City inspectors from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) visited my apartment, finding many more legal violations, including lead paint and high carbon monoxide levels. We learned the saddest injustice of the whole situation: my niece had gotten lead poisoning, which affects children's health and development. I also learned that mold, mildew and dust can cause respiratory problems like asthma and allergies.

After the inspector wrote his report,

Advocating for an Education

I found a better school for my daughter.

BY MARIBEL MARTINEZ

Translated from Spanish.

When my daughter Liliana was in kindergarten, we changed apartments, and I had to move my daughter to a new school. The school she had left was very pleasant, clean and well ordered. Although there were almost no Latinos there, everyone was friendly and looked for translations of the information we needed. They even had parent workshops and classes for parents to learn English, which I joined.

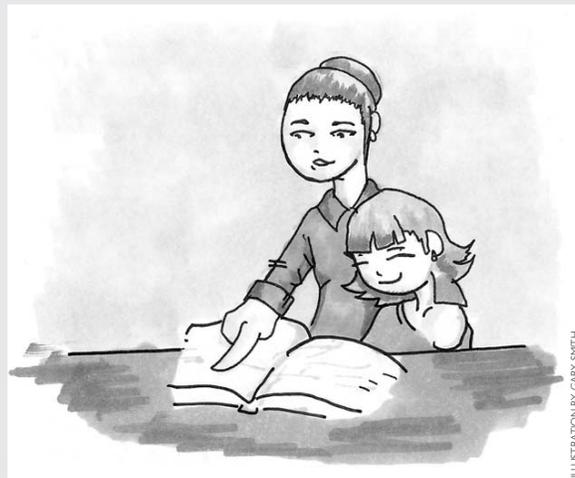
My daughter's new school was very different. It was disorganized and dirty, and when we went to the office, they didn't attend to my concerns. They told me, "Wait," or, "Come a little later." Liliana was bored because everything they were teaching she had already learned.

I began asking how I could move my daughter to a new school, but they told me that I couldn't enroll her anywhere else because school attendance is based on your neighborhood. At two other schools they told me exactly the same thing. I thought, "How could it be that I can't move my daughter when she is so bored that she doesn't care about going to school anymore?"

Stuck in a Bad School

I visited another school feeling very serious and said, in Spanish, "Good morning, I need information so I can register my daughter."

"Let's see if we have room," the secretary said.



called a taxi and I went straight there. When I arrived, I told them, "I need to switch my daughter's school."

"Why do you want a transfer?" they asked

"I don't think her school is a good environment for my daughter. In almost four months, the girl hasn't learned anything. The school is dirty and disorganized!"

I told her my story and she said the school had room, so she suggested I go to the district office for a transfer. I took the address that she gave me, and without thinking any further, I

"Ok, let's call about a transfer."

"I'd like you to move her to PS 24," I told her. "There's room. I already spoke with the secretary there."

Safe at Home

Finding family support services without fear.

I stopped paying rent for four months. She took me to housing court, and I took her to court for failing to make repairs. In court I felt secure because HPD had made a direct request that the owner take care of the violations, and also because someone from the Fifth Avenue Committee accompanied me. The court also had an interpreter.

Achieving My Goal

The judge gave the owner a week to make all of the repairs. Finally, the repairs were made.

With my landlord, things are different now. Before she'd

come into our apartment to check everything over, take pictures and ask for the rent in cash. Now I know that it's my right to refuse to allow her to enter. She doesn't see the apartment except when I believe it's necessary, and I send the rent by certified mail.

The entire building is now part of a city program because the inspectors found many violations, including lead paint, in other apartments. Other families in our building have benefited from my fight for justice. Now we all know that, even if you don't have the papers to live here legally, you can get justice.

"Then it's Ok," she told me, adding, "I'm going to give you some papers about the rights of parents of public school students. It's good that you worry about your daughter. Very few mothers come here, especially that don't speak English."

I Like it All!

When I arrived home, I told my daughter that I had very good news.

"What, Mami? What, Mami?" she asked.

"We're going to send you to a new school that looks good. You just have to finish kindergarten, my love."

When the new school year started, we were happy to meet a nice teacher and see a big room with computers and Liliana's name on the door, on her table and her chair.

When I picked her up at the classroom door, I said, "How was it, Lili?"

"I like this school, and my teacher, too. And my room! I like it all," Lili said. She was so pleased! And so was I.

Now Lili is in the 7th grade, and each time that there's been a problem with the school, I simply call that day and see how I can work with the school to fix it.

Ilze Eamer, assistant professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work and director of its Immigrants and Child Welfare Project, explains how immigrants can get the help their families need:

Today, immigrants arrive in this country at a point when the climate is increasingly hostile to them. They're described as "those people who come up here and all they want is welfare," or they're perceived as taking jobs away from Americans.

Fear of deportation prevents people from seeking out services. So does confusion. Each state and county passes its own laws about immigrants. In New York City, public employees cannot turn someone in solely because of their immigration status, so it's safe to access public services. But it's not so safe in upstate New York, where there are no laws to protect undocumented immigrants if they seek out help for their families. Georgia has laws that require public employees to turn in anyone who they know is undocumented. Immigrants don't know what's going on, so they assume the worst.

Most Kids Are Citizens

This situation is not safe for children. There was a case in Texas recently where parents were afraid to take their newborn child to the emergency room, and the child died. That's a tragedy.

It's also why it's so important for immigrant parents to find someone who really knows the laws where they live. Find someone who can explain them to you, because there is a lot of misinformation out there. Some families find help through their pastor, or by talking to the parent coordinator at their school about where to go.

For the most part, parents can safely

access more services than they might think. Eighty percent of children of undocumented immigrants are U.S. born, which means they're citizens. A caseworker would be able to access services for the children, like food stamps and Medicaid, or even public housing, because the child is eligible.

Safer Than You Think

If we look at the data on children of immigrants, they are at significantly greater risk of being in poverty, of being hungry, of having health care issues, and of not completing their education. But study after study has shown that immigrants typically use fewer social services than they have a right to get. Sometimes legal immigrants do not access services because they are afraid of being perceived negatively, or they fear that it could affect their long-term chances of staying in this country. They also come



ILLUSTRATION BY TANIKA ONO-KINGHT

from places where social services are not readily available, and they often really don't know how our systems work.

Still, both documented and undocumented parents do regularly access services for their children. When they don't, it's usually because they're afraid of making themselves public. In this climate, nothing can be guaranteed, but as far as I know, there have not been any prosecutions of undocumented parents because they accessed services for their U.S.-born children.

'In My Country...'

Parents struggle to raise children in a new culture.

When immigrant parents come to the United States, they have a lot to adjust to. They have lost the supports they once relied on. Their children are exposed to new values. They have to learn to parent under a whole new set of circumstances.

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) encourages collaboration between social service organizations to help refugee families get the support they need. Parents involved with BRYCS share their experiences parenting in a new country:

Mary, a mother from Sudan:

My family and I came to the U.S. in July of 2006. My husband and I have a 10-year-old son, a 3-year-old daughter, and a 3-month-old girl.

My son was born at home in Sudan. Female relatives—like my aunts, grandmother, and sister-in-law—were present during my son's birth, along with a female doctor. In Nuer culture, female relatives care for the new mother for 40 days after childbirth. The new mother is given very hot baths and she does not go out of the house. Other women take care of the household tasks, like shopping and cooking.

Our third child was born here in the U.S. With this child, it is like having a baby for the first time, because with my first two children I had other women around to help me at home. My husband says I am now an American wife because I am doing it all myself this time.

In Sudan, it is OK for husbands to beat their wives, but it is not OK here. Some of the men understand this, but it may be harder to change for those who do not have education. We have a Sudanese friend who lives in Canada, but his wife is still in Sudan. The husband does not

want to bring his wife to Canada, because he says that here the wife is over the husband.

I remember being told, during our three-day cultural orientation before coming to the U.S., that you cannot beat your children in the U.S., and that children over age 18 are free to do what they want. A relative who lives in the U.S. has a teenage daughter who did not want to listen to her parents, so she went to the police



In Sudan I had other women around to help me at home. I am now an American wife because I am doing it all myself this time.

and told them that she was not happy and that her mother was beating her. The girl finally admitted that she had called the police because her mother was not allowing her to do what she wanted.

I like that there is no beating here like in Sudan. In Sudan, even if you're 18, your father has the right to beat you—but I don't want my children to call the police on me, like this child did. So, here in America, what do you do?

Aline, a mother and social worker from Burundi:

In Burundian culture, especially in rural areas, an 8-year-old girl starts being trained to carry a baby on her back so her mother can run an errand. The mother might go to the market for two hours or something, but she would not be gone all day.

Many refugee families who come to the U.S. still believe that an 8-year-old can watch a younger child, but there

Klee Thoo, a father from Burma who is part of the Karen ethnic group:

We do not show affection in the same way as here. When you come home and see your children, you wouldn't hug them.

In Burma, a typical greeting would be "Good morning, Grandma," not, "How are you?" Here, when someone asks, "How are you?" it is hard to answer and hard to look them in the eyes.

Some parenting differences between Burma and the U.S. are that in Burma, many parents beat their children with a stick if the child does not listen. This can cause the children to become afraid of older people. So here, it is a wonderful thing for me because I have to use my good ideas to teach my children. We don't use the stick anymore for discipline.

John, a father from Liberia:

The Bible says, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." Shortly after we arrived, I asked my young son to untie my shoes. His four-year-old friend, who was with him, responded that my son did not have to do that for me. My older children, who were over age 15 when they came here, already have the African culture in them. They are more submissive. When I talk, they respond.

The freedoms are too large for children here. In Liberia, when parents are speaking, the children shut up. Here, children have the first priority. Children demand from their parents, they don't ask.

Jarso, a father from Ethiopia who is part of the Oromo ethnic group:

In the U.S. it seems like my wife and I are running all the time to work. We are busy all the time. We have

Culture Clash

How workers can give sensitive support.

two kids who need support, and we don't have time to accommodate more children. My parents ask why we don't have more children, and there are expectations from family to have more children, but here we don't have the extended family to support us.

In Africa, everyone helps each other—both relatives and neighbors—but here people don't even know the neighbors next door. We have tried to get to know our neighbors, and sometimes we say hello, but everybody is running; we don't have time.

Caridad and Arturo, a mother and father from Cuba and Chile:

Arturo: Here it seems like the top priority is paying the bills, but that takes a toll on family life. It seems like a big problem here that both parents work full time and it leaves little time for family life.

Caridad: If you work 12 hours to pay the bills, but your quality of life is not as good, then your family life suffers and you can't control your children. When you come here, your priorities change. If my husband works or has two jobs, and I work until 5:00 or 6:00 at night, then I have less time to spend with my daughter, I can only check homework, not help her with it, and it is easier to put food into the microwave than to cook. For us, these changes are hard, but for children it is harder. We have tried to make the transition less abrupt for our daughter.

These excerpts from the publication BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Klee Thoo, A Burmese Karen Father; Aline, a Burundian social worker; Mary, a Sudanese mother; John and Ellen, a Liberian family; Jarso, an Oromo Ethiopian father; and Caridad and Arturo, a Cuban-Chilean family are printed with the permission of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). USCCB is the copyright owner of BRYCS Parenting Conversations and no use may be made of all, or part of BRYCS Parenting Conversations without written permission of USCCB.

Vanessa Leung, deputy director of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, talks about the cultural conflicts immigrants often experience when they enter the child welfare system:

While immigrant families face similar challenges to other families, there's also an extra layer of challenges that come from immigrating. It's important for workers to take time to fully understand that this family has faced a lot of changes.

Sometimes parents don't speak English and they're afraid their children are going to see them as less capable. Also, kids usually don't want to be different from their peers, and they can begin to reject their parents just because their parents are different.

For instance, in some Asian communities, there are different ways of showing affection that may not be so much about hugs and kisses. For children, this often becomes difficult, because what they see on TV, or in other families, is very different from their own family. For their part, parents may want their children to retain their home culture and are afraid of the bad influences within American culture.

Respecting the Family

It's especially important for a worker to be sensitive to these dynamics and not make them worse. Of course, when the ways that parents discipline their children are in conflict with the child welfare laws, a worker needs to help them find other ways to discipline their children. But often parents feel that moving to a new country has undermined their authority as parents, and a worker should be careful not to undermine that authority even further. A worker should understand the perspective of the parents and of the children, so she can help them find that balance.

It's also important for the worker to really understand who makes certain decisions in the family and how responsibilities are divided. For instance, when important decisions are made, other people outside the nuclear family may need to be consulted, whether it's grandparents or other senior members of the family. It's important for workers not to assume that mom and dad are the only important adults in the family.

Educating the Worker

Often immigrant parents need an advocate from their own community to help them navigate the child



ILLUSTRATION BY KATIE MARTIN

It's important for workers to fully understand that immigrant families already have faced a lot of changes.

welfare system. When this is the case, it is important for parents to keep searching until they find an organization that they trust and that is knowledgeable about the child welfare system. Does the organization have people who are willing and able to be an advocate for them within the child welfare system and who can come with them to meetings and to court?

Another good idea, when parents are looking for family support services, is for them to talk to people in their own community to see whether other parents have found a particular agency to be supportive of immigrant families. If parents feel their worker does not understand them or is insensitive to certain aspects of their culture, they may have to work to educate that worker about their culture and values.

They should also feel that they can speak to that worker's supervisor to see if they can work out the conflict or be transferred to another worker. Unfortunately, the options are often limited for parents who do not speak English, which is why we are working to find ways to improve child welfare services to immigrants.

How to Handle an Investigation

Ken Borelli, a consultant on immigration and child welfare issues, explains how to respond if you are investigated by child protective services:

Q: What should I do if child protective services investigates my family?

A: The first thing to do is to remember that most investigations prove to be unfounded. Even most founded cases do not lead to a child's placement in foster care. Most families are referred to support services in their community. So the best thing to do is to try to share appropriate information about your children: about discipline, school attendance, and health concerns, as well as general parenting practices.

That does not mean that you have to agree to any sort of allegation. If you think your child was hurt at school not at home, don't agree that your child got hurt because you hit

him. Some people think if they agree to the allegation, the situation will all go away, but that's not the case. Stick to what you consider the truth.

If there is a problem at home, don't just sweep it under rug to get the investigator away. If your child continues to go to school with bruises, or to not go to school, his teacher may continue to make reports to child protective services. That increases your chances of coming to the attention of the police or immigration.

If your family is struggling, it may help your family to take advantage of services that a child welfare worker can connect you to, such as parenting classes or counseling, medical care, or after-school programs. The sooner you can stabilize your family, the sooner you can get child protective services out of your life.

Q: Do I have a legal right to an interpreter?



ILLUSTRATION BY TERENCE TAYLOR

A: In some places, the laws are clear that you have a right to an interpreter. In other places, no such laws exist.

No matter where you live, if you don't speak English or don't understand the worker, request an interpretation service. Be as polite as possible but be as firm as possible that you need an interpreter. If an interpreter is still not provided, you

may even want to put your request in writing.

Q: Do I need to tell an investigator about my immigration status?

A: No. The role of child welfare is to check child safety. Generally, it's not appropriate for a child protective investigator to ask about your status, and it is not mandatory that you respond to the question. But there are times when you may need to tell your caseworker if you are undocumented. For instance, if you are required to apply for certain services that you are not eligible for because of your status, you should tell your caseworker. Otherwise, she may label you as non-compliant, and this may make matters worse in your case.

Q: Can a child welfare investigation lead to deportation?

A: To date, child welfare systems and

New Culture, New Rules

What immigrant parents need to know about the system.

Families new to the United States may be surprised to learn that some of the ways children are typically treated in their home country may be considered abuse or neglect here.

Lydia Ithier, a social worker at New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS), and Peggy Ellis, associate commissioner for community based services at ACS, explain the laws and how to find family support services.

Q: What might put immigrant families at risk of being investigated?

A: One problem for many immigrants is that parents don't understand our abuse and neglect laws. Some of the ways that they raise children may be in conflict with our laws. When I speak to immigrant parents,

I tell them, "In this country, if you hit your child and cause injuries, or you take a stick or belt and hit your child, that will be considered abuse. If your child goes to school with marks, or says, 'Mommy or Daddy hit me with a broom,' the school is going to report you as an abusive parent. Someone from the city will come to your house to investigate whether your child is safe."

I also talk with parents about leaving children home alone, because our standards are different than in many other countries. Many immigrant parents think that a 9- or 10-year-old child can assume the responsibility of taking care of younger kids, but here, it's considered neglect if you leave children home alone.

Sometimes parents keep teens home

from school to take care of siblings. Or, when the family arrives in the U.S., they're struggling financially and they want their 13- or 14-year-old child to work. That's accepted in other countries, but if your child is under 16 and not attending school, you can be charged with educational neglect.

Q: How does a child protective investigation work?

A: A child protective worker should knock on the family's door and explain that they're doing an investigation because an allegation of abuse or neglect was called in to the state hotline, and we need to determine if it's true or not. They should have their IDs with them.

From there, we do a full assessment

of how the family is functioning. Depending on what we learn, we'll either offer services to help the family, or if the children are in danger, remove the children from the home.

If a child needs to be removed, we try to find a family member or someone connected to the family to care for the child. You do not have to be a legal resident to become a foster parent. If there's no family or close family friends at all, we'll place the child in a foster home. Then, we'll work with the parents to reunite with their child.

Q: What can parents do if they need help?

A: In New York City, we offer supports to families called "preventive services" that are free of charge,

Fighting for My Daughter

I've had to learn how to advocate for myself.

BY WALDINA TERREROS

Translated from Spanish.

Six years ago I came to this country from Honduras, leaving behind my two older children, now a teenager and college student, who live with my mother.

After struggling economically when I arrived, I found a night job as a waitress and I began working seven nights a week, earning enough to send a monthly check home to my family.

Our Little Girl

At this job I met a responsible working man. We became a couple, but when I got pregnant, he begged me to have an abortion. I thought about it but decided to have my baby despite the circumstances.

My daughter Rocio was born healthy and I gave her my love and care. Her father was happy to have a girl, because he had three sons.

For four years, our relationship was good, but we never lived together. I learned that he was living a double life. He had a wife and kids at home.

It wasn't easy to have the responsibility of caring for my daughter. I worked nights and left Rocio with a babysitter. I didn't have time to study English as I'd hoped. But he paid the rent so I was able to support my daughter and my family in Honduras.

A Sharp Turn

Then he left his wife and started dating a younger woman and his attitude toward me changed overnight. I don't know why. He accused me of having a relationship with another man, which wasn't true. He began to be abusive toward me, physically and emotionally. He stalked me. He also stopped paying the rent and we lost our apartment.

I became sad and worried. I looked for help from community organizations, and Safe Horizon, which helps domestic violence survivors, helped me protect us from her father.

On Feb. 28, 2007, after he had been harassing me for six months, I went to court and asked for an order of protection. The next day I filed for child support and



ILLUSTRATION BY ALICE HUANG

full custody of my daughter. Four days later, he petitioned for custody and called the child welfare system (ACS) to accuse me of child abuse and negligence. They investigated me and closed the case for lack of credible evidence.

For nine months I had custody of Rocio and he had visits, but then he called ACS on me two more times.

Losing Rocio

At first our contact with ACS benefited my daughter and me. They gave us services

that we needed: daycare and a personal tutor, speech therapy and therapy for my daughter, who has delays in her speech and cognitive abilities.

But nine months later, in December 2007, my ex brought our daughter to the hospital about bruises on her back and the hospital called ACS. That case was closed, but in January he called in a report again. Then brought the hospital report to a judge that had not previously supervised our case. That judge gave him temporary custody because ACS was still in the process of investigating that case (it was ultimately closed) and gave me visits supervised by his sisters.

His sisters gave excuses about why I couldn't see or talk to my daughter, even though we had always been together and missed each other. After that court date, it was 10 days until I was able to see my daughter, and that was just for two hours at a Target.

Fighting Back

It has been difficult to fight back since I don't speak English, don't have any family here to support me, and didn't understand the system at first. But I learned about my rights at the Child Welfare Organizing Project and by working with my lawyer.

We have a court date next week. The daycare director and the ACS social worker have said they are going to testify in my favor, so that I might get custody and her father will visit. But my lawyer warned me that the allegations against me, even though they were unfounded, don't look good.

I hope this will be the end of this painful situation and my beautiful daughter will come home to me.

the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) have not worked together. Where it gets a little murky is when child welfare partners with the police. In certain situations, like when a child is going to be removed from home, police sometimes come to the home as well. And in some cases, like during an investigation of sexual abuse, a family court case can become a criminal case. Unfortunately, there is no single policy for the police across the country. In one location the police could call immigration and it could hurt you. In another area, you could get the services you need to support your family and nothing happens regarding immigration.

In the vast majority of cases, child protective services tries to help families get the support they need without ever hurting their chances of remaining in this country or becoming a citizen.

available in all neighborhoods, and confidential.

Often a preventive worker can help parents get concrete services, like welfare, housing, or other public benefits, parenting classes and help at home. For instance, if you are working three jobs and you are concerned about what to do with your kids after school, your preventive worker can help you connect to child care or after school programs.

Counselors can also support parents and their children as they adjust to living here. Many times immigrant families struggle because, as children grow up, they want to become American, and their parents have different expectations based on their culture. Parents also may have lost some of their traditional methods of discipline and they may need to learn new parenting techniques. Parents can talk with their worker about how to have that authority as a parent, such as by setting a curfew with teens, or enforcing time outs with younger children.

No More 'Mother's Helper'

I want my daughter to have the childhood I couldn't enjoy.

BY GUADALUPE COHETERO

Translated from Spanish.

All my life I watched my mother try to take care of her children emotionally and economically. It was not easy. My mother had 10 children (eight survived), and she and my father worked hard but were very poor.

I admired my mother because she was strong, but I was also very angry at her. I had to live apart from my parents most of my life and become a second mother to my siblings when I was still a child.

Hours Apart

When I was little, I lived with my parents in Mexico City. Then, when I was 4 or 5 years old, they brought my siblings and me to live with my grandparents because they were always working.

Until I was 14, my mother or father would come to see us every two weeks. I missed them at first, and I would eagerly await their arrival. But they weren't very loving toward me because each visit they only stayed one night.

It makes me sad that my mother had to leave us for many years so that she could work, although I understand why she had to move away from home to survive economically. I moved to the United States, far from my family, for the same reason.

My mother has told me that she wanted her children to have a better life than she had. Living with my grandparents, I saw what her life as a child in the country had been like. At 6 years old, I had to take on many responsibilities in the household, like bringing water to the house, taking care of the animals and helping my grandmother make tortillas. My grandfather was very strict.

A Painful Reconnection

At 12 years old, I went with my 6-year-old brother to live in a larger town with electricity and stores so that I could go to secondary school. I was in charge of my brother—cooking for him, bathing him, making him do his homework and sending him to school.



I am glad I don't face the same economic choices my mother had in Mexico. I can give a different childhood to my daughter.

I was afraid of living alone. Finally, after two years, my mother came to stay for good, along with my five younger siblings.

I hoped that, in time, I would be able to ask her my questions about life and she would give me advice. In reality, it was very difficult to live with her.

My mother worked cleaning houses or cooking for people every day. She arrived home tired. She would say that her feet and her back hurt.

She put me in charge of taking care of all my siblings. My mother did not have the personality to take care of children. Everything made her angry.



Alone in New York

I promised myself that I would have only one child, and that as a mother I would have patience and understanding.

At 18, I moved to New York City to work and study. Four years later, I married and soon we had our daughter, Brenda. In the first few months, I felt so helpless and unsure of how to feed my newborn and bathe her. My husband and I were all alone in New York. I felt I needed my mother more than ever, but the only phone in her village was at a store where families could wait to receive a call. It was very difficult to communicate that way.

My husband also grew up separated from his parents and he thought I should stay home with Brenda. But like my mother, I felt it was important that I work. I wanted to help support my parents and my younger siblings in Mexico.

So when Brenda was 3 months old, I returned to working in a factory folding and packing shower curtains. After three years, though, the woman who cared for Brenda couldn't babysit anymore, and we moved houses. I thought it was too many changes for her, so I left my job to stay home.

I enjoyed being home with my daughter, even though she was sometimes naughty, like any child, and I was not always as patient as I'd hoped.

Feeling Like My Mother

When Brenda was 8 years old, we decided to have a son as well. Diego arrived, and two years later, Francisco was born. He was a surprise. When I found out I was pregnant again, my fear was, "What am I going to tell my mother?" I felt embarrassed and

ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

Finding Hope in a Hard Place

BY ANONYMOUS

unprepared. I kept thinking, "What am I going to do for my children?"

Just as I feared, after Francisco was born, my daughter began to get angry at me because I didn't attend to her like before. If I was on the bed holding Francisco, Diego would climb on top of me. That would make Brenda angry, and she would go to her bed.

I would say to her, "How are you? What are you doing?" and invite her to play, but because she was upset she'd say, "I don't want to play." It made me sad to feel that I might be hurting my daughter as my mother hurt me.

At times I feel like my mother. Now that I have three, it's a little difficult to be patient. When my daughter makes me angry, especially, I'm shocked to find that I feel like I could hit her. But I don't. I tell myself, "I have to control myself. Hitting doesn't fix anything. By talking, I can make her understand me. If I hurt her, I will leave her feeling so small."

A Sister, Not a Mother

My worst fear didn't come true: I don't make Brenda take care of her brothers. What I do is tell her that she's responsible for herself. She has to do her homework, bathe, brush her teeth, and clean up her things.

I feel lucky that I can stay home with my children. I enjoy their smiles and their tantrums. I am learning patience. My mother was not able to enjoy and share her children's childhood.

My mother and I have a better communication now. She has a phone in her house, and I talk with her about how she is. I feel sympathetic to my mother. I know that, to her, it must have seemed like the right thing to make me mother my siblings. She did not know much about family planning, and her economic choices were limited.

But I am glad I don't face the same economic choices my mother had in Mexico, and that I can give a different childhood to my daughter. Brenda plays with her brothers, but she's not responsible for them.

Los cuentos en esta revista de Rise fueron escrito originalmente en Español. Para leer los cuentos completos en Español, visita a nuestro sitio del internet: www.risemagazine.org/pages/en-espanol.html

Growing up, I lived in Ghana with my grandmother. She treated me well, and I would see my mother occasionally when I was on vacation.

Then, when I was 12, I came to this country with my mother, little sister and older brother. I thought it was going to be a time for my mother and me to get to know each other.

But from the time I got here, I've had the responsibilities of an adult. The first year, my mother would not let me go to school. I stayed home babysitting my 4-year-old sister. I became very angry and upset, because without school I could not reach up to my goals.

Angry and Alone

The only other people I knew in this country were my aunt and uncle, so I started calling them to ask them for help. When my mother found out, she pushed me into the elevator and started hitting me, and when we got to our floor, she dragged me into the apartment. After that, my mother hit me often, until I was on the floor crying.

I started feeling lonely and depressed. There was a lot of hate in me.

The next year, my mother let me go back to school. But she never gave me any money to buy school supplies or lunch. She didn't feed me dinner. In fact, she barely even spoke to me. We lived in the house like roommates, as if I was going to work, too. I had to struggle for 50 cents to get a newspaper to do my social studies homework.

Then my mother's boyfriend moved in, and he made my life even worse. I don't even want to describe what my home life was like. For a long time, I lost hope.

I Prayed for Motherly Love

I looked for support from God. When I woke up, I read my Bible and I prayed for motherly love. Finally, my prayers were answered.

One Sunday we had a guest speaker at our church named Evangelist Pauline Walley who kept a kind smile on her face. She became so strong in my mind that I felt if I didn't talk to her, something bad would happen to me. I got a friend of mine to introduce me and soon we went to her house.

I asked her if she remembered my name. She did! I was so happy. That alone gave me confidence, and I was able to open up to her. I started to go to Evangelist Pauline's house every day and the church became my family.

Soon my mother started accusing me of bringing separation to the family and started hitting me even more. I would go to school crying every day.

Finding My Peace

One afternoon my mother gave me a letter saying that she had filed a PINS (Person In Need of Supervision) case against me in family court. Parents file a PINS case when a child is out of control and the parent wants the court to intervene. I was very surprised and confused. I wasn't scared, though, because it was time for me to tell someone what was going on.



I went to a hearing and there I was able to open my mouth to tell a lot of secrets that I had kept silent. Since I was being abused and neglected, I ended up in foster care.

I was afraid that in foster care I might lose the family that God had given me, but my relationship with my spiritual family has grown stronger. I see them all the time and they help me focus on my schoolwork and ambitions.

When my mother rejected me, I thought no one could love me. But through my spiritual family, I have been able to find my peace. They hold on tight to their hopes for me. They make me believe in myself. In every way they show me they love me and want me to succeed.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Some of the stories in this issue were written by participants in a writing group at The Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, a preventative service agency in Brooklyn, NY. You can reach CFL at (718) 788-3500 or www.cflsp.org. Other stories were written by participants in

the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy and self-help program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

Rise is published by Youth Communication, which is dedicated to publishing stories by those whose voices are rarely heard in the media. For information about Youth Communication, go to www.youthcomm.org. It is funded by the Child Welfare Fund, the Hite Foundation, and Hedge Funds Care.

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# of copies per issue	price / yr
10	\$30
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100	\$195
500	\$955

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Case Closed

Speaking up for immigrant parents.

BY LYNNE MILLER

As a parent advocate at a foster care agency in New York City, my job is to help parents understand the system and get the services they need. When I work with immigrant parents, I see how difficult it can be when you don't speak English.

Recently, I worked with parents who only spoke Spanish. I met them at the first meeting about their case after their child was removed from home. At those meetings, workers from the city child welfare agency, Administration for Children's Services (ACS), explain why the child was removed and what parents need to do for their child to return home.

When I arrived, the parents looked bewildered and terrified. It was obvious to me they were unsure where they were. I felt at a loss to help them because I speak almost no Spanish.

There was no interpreter present. The ACS case manager, whose job is to determine if the children should be removed, was interpreting for the birth parents. I interrupted and pointed out that the case manager should not interpret; because she works for the city she cannot be considered impartial. How could we be sure that

the everyone understood exactly what was being said?

One person at the table made a face as if to say, "Mind your own business," but the meeting leader agreed with me. The meeting was rescheduled for the next day and ACS was told to produce an impartial interpreter.

The next day the parents brought a family friend to interpret and ACS provided an interpreter too. I think the parents felt a little more confident. Afterward, they let me know how much they appreciated my assistance. (The child was returned after 10 days—case unfounded!)

It's not easy to get an interpreter for every situation. Another birth mom I worked with spoke Turkish and very little English. When we met one-on-one, all I could do was sit and try to figure out what she was saying. Her child did a little translating, too.

These experiences let me know how important it is for parents and parent advocates to make sure that a proper interpreter is provided, especially in an official meeting. Sometimes the child welfare system needs to be pushed a little to do the right thing.

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Los Cuentos en Español

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Stories in Spanish

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Rise

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