BACKGROUND

Why did we do this study?

Canada offers permanent resettlement to more than 20,000 refugees each year. Although studies suggest the importance of social support for refugees during the early years of resettlement, this knowledge has not been invoked to systematically develop interventions that help refugee new parents adapt to life in receiving countries such as Canada.

What did we want to know?

The purpose of this pilot study was to design and test an accessible and culturally appropriate social support intervention that meets the support needs and preferences identified by refugee new parents and can ultimately inform services, programs and policies for these vulnerable families.

Who participated?

Seventy one mothers and fathers who arrived in Canada in the last 60 months from Sudan and Zimbabwe, and who had a child between 4 months to five years of age born in Canada.

METHODS

Data Collection

Quantitative Data - Intervention Impacts: Standardized measures were administered at pre-test (n=71) and at post-test (n=61).

Qualitative Data - Intervention Processes: Field note forms were completed during the support intervention.

Qualitative Data - Perceived Impacts: Five participant group interviews (n=50); individual participant interviews (n=33); and individual mentor interviews (n=9) were conducted.

Intervention Processes

Face-to-face support groups were created comprised of like-ethnic and gender peers. Each of the four support groups was co-led by Sudanese or Zimbabwean peers who had a child in Canada and a professional (service provider) from health, education, or social service sectors. Discussion topics for support groups were informed by challenges identified during the pre-intervention assessment study, and suggested topics that were pertinent to participants’ specific support needs.

INVESTIGATORS

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### FINDINGS

#### PARTICIPANTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT GROUPS

The opportunity to meet and socialize with peers in similar life situations was valued. The support intervention was described as a very positive experience by participants because it presented opportunities for learning new things, making new friends, and refreshment. Once participants felt comfortable to disclose and share personal experiences, peer mentors addressed challenges encountered by refugee new parents in raising children in Canada. Participants discussed what it meant to raise children, including getting them to school, preparing food, providing shelter, as well as worrying about their children’s future.

*This group ... provide us with a confidential and safe place where we as women feel free to explore a wide range of emotions, experiences and gender specific needs* (Sudanese woman).

#### SUPPORT EXCHANGED/ RECIPROCATED AMONG GROUP PARTICIPANTS

**Emotional support:*** Participants indicated that attending support group meetings helped relieve stress. The sessions gave opportunities to share ideas with peers who faced similar challenges.

**Practical support:*** Participants exchanged ideas regarding strategies for managing family finances identified as a major challenge. Participants challenged one another to set good examples as role models for their children and to develop strong and supportive parent-child relationships.

*We should know what is going on in our kids’ lives, do not let technology and television raise your kids for you* (Zimbabwean man).

**Informational support:*** Participants exchanged personal experiences and opinions on sensitive issues including marital challenges, cultural identity and discrimination; work-related stresses; school; and parenting.

*We should know what is going on in our kids’ lives, do not let technology and television raise your kids for you* (Zimbabwean man).

#### SUPPORT FROM PEER MENTORS

Peer mentors reported that participants often called them to seek support regarding personal matters such as spousal conflicts or taking care of children. Some participants came earlier or stayed following support group sessions for one-on-one support interactions with peer mentors. Peer mentors provided interpretation services; helped complete immigration forms; and escorted some participants to meetings with service providers.

*I’m not talking to a professional but I’m talking to a person I know and respect. So definitely it hit home really more so it definitely-definitely made a difference* (Zimbabwean male)

#### SATISFACTION WITH INTERVENTION

Participants found the use of their own language and dialect during support group meetings critical for self-expression. Discussions on topics such as the confluence of cultures, access to jobs, raising children, family budget, personal development, household communication, and parenting resources, were found to be valuable. Participants appreciated ‘hanging around’ with people of the same ethnic background.

*It may not change the meals on your table; it might not change the income on your pay check. But just to know that someone understands what you are going through is very comforting* (Zimbabwean male)
**IMPACT OF SUPPORT PROGRAM ON COPING WITH LONELINESS AND STRESSFUL SITUATIONS**

Participants reported that interaction with group members provided stress relief. Sharing common problems such as children’s experience of racism at school, parenting and marital challenges, and possible solutions was viewed as a way to “de-stress”.

*I felt like withdrawing from normal activities, I also felt the loneliness, isolation and loss of everything that is important to me like my family support and my culture. The support group and the community meeting gave me the senses that I am not alone* (Sudanese woman)

**CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS**

Some participants felt that their relationships with family members improved following the intervention. Support group meetings fostered proactive parenting strategies that brought parents closer to their children. The participants also reported improved connections and relationships with neighbours and the larger ethnic community.

*I think the group gave me a break from the family especially the children, and when I get home I found that I am more energized and relaxed when dealing with family stressful situation…. And their school work too* (Sudanese woman)

**CHANGES IN SUPPORT SEEKING SKILLS**

Some participants believed that the group had ‘shaped and sharpened their skills’ in dealing with family matters. The more time refugee parents spent as part of the support group, the more they shared ideas and strategies with peer participants and mentors.

*It may not change the meals on your table; it might not change the income on your pay check. But just to know that someone understands what you are going through is very comforting* (Zimbabwean male).

**SOCIAL COMPARISON AMONG GROUP MEMBERS**

Participants compared changes in decision-making processes within their families as a result of living in Canada during group discussions. Coping strategies shared among peer participants included spousal communication, anger management, and positive thinking skills.

**MENTORS’ PERSPECTIVES REGARDING INTERVENTION PROCESSES AND IMPACTS**

* Peer and professional mentors’ roles: They scheduled meetings; booked meeting venues, invited group members, arrived early to welcome participants; cleaned up after the meeting, invited guest presenters; and conducted literature and resource searches relevant to topics discussed.

* Types of support provided: They provided information, emotional, affirmation, and practical support to refugee new parents. They linked participants with sporting activities, interpretation services, employment, and educational opportunities.

* Structure and functioning of the group: Peer mentors described support group meetings as opportunities to build social capital among participants. Support meetings were seen as opportunities to talk about ethnic differences in a non-threatening environment which helped change stereotypes.

* Content of the program: Conversation during face-to-face group meetings and over the phone dyadic communications focused on resettlement needs; marriage; child rearing; work; and educational opportunities.

* Support for peer and professional mentors: Peer mentors concurred that they require extensive preparation to successfully lead support groups.

*So people begin to realize - - - it’s universal it’s not just my wife it’s something common maybe in women or we men we don’t really know women as much as we would want to, but there are some things they will never tell us* (Zimbabwe female mentor).