



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

# Somali Bantu Refugees: Cultural Considerations for Social Service Providers

Lyn Morland, MSW, Doctoral Candidate  
Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services, USCCB

*The Somali Bantu are a recently arrived group of refugees with a history of severe oppression and discrimination in their native Somalia. Most are from rural farming backgrounds, while some may have worked as mechanics, drivers, or manual laborers in local cities. Virtually all have limited exposure to Western cultures and lifestyles. Although they are learning quickly about the U.S., the process of acculturation typically takes years. It is critically important for child welfare and other service providers to be aware of this group's cultural background to avoid unnecessary interventions and to make needed services as effective as possible. Traditional medical practices that leave cuts, burns, and scars can easily be misinterpreted as abuse. The traditional practice of allowing children to play outdoors without parental supervision can easily be misinterpreted as intentional neglect (the entire community raises the child in rural Somalia). Read on for more information and for helpful suggestions for working with these refugees.*

<u>Contents:</u>	
<i>Background:</i>	
The Somali Bantu.....	2
Family Structure.....	3
Early Childhood.....	4
Medical Practices.....	5
Expectations of Boys and Girls.....	6
Methods of Discipline.....	6
Becoming an Adult .....	7
Courtship and Marriage.....	8
<i>Summary:</i> Guidelines for Working with Somali Bantu Families.....	10
<i>Resources</i> .....	12

A joint project of



Lutheran  
Immigration &  
Refugee Service  
700 Light Street  
Baltimore, MD 21230  
www.lirs.org



U.S. Conference of  
Catholic Bishops  
Migration &  
Refugee Services  
3211 4th Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20017  
www.usccb.org/mrs

888.572.6500  
info@brycs.org  
www.brycs.org

***Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)***, a joint project of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), provides national technical assistance to "bridge the gap" between public child welfare and other mainstream organizations, refugee-serving agencies, and refugee communities. BRYCS' overarching goal is to strengthen the capacity of service organizations across the United States to ensure the successful development of refugee and newcomer children, youth, and families through targeted training, consultation, development of cutting-edge resources, and a web-based clearinghouse.<sup>1</sup>

*In November and December 2003, the Somali Bantu were featured on the BRYCS website, helping make existing information and resources on this group more widely available.<sup>2</sup> Although a great deal of information has been gathered on this group,<sup>3</sup> there remains little written specifically on childrearing practices – an important gap for those agencies serving families, including public child welfare, the school systems, and law enforcement. To address this gap, BRYCS staff reviewed the existing literature, interviewed key experts in the field, and conducted focus groups with recently arrived Somali Bantu families, in order to hear about their practices directly from them.*

<sup>1</sup> See [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org) for more information. BRYCS is grateful to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services, Grant No. 90 RB 0018, for its continued support.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.brycs.org/brycs\\_spotnov.htm](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_spotnov.htm) for the BRYCS *Spotlight* and *Featured Search* on the Somali Bantu.

<sup>3</sup> See Section IV. Resources. Special thanks are due to Omar Eno and Dan Van Lehman of the National Somali Bantu Project for their extensive work on behalf of the Somali Bantu and for lending their expertise by reviewing this publication. This bulletin also draws on the work of Pindie Stephens and Sasha Chanoff of the International Organization for Migration.

## **Background: The Somali Bantu**

In the spring of 2003, the United States opened its doors to the first of 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees. Although the Somali Bantu encompass diverse backgrounds as a population, this specific group of Somali Bantu are primarily descendents of East Africans originally brought to Somalia and enslaved by the Sultanate of Zanzibar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As they escaped or were freed, they became subsistence farmers in the Juba Valley – the agricultural backbone of Somalia. Based on this background and a distinctive physical appearance, these Bantu have been heavily discriminated against in Somalia, and relegated to agriculture, manual labor, and mechanical work – all low-status jobs. Access to education was restricted, and the majority of adults have had very little formal education. This means that many adults are pre-literate and most have had little exposure to urban settings and Western cultures. Barriers to intermarriage with politically dominant Somali clans left the Bantu without the protection of those clans and therefore extremely vulnerable to violence and displacement during the on-going civil war in Somalia. This violence included theft of their farms, rape, injury, and witnessing the murder of family and friends. Most Bantu spent ten to twelve years in refugee camps in Kenya, where they were targeted by bandits and continued to be discriminated against by the other refugees living in the camps.

Despite these difficulties, the Somali Bantu remain a highly versatile, adaptable, and hard-working people with a strong sense of family and community and many skills to draw upon. They highly value education and are eager to learn and for their children to be successful in this country. While in the refugee camps, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) helped prepare the Bantu for the transition to the U.S. by providing those over the age of fifteen with up to eighty hours of cultural orientation (CO) classes. Some adults began to learn English informally in the camps, and children were able to attend primary and secondary school and most began to learn to read, write, and speak English.

According to the IOM, sixty percent of these Somali Bantu refugees are under the age of seventeen, with thirty-one percent under the age of six. Services for children and their families are therefore of central concern for this group. Although people everywhere share similar basic needs and values – such as desiring the best for our children – other aspects of the Somali Bantus' cultural background and experiences differ markedly from those of most people in the United States. It will be very important for service providers to be familiar with the background and traditional practices of these refugees to ensure cultural differences are understood and respected, misunderstandings are prevented, and services are appropriate and effective.

### **Practice Implications:**

- Due to their history of oppression, the Bantu have learned to remain quiet about problems and injustices rather than confronting them directly, particularly in interactions with other Somali groups. Instead, the Bantu tend to complain in private. In such cases, it is important for service providers to be aware of this dynamic, earn the trust of the Bantu, and use close family members or other Bantu community members for interpretation.
- Although this bulletin uses generalizations to convey information about this group's history and culture, it is important to keep in mind that the "Somali Bantu" include a range of tribal groups, backgrounds, and experiences, and that each individual and family you meet will be unique. In addition, these refugees are adapting to the United States in different ways and at different rates. *Professional service providers should meet each Somali Bantu family as they would any client – with skilled listening and an open mind.*

## **Family and Community Structure**

Somali Bantu family structure is patriarchal, with the eldest male accorded the highest respect. After marriage, couples tend to live with the husband's family until they can afford to live on their own. A woman keeps her father's name after marriage, while her children take their father's (her husband's) name. However, these Bantu have also maintained much of their original southeast African culture, so that the women's kinship groups are also very important. Both in Somalia and in the camps, women played an important role in running the household, working in agriculture, and in the community. Woman leaders are part of Somali Bantu oral history; for example, a woman named "Wanankucha" led a group of Bantu out of slavery and helped to settle the Juba Valley. The Bantu are considered "liberal" in their practice of Islam and women do not wear the "hijab" (head covering or veil) in public that many Muslims wear, although she may wear a head scarf before or after marriage for cultural reasons.

Somali Bantu practice polygamy, as do other Somalis; however, the refugees in our focus groups were well aware that polygamy is not practiced in the United States and were accepting of this new custom. In our discussions with these refugees, it was clear that men and women have distinct roles, particularly in raising children. The fathers are the primary disciplinarians, while the mothers tend to be their children's friends, confidantes, and advocates. One of the focus group mothers stated that her children "give her all their secrets" and it is her role to ensure the child is happy. This may involve intervening with her husband on the child's behalf. For example, one family noted that if a girl is asked to marry a boy she doesn't like, she cries to her mother, who then advocates for her with her father. It is then his role to speak with the boy's family and to negotiate a resolution acceptable to all.

Children are highly valued by Somali Bantu, and this is reflected in their large families. IOM reported that most families in the refugee camps have four to eight children. This value was echoed by those refugees in our focus groups, who all agreed they would like to have as many children as possible, "God willing".

Extended family members play a very important role in childrearing, including helping the mother by actively caring for children when they are first born as well as advising and assisting parents with raising their children. Focus group respondents stated that when there is a serious dispute between a husband and wife, both sets of parents step in to attempt to resolve the argument. If it cannot be satisfactorily resolved, then a divorce might finally be negotiated.

If something happens so that both parents are unable to take care of their children, the father's brother or sister will take them in as part of their own family, and may work together with the grandparents and other family members to take care of them. In the U.S., the mother's family would be just as appropriate a resource and her sister or brother or her grandparents will take them in as their own. If these more immediate relatives are not available, then more distant relatives will step forward. IOM staff have noted that families caring for nieces and nephews did not distinguish them from their own children. Since few extended families arrive in the United States intact, it is highly likely that parents will deeply miss the support of their extended families.

In addition, in Somali Bantu villages, as in many rural cultures, it does indeed "take a village to raise a child" and all community members take responsibility for supervising and disciplining children. Particularly in rural Somalia, the community plays a central role in peoples' lives, providing important roles such as healers, political and religious leaders, assistance with resolving disputes, and practical and emotional support, as needed.

**Practice Implications:**

- Service providers should respect the father's role as head of the family, primary decision-maker, and disciplinarian, and should approach him first on family matters.
- Workers should also respect the mother's role as in charge of the household and primary communicator and advocate for the children within the family.
- Children should never be used as interpreters since parents may not be comfortable sharing some types of information with children, and since this reverses the usual parent-child role within families.
- If the parents cannot care for a child, the father's family is usually the first recourse, particularly his brother or sister. Here in the U.S., the mother's family is just as important a resource, including aunts and uncles and grandparents.
- Providers should recognize that extended family or community members may be very helpful in resolving disputes within families.
- In the event of a dispute between husband and wife, service providers should be aware that the wife might not tell the truth about her husband's abuse in front of him. For this reason, it is better to talk to the wife separately.
- Workers should encourage the development of natural support systems in the U.S. by, for example, assisting their clients to live near other Bantu families and working with families to develop child care or other support groups.
- Mothers may expect their neighbors to look after their children as they did in Somalia and Kenya, and may not supervise them carefully when they play outside; this should be approached as an issue of education rather than intentional neglect.

**Early Childhood**

When a child is born, there is great celebration and feasting. According to one Bantu refugee, "When it is a boy, we kill two goats, if a girl, we kill one goat – there is much celebrating when a child is born!". Traditionally, a child is given a name on the third day after birth. The mother often observes a period of 40 days after the birth, when she does not leave the house. During this time, the grandparents play an especially important role, and will care for both the mother and the child during these first few weeks.

As is common in many rural societies, the mother will sleep with her infant, apart from her husband, while the baby is breastfeeding. According to our focus groups, babies are exclusively breastfed for 5-7 months, and then are started on adult food, particularly a maize porridge that is often eaten as a staple at meals. Babies may continue to breastfeed for up to two years or until the next pregnancy. Once the mother is pregnant again and a new baby arrives, the child may go to sleep with its grandparents or with other family members, including older siblings, or may begin to sleep on its own.

Rural families do not use flush toilets or diapers for children and may be more accustomed to simply cleaning up after young children. However, refugees are reportedly adjusting to U.S. customs soon after arrival.

Many women will have attended "mothers' classes" in the refugee camp and so should have some exposure to U.S. parenting customs and practices, as well as the concept of parenting support groups. Such formats will be important to continue, particularly for parents without extended family members or for families who are more isolated.

**Practice Implications:**

- It should be considered normal for a mother to sleep with her infant and apart from her husband for the first two years following birth or until the birth of the next child. The child then often sleeps with grandparents, other family members, or may sleep on its own.
- Differences in practices concerning hygiene, including the use of diapers, should be approached as an issue of education rather than of intentional neglect.
- Working together with families to create support groups for mothers may help fill in for the lack of extended family for advice and assistance in this country.

**Medical Practices**

Although the Bantu have become more accustomed to Western medicine while living in the refugee camps, they are highly likely to continue to use indigenous healing methods, similar to those practiced in Southern Somalia as well as other parts of the world. Somali Bantu are accomplished herbalists, tend to have at least one “bone-setter” in each village, and engage in prayer for religious healing. Some women perform ritual ceremonies together with an indigenous healer in order to cast off illness and evil spells. When a child is ill, the Bantu may turn first to indigenous healing practices.

Recognized indigenous healers use practices that may leave wounds or scars on a child; these practices include “fire-burning”, cutting, and cupping. “Fire-burning” typically involves a hot stick that is placed at the location of the pain and burns a hole in the skin. For example, for a headache, the stick may be placed at each temple, then at 3 to 4 places across the child’s forehead. When a child is born with a larger than normal head (encephaly), a large flat nail is often heated and applied to the forehead. This technique is also used for stomach aches (in a pattern around the navel), sore throats, sprained arms – in short, for almost any pain. Some Bantu are more likely to use a knife to make small cuts rather than burns, in similar patterns, and for the same reasons. Bantu may also use “cupping”, which involves heating a cup and then placing it against the skin, creating a round burn; small cuts may then be made around the burn. According to our focus groups, the purpose is to “shock” the area so that the pain leaves, or to “fight pain with pain”, and it is perceived as quite effective.

Other healing practices reported include extracting a “bad” tooth to cure diarrhea during teething; the removal of the uvula and burning of the tonsils for a sore or infected throat.

**Practice Implications:**

Service providers should be aware that traditional healing techniques may leave marks including cuts, burns, and scars, but that these are made with the intention of healing illness rather than harming a child. It is essential that professionals investigate the reasons for such marks thoroughly. Prior to making a finding indicating abuse or making a decision to remove a child from his home, the investigator should interview the family extensively and consult with cultural experts.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> BRYCS can connect service providers with local or national experts or provide information on cultural practices; call 1-888-572-6500, or email [TA@brycs.org](mailto:TA@brycs.org) or [Clearinghouse@brycs.org](mailto:Clearinghouse@brycs.org) for resources.

## **Expectations of Boys and Girls**

Expectations of boys and girls tend to follow general gender roles and emphasize the values of hard work, taking care of family, and being a valued community member. Girls are generally expected to help with household tasks, such as cooking, mat weaving, and caring for younger siblings. Girls also assist with farming tasks and in the fields, as do their mothers. The ideal behaviors, according to our focus group, are those that show that girls can take care of a family and that will prepare them for marriage. All mentioned that “a good girl or boy is happy and cheerful”. Boys are generally expected to help out in the fields on a regular basis beginning at around age 7. Men noted that boys should be curious and eager to learn (“A good boy is quick and asks many questions”). According to the Somali Bantu we spoke with, children are not separated by gender and are expected to play and work together.

Both boys and girls take on responsibilities in the home and in the fields at a much earlier age than most children in the United States. This has been viewed by the Bantu as an important preparation for adult roles and children are seen as integral, contributing members of the family. Since the Bantu place such a high value on education and the situations and expectations for their children are different in this country (parents stated they wanted their children to be “pilots”, a “doctor”, “social worker”, and “teacher” in our groups), they will likely place more value on school work in this country. However, this may also become an area of disagreement for families when children become teenagers, and want to be more like their non-refugee peers in level of responsibility at home, a common issue for many immigrant families.

### **Practice Implications:**

Service providers should be aware that children take on much more responsibility in the home and in caring for younger siblings at a younger age in the Bantu culture than is typical in the U.S. Although this is culturally appropriate for Somalia and will likely be modified over time in this country, these expectations may also cause conflict with parents when children become teenagers.

## **Methods of Discipline**

The Somali Bantu, like all families, use a range of methods of discipline, including physical punishment. According to a key informant, the Bantu keep “switches” (fresh thin branches with leaves) around for threatening or disciplining children in Somalia. These branches sting and make noise, but do not really hurt a child. Teachers and other community members are expected to discipline children if they see they are endangering themselves or others, and will tell the parents about the child’s actions later. Since the intention of physical punishment is to teach—not injure—a child, if a parent gets carried away in anger and punishment goes too far, extended family and community members will step in to mediate. As is true for many immigrant families, there is a chance that the loss of this family and community intervention combined with the stress of cultural adjustment may sometimes result in excessive physical punishment.

The Bantu learned in the refugee camps, and have heard from other refugees, that physical punishment is not acceptable in the United States. In fact, the power of Child Protective

Services to take children away if they are physically punished has reached mythic proportions within most refugee communities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in our focus groups, Bantu did not list physical punishment as a method they use, focusing instead on other methods.

According to these Bantu refugees, they rely on several methods when a child is misbehaving (eg, is disobedient, has a sour disposition, or continually cries). The first and most frequent approach mentioned is to assume the child is unhappy and to try to make him or her happy by giving food, a toy, or something else they think the child will like. The mother in particular will try to understand what is bothering her child and will try to address that. Other strategies mentioned included reasoning with the child and trying to educate him or her regarding the desired behavior, pointing out another child as a model, and trying to put the child together with “good” or “smart” children. If the misbehavior continues or is more serious, parents mentioned threatening to tell their teacher (at Islamic schools that children sometimes attended in the village, “the teachers are strict and will beat them”) or telling them they will take them to the doctor for shots (this was used in the refugee camps).

Bantu parents shared that they are confused about how to discipline children in this country. They noted that their children are already eating “junk” food and watching too much television, and they are finding that their traditional methods of discipline do not work as well in the U.S. and that physical punishment is not allowed. Refugee parents need guidance on acceptable and effective methods of discipline in this country.<sup>6</sup>

### **Practice Implications:**

- Service providers should be aware that these parents are used to using methods of discipline that may include physical punishment but also know that this is not acceptable in the United States.
- Bantu parents will most likely be open to and appreciate guidance on appropriate and effective methods for disciplining children in this culture.
- Service providers should consider working together with refugee communities to develop parenting education or similar programs immediately following the arrival of new refugees.

## **Becoming an Adult**

Somali Bantu do not traditionally celebrate birthdays or keep track of age, but rather go according to physical development and emotional maturity as markers of readiness for adulthood. The Bantu do traditionally mark transitional events, such as a girl’s first menses, with a community celebration and feast. The Bantu with whom we spoke noted that boys are considered to become men when their voice changes and they begin to look after their appearance, but that there was a wide range of emotional maturity and readiness to take on the responsibilities of adulthood among them.

Bantu do practice circumcision for both girls and boys, as do other Somalis and much of Muslim Africa and the Middle East. Boys and girls are usually circumcised between 5 to 10 years of age. “Female genital cutting” (FGC) is a cultural practice performed to protect a girl

<sup>5</sup> See [Directions in Service Provision: Findings From Needs Assessments of Refugee Youth, Children, and Parents](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_resources.htm) and [Community Conversations Summary](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_resources.htm), both available for free download at [http://www.brycs.org/brycs\\_resources.htm](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_resources.htm).

<sup>6</sup> See information on BRYCS’ manual, [Strengthening Services for Refugee Parents: Guidelines and Resources](http://www.brycs.org/documents/execsumm.pdf), and download the executive summary from <http://www.brycs.org/documents/execsumm.pdf>.

from having sexual relations prior to marriage, and thereby preserving her respect within the community. The circumcision for girls that Somali Bantu practice tends to be a milder form of FGC, but can still endanger girls' health through potential infection and difficulties with menstruation and childbirth. These refugees are aware that circumcision for girls is against the law in this country, and are reportedly agreeable to stopping the practice. However, service providers will likely encounter many Bantu women and girls who were circumcised before their arrival here.

In general, children begin to take on adult responsibilities at an earlier age in Somalia, and often marry and become parents in their teens. However, this expectation is changing quickly among refugees in this country as more emphasis is placed on getting a good education and higher status jobs for all of their children.

### **Practice Implications:**

- Service providers should be aware that many Bantu women and girls may be circumcised, a cultural practice in Somalia that is considered to make a woman respectable and marriageable. There may be health concerns for circumcised women, particularly associated with menstruation and childbirth.
- In general, children are expected to take on adult responsibilities at an earlier age in Somalia, but these expectations are rapidly changing with their increased opportunities in this country.

## **Courtship and Marriage**

According to our focus groups, boys and girls first become interested in each other in their early to mid teens. If a boy is interested in a girl, he will begin to show her special attention, such as buying her a special treat or handing her a pen when she needs one. The girl typically does not respond to his show of interest. After a few days, the boy may begin to tell her that he loves her. If she likes him, she may let him continue to court her. If she does not like him, she tells her mother who then tells her husband who gets the word to the boy that his daughter is not interested.

Dating as practiced in the United States does not exist in traditional Bantu culture. Interest may be shown a girl, as above, but this is generally a serious gesture. IOM notes that marriage rarely takes place before the age of 16; however our focus groups placed the age of marriage at generally between 13 and 15 ("at age 13 if a boy is rich, at 15 if he's not"), although they also noted that the age of marriage depends on the youth's maturity and that "some are not ready until 20". Somali Bantu practice two types of marriage, one arranged by parents and the other "for love", where a couple will run away to be married by a local Sheikh. The Sheikh requests the parents' blessing for their children's marriage and they usually consent. The groom's family pays a dowry for the bride as well as arranging the marriage celebrations. Those whose marriage is arranged by parents may have been promised to each other when quite young. After the ceremony, the couple generally lives with the husband's family until "he is 17, and his father gives him some land", according to our focus groups. They may also occupy a house in the husband's family's compound until they begin their own family and farm.



As noted previously, Somali Bantu practice polygamy, and our focus group participants stated that most men in Somalia have one to four wives, depending on their ability to support them and their children. Although divorce is accepted among the Bantu, the couples' parents and other family members will attempt to mediate disagreements and find a solution acceptable to everyone. When these conflict resolution strategies are exhausted, a divorce may be negotiated. In case of divorce, younger children usually stay with the mother, while older children may live with their father.

Divorce among the Bantu in Africa is fairly common. We should note that child support is more affordable in Somalia and the Kenyan refugee camps than in the United States. In Africa, a man can more easily support two families than he could in the U.S. In this regard, some service providers now state that a Somali Bantu man who has divorced and remarried is barely able to provide for his new family, let alone child support for his first wife.

**Practice Implications:**

- Service providers should be aware that Somali Bantu families tend to be conservative regarding relations between girls and boys and that U.S.-style "dating" is not traditionally practiced. This cultural difference may result in conflicts between parents and teens, when teens want to date like their peers; this issue may be particularly difficult for girls.
- Although traditional expectations for teenagers to work full-time and/or get married are likely to change with the opportunities for education and higher-status jobs in the United States, service providers may need to monitor these expectations and encourage Bantu teens to stay in school.

## **Summary: Guidelines for Working with Somali Bantu Families**

### ***Practice implications of family and community structure:***

- Service providers should respect the father's role as head of the family, primary decision-maker, and disciplinarian, and should approach him first on family matters.
- Workers should also respect the mother's role as in charge of the household and primary communicator and advocate for the children within the family.
- Providers should recognize that other family or community members may be very helpful in resolving disputes within families.
- In the event of a dispute between husband and wife, service providers should be aware that the wife might not tell the truth about her husband's abuse in front of him. For this reason, it is better to talk to the wife separately.
- If the parents cannot care for a child, the father's family is typically the first recourse, particularly his brother or sister. Here in the U.S., the mother's family is just as important a resource, including aunts and uncles and grandparents.
- Workers should encourage the development of natural support systems by, for example, assisting their clients to live near other Bantu families and working with families to develop child care or other support groups.

### ***Cultural practices that may be misinterpreted as intentional neglect:***

- Mothers may expect their neighbors to look after their children as they did in Somalia and Kenya, and may not supervise them carefully when they play outside. This should be approached as an issue of education rather than intentional neglect.
- Differences in practices concerning hygiene, including the use of diapers, should be approached as an issue of education rather than neglect.
- Service providers should be aware that children take on much more responsibility in the home in the Bantu culture than is typical in the U.S. For example, Bantu parents may expect older siblings to care for younger ones at an earlier age and for longer periods of time than is acceptable in the U.S. Again, this is an issue of education rather than intentional neglect.

### ***Cultural practices that may be misinterpreted as abuse:***

- Service providers should be aware that traditional healing techniques may leave marks including cuts, burns, and scars, but that these are made with the intention of healing illness rather than harming a child. It is essential that professionals investigate the reasons for such marks thoroughly. Prior to making a finding indicating abuse or making a decision to remove a child from his home, the investigator should interview the family extensively and consult with cultural experts.
- Service providers should be aware that many Bantu women and girls may be circumcised, a cultural practice in Somalia that is considered to make a woman respectable and marriageable. There may be related health concerns particularly associated with menstruation and childbirth.
- It should be considered normal for a mother to sleep with her infant and apart from her husband for the first two years following birth or until the birth of the next child. The child then often sleeps with grandparents, older siblings or other family members, or on its own.

- Service providers should be aware that these parents are used to using methods of discipline that include physical punishment. Although they know that physical punishment is not acceptable in the United States, they will likely need guidance regarding appropriate and effective alternative methods of discipline.

***Areas of potential conflict for families:***

- Since children tend to take on much more responsibility at home in the Bantu culture than is typical in the U.S., these expectations may cause conflict with parents when children become teenagers and want to be more like their non-refugee peers.
- Service providers should be aware that Somali Bantu families tend to be conservative regarding relations between girls and boys and that U.S.-style “dating” is not traditionally practiced. This cultural difference may result in conflicts between parents and teenagers, when teens want to date like their peers.
- Although traditional expectations for teenagers to work full-time and/or get married are likely to change with the opportunities for education and higher-status jobs in the United States, service providers may need to monitor these expectations and encourage Bantu teens to stay in school.

***Direct service guidelines:***

- Keep in mind that Somali Bantu families have many strengths, including highly valuing extended family and community, learning and education, and hard work. Focusing on and working with these strengths<sup>7</sup> will help gain refugees’ trust and will increase the effectiveness of services in the long run.
- When using interpreters, service providers should consider gender, age, ethnic group of origin, and other cultural issues to determine appropriateness. Service providers should never use children as interpreters since parents may be uncomfortable sharing some types of information with children, and since this reverses the parent-child role within families.
- Due to their history of oppression, the Bantu may not complain publicly about problems or injustices, complaining privately instead, especially concerning situations with other Somali groups. It is important for service providers to be aware of this dynamic, earn the trust of the Bantu, and use family or other Bantu community members for interpretation in such cases.
- Bantu parents will most likely be open to and appreciate guidance on appropriate and effective methods for disciplining children in this culture.
- Service providers should consider working together with refugee communities to develop parenting education or similar programs. It is especially important that these programs be available for new arrivals.
- When working directly with Somali Bantu families, service providers should keep in mind the following potential differences in communication styles:
  - As a sign of respect, Somali Bantu generally do not look those they consider of higher status (such as elders) directly in the eye. This may be particularly true for younger Bantu and for women.
  - Muslim men will not shake a woman’s hand just before prayer; all Muslims use the right hand only for eating and for greeting others.
  - Out of respect and to avoid causing offense, Somali Bantu may not answer questions directly initially when speaking with someone who is considered higher status. Once a service provider has built a respectful and trusting relationship, the Bantu are capable of being quite open and direct.

<sup>7</sup> See Saleebey’s *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* for a description of this approach – particularly important for working with refugees who are indeed survivors, having endured great difficulties and an arduous journey to make it to the U.S.

## **Resources**

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (2003, September). (Somali Community Service of Seattle) Parent School Connection. Available from the BRYCS Web site  
[http://www.brycs.org/brycs\\_feature092003.htm](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_feature092003.htm)

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. (2003, November). Somali Bantu Resources on Children, Youth, and Families. In *Monthly Spotlights*. Available from the BRYCS Web site  
[http://www.brycs.org/brycs\\_spotnov.htm](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_spotnov.htm)

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. (2003, November). Somali Bantu Resources on Children, Youth, and Families. In *Featured Searches*. Available from the BRYCS Web site  
[http://www.brycs.org/brycs\\_archive.htm](http://www.brycs.org/brycs_archive.htm)

Birman, D., Trickett, E.J. & Baccus, N. (2001, November). Somali Refugee Youth in Maryland: Needs Assessment. Denver: Sprng Institute for Intercultural Learning.

Chanoff, S. (2002, September). Somali Bantu Exodus [Electronic version]. *IOM News*, 2-3.

Chanoff, S. (2002, November). After Three Years: Somali Bantu Prepare to Come to America [Electronic version]. *Refugee Reports*, 23(8), 1-11.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (1995, November). Meeting the Needs of Refugee Families and Their Children. *Social Policy Research*, 86. Retrieved May 11, 2004 from  
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/pdf/sp86.pdf>

National Somali Bantu Project Web page. (n.d.). Retrieved May 11, 2004 from  
<http://www.bantusupport.pdx.edu>

Office of Global Health Affairs, Office of Humanitarian and Refugee Health Affairs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003, August 16). *Background on Potential Health Problems for Somali Bantu*. Retrieved May 11, 2004 from [http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft\\_BRYCS0713.pdf](http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft_BRYCS0713.pdf)

Somali Bantu Community Organization, Inc. (n.d.). *Who Are the Somali Bantu?* Retrieved September 26, 2003, from [www.somalibantu.com/Fact%20sheet.htm](http://www.somalibantu.com/Fact%20sheet.htm)

Somali Bantu Web page. (n.d.). Retrieved May 11, 2004, from <http://www.somalibantu.com>

Richter, L.M., Grieve, K.W. & Austin, D. (1998, May). Scaffolding by Bantu Mothers During Object Play with Their Infants. *Early Child Development and Care*, 34, 63-75.

Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (2001). *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, 3rd Edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Sherriff, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Reaching First Base: Guidelines on Good Practice on Meeting the Needs of Refugee Children from the Horn of Africa*. Available from the BRYCS Web site  
[http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft\\_BRYCS0391.pdf](http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft_BRYCS0391.pdf)

Stephen, P. (2002, April). *Somali Bantu Report*. Available from the BRYCS Web site  
[http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft\\_BRYCS0392.pdf](http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft_BRYCS0392.pdf)

Stephen, P., & Chanoff, S. (2003 September). Somali Bantu Cultural Orientation: Emails from Kenya. Available from the BRYCS Web site [http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft\\_BRYCS0712.pdf](http://www.brycs.org/documents/ft_BRYCS0712.pdf)

Van Lehman, D. & Eno, O. (2002). *The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wilkinson, R. (Ed.). (2002). America Here We Come: the Somali Bantu [Special issue]. *Refugees*, 3(128).

Yates, T.J.A. (1932). Bantu Marriage and the Birth of the First Child. *Man*, 32(159), 135-137.