



The Institute of Family Living

Counselling Immigrant Families: The Challenges of Reintegration

Many challenges arise in the counselling of immigrant families to Canada. For example, in the Caribbean immigrant community, parents tend to migrate to Canada alone, and their children then join them between one and 15 years later.

Overcoming "culture shock" and the necessary adjustment to new family patterns is crucial to the newly arrived children, if they are to function well in the various roles expected of them. Parents and children alike need to absorb new approaches to discipline, education, social life, and relationships.

Almost always, parents expect to resume immediately their full role as parents, without first allowing their recently-arrived children to know them as human beings. The children need reassurance and support more than they need another authority figure.

In this situation, the children often mourn the change they have just made, become homesick, and wish they could go back. Such feelings, deeply internal but seldom spoken aloud, may find expression in such unwholesome ways as withdrawal, melancholia, angry moods, confusion, feelings of hate, and more. The difficulties are great for both the welcoming parent(s) and the newcomer children.

In such a maelstrom of emotions and circumstances, a family counsellor must guide the family as they struggle with the reintegration process. Sadly, the counsellor's task is frequently complicated by the suspicion with which many immigrant families view counselling. Acknowledging and dealing with that suspicion is one of a psychotherapist's most demanding challenges.

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