

Cultural clashes can make it harder for immigrants to parent. Better support can improve their child's mental health

August 1 2024, by Marie Yap and Sunita B Bapuji



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More than 10% of children and young people worldwide have a [diagnosable mental health problem](#). If these problems are not detected

and treated, children may suffer the same or other mental health problems [in adulthood](#).

So, preventing mental health problems in children is a global priority.

At the same time, the number of immigrants in Western countries such as Australia [is rising](#)—and they face many culture-related challenges in a new country. These challenges can affect parenting and their children's mental health.

Parents have an important role in children's mental health. They can help them develop positive self-esteem and manage stress, which can prevent anxiety and depression. So [immigrant parents](#) may benefit from tailored parenting support as they adjust to a new country, so they can support their children's mental health.

Parenting programs reaching where they are needed

Governments worldwide are recognizing the importance of preventing mental health problems in children and are setting aside money for [mental health promotion and treatment](#).

In 2022, the Australian government invested A\$40.6 million to make the evidence-based online parenting [programPositive Parenting Program \(Triple P\)](#) more widely available to [support](#) children's mental health and well-being (aged up to 11 years).

Australia's headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation also made the individually tailored [Partners in Parenting online program](#) available in 2023 for parents of adolescents aged 12–18.

Parents can sign up for these online programs and work through the modules, which include interactive reflection activities and videos, in

their own time.

Similar [programs](#) are available in other Western countries.

But such programs are still not reaching enough [immigrant families who have moved to Western countries](#), including in Australia.

Our research explored how immigrant parents raise their children and how it affects immigrant children's mental health. With that knowledge, we can adapt parenting programs to better support migrant parents as they get used to parenting in their new home country.

What did we do?

We combined the results of 56 research studies from seven countries on [immigrant parenting and children's mental health](#). We found the ways parenting can affect children's mental health are mostly the same for immigrant and [non-immigrant families](#).

For example, when parents are more caring and supportive, and are aware of what their children are up to when they're not with them, children are more likely to have good mental health.

On the other hand, children may be more likely to develop [mental health problems](#) in families with frequent conflict between parents, or between parents and children, and where parents are not available for their children or have poor mental health themselves.

There is, however, a specific problem called "acculturative conflict", where children and parents [clash over cultural differences](#), including how to parent according to their culture of origin versus Australian expectations. These clashes pose a specific risk for poor mental health for immigrant children.

What is acculturation?

Acculturation happens when people are exposed to a new culture (such as values, beliefs, language, customs and practices) and attempt to adjust and incorporate them [into their daily lives](#).

Parents and children go through the acculturation process of adjusting to a [new culture](#). Parents do this through work or interactions with adults.

But children do this differently. Immigrant children tend to pick up the language and values of Western countries more quickly than their parents. This may be because they are taught these things in daycare or school.

Children want to feel like they belong and fit in with their friends. This is usually a bigger deal for them than it is for adults.

What happens when parent and child acculturation rates differ?

When children acculturate to the new culture faster than their parents, it often leads to [family disagreements and conflicts](#).

Some of the ways these parent-child acculturation conflicts can play out include:

- parents showing love for their children by providing shelter, food and a good education. But their children see their friends' parents expressing physical and verbal affection and wish their own parents would do the same, or feel hurt or resentful that they don't
- parents setting high expectations and strict boundaries to ensure

their children do not bring shame upon the family, while their offspring find this excessive and unreasonable

- parents expecting their child to behave according to the "proper" standards for people of their cultural background, but [young people](#) feel their parents are being too traditional or conservative.

How can we better support parents?

Developers of parenting programs need to work with [immigrant communities](#) to adapt their existing programs. This could increase parents' interest in seeking support and benefit immigrant children's mental health.

Tailoring existing evidence-based [parenting strategies](#) can help immigrant parents minimize acculturative conflicts with their children and better support their children's mental health and well-being.

This would require greater government support and investment in these programs.

In the meantime, immigrant parents can honestly discuss with their children how they would like their parents to express their love and care, and make the effort to do so. For example, does their child feel most loved when the parent says "I love you", buys them a gift they like, or shows interest in what interests them?

Immigrant parents can help their children understand the reasons behind rules and boundaries, and involve them in shaping expectations. Parents can try to validate their children's perspectives, even if they don't always agree with them. Have a family discussion where both parent and child have input into what the expectations are (for example, about screen use or bedtimes) and what the consequences would be if expectations are not met.

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Provided by The Conversation

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