

## Adapting parenting in a new country and cultural conflicts



### Why parenting feels different after migration

Parenting is never culturally neutral. Every family carries assumptions about respect, obedience, sleep, food, gender roles, education, religious practice, privacy, and how much independence children should have. After migration, these assumptions may be questioned by teachers, clinicians, neighbors, social services, or the child's peer group. What once felt normal may suddenly feel judged, and parents may feel pressure to defend their competence.

Research on immigration and parenting describes acculturation as an ongoing process in which families negotiate between at least two cultural systems. Parents may retain practices from their country of origin, adopt new practices, or create a blended approach. Children often acculturate faster because they spend many hours in school and social settings. This gap can lead to disagreements about clothing, friendships, dating, chores, language use, academic pressure, and the meaning of respect.

It is helpful to distinguish cultural difference from harm. A child can thrive in many parenting traditions when there is emotional safety, responsiveness, and appropriate structure. At the same time, every country has laws and professional standards around child safety, physical punishment, neglect,

education, and healthcare access. Adapting is not only about preference; it can also be about learning the legal and safeguarding expectations of the new environment.

### **Acculturation gaps and the child's developmental stage**

Conflict often increases when a child's developmental needs collide with changing cultural expectations. A preschooler may need predictable routines and co-regulation, meaning adult support to calm the nervous system during distress. A school-age child may need responsibility scaffolding, where adults gradually teach skills rather than assuming instant independence. An adolescent may need privacy, peer connection, and age-appropriate independence while still needing limits and monitoring.

Acculturation gaps can make these stages harder to interpret. A parent may see a teenager's request for privacy as rejection of family values, while the teenager may see parental monitoring as mistrust. A child who stops speaking the home language may be seeking social acceptance, not intentionally disrespecting the family. A parent who insists on traditional expectations may be trying to preserve safety and identity, not simply being rigid.

Adapting parenting strategies can help families separate the developmental issue from the cultural issue. For example, the real question may not be, "Should my child be like children here or like children back home?" It may be, "What level of responsibility is appropriate for my child's age, temperament, neurodevelopmental profile, and safety needs?" This framing supports developmentally appropriate expectations without dismissing culture.

### **Common areas of cultural conflict**

Many immigrant and refugee families describe similar points of tension. These conflicts are not signs of poor parenting; they are predictable stress points during adaptation.

**Discipline:** Some parents come from communities where adult authority is rarely questioned. In the new country, schools or clinicians may emphasize explanation, emotional coaching, and non-physical consequences. Parents may need support understanding which discipline methods are legal, safe, and

effective.

**Autonomy:** Host cultures may expect children to make choices earlier, while the home culture may emphasize family obligation and collective decision-making. Families can negotiate autonomy gradually, using age-appropriate independence rather than sudden permissiveness.

**Language and identity:** Children may prefer the new language, especially with siblings. Parents may experience this as loss. Preserving the home language supports family connection, cultural memory, and sometimes communication with grandparents or extended kin.

**School expectations:** Parents may be unfamiliar with parent-teacher meetings, special education processes, consent forms, or mental health referrals. Misunderstandings can occur if educators mistake quietness for lack of involvement.

**Emotional expression:** Some cultures value restraint and endurance; others encourage children to name feelings openly. Both can be adapted into a balanced model where feelings are acknowledged and behavior still has limits.

## **Building a blended parenting approach**

A blended approach asks, "Which parts of our culture protect our child, and which parts need adjustment in this context?" This is a more compassionate question than, "Which culture is right?" Many parenting practices can be culturally adapted without losing effectiveness, especially when core principles remain: warmth, safety, consistency, responsiveness, and realistic expectations.

Start by naming non-negotiables. These might include physical safety, school attendance, medical care, sleep needs, respectful communication, and family rituals. Then identify negotiables, such as clothing choices, hobbies, room decoration, or how children spend supervised time with friends. This reduces the likelihood that every disagreement becomes a symbolic battle about cultural loyalty.

Children often cooperate better when parents explain the value behind a rule. "In our family, we visit elders because relationships matter" may be easier to accept than "You must do this because I said so." Similarly, "I need to know where you are because safety is my responsibility" is clearer than "You are becoming too Western." Explanations do not remove parental authority; they make

authority more understandable.

Parent-child repair after conflict is especially important. Repair means returning after an argument to acknowledge emotion, clarify expectations, and reconnect. It does not mean the parent gives up the rule. A simple repair might sound like, "I became very angry because I was scared. I still need you to come home at the agreed time, and I want us to talk about how to make that possible."

### **Protecting culture, language, and belonging**

Children need belonging in both the family and the wider community. When parents feel that the new country is pulling children away, they may respond by tightening control. This is understandable, but excessive restriction can sometimes increase secrecy or shame. A more protective strategy is to make the home culture emotionally alive rather than only rule-based.

Practical steps include cooking traditional foods together, telling family stories, celebrating holidays, maintaining contact with relatives when safe, and using the home language in warm daily routines. If a child resists, avoid turning language into a punishment. Instead, connect it to affection, humor, songs, stories, and meaningful roles. Multilingual family identity can be a source of pride when children experience it as connection rather than pressure.

Parents can also invite children to compare cultures thoughtfully. Ask, "What do you like about school here?" "What do you miss from our old home?" "Which family traditions do you want to keep?" These questions help children develop cultural integration, not cultural rejection. They also give parents information about the child's social world, which can reduce anxiety-driven assumptions.

### **Caregiver stress, trauma, and mental health**

Migration can involve bereavement, financial strain, discrimination, uncertain legal status, housing instability, or past trauma. Refugee families may have experienced violence, forced separation, or prolonged insecurity. These stressors can affect sleep, irritability, concentration, threat perception, and emotional regulation. In family life, this may look like harsher discipline, withdrawal, overprotection, or difficulty tolerating normal child behavior.

It is not appropriate to diagnose a parent or child based only on conflict. However, persistent symptoms such as intrusive memories, panic-like episodes, severe insomnia, depressed mood, loss of functioning, substance misuse, or thoughts of self-harm deserve prompt professional assessment. Children may show distress through somatic complaints, regression, school refusal, aggression, appetite changes, or sudden decline in academic performance.

Professional help for parenting stress can include a primary care clinician, pediatrician, perinatal or family mental health service, school counselor, culturally responsive therapist, social worker, or community health program. Interpreters should be offered when needed; using a child as the interpreter for sensitive medical, legal, or mental health topics can place an inappropriate emotional burden on them.

### **Working with schools and healthcare systems**

Schools and healthcare settings may be the first places where cultural conflict becomes visible. A teacher may worry about a child's silence, a parent may feel blamed during a meeting, or a clinician may ask questions that seem intrusive. These systems often operate with assumptions that are not obvious to newly arrived families.

Before meetings, write down your main questions and concerns. Ask professionals to explain unfamiliar terms, such as developmental delay, individualized education plan, safeguarding, confidentiality, consent, or mandated reporting. If recommendations conflict with your values, say so respectfully and ask for the reasoning. For example: "In our family, we usually handle this differently. Can you explain what the school is concerned about and what options we have?"

Clinicians and educators should also avoid assuming that one cultural explanation accounts for everything. Cross-cultural parenting research shows both similarities and differences across societies, and families vary widely within the same cultural group. Good support is culturally responsive: it asks about values, identifies risks clearly, and adapts guidance without stereotyping.

### **A practical family plan for reducing conflict**

Families do best with small, repeatable habits rather than one dramatic conversation. Consider a weekly check-in where each person names one thing that felt difficult and one thing that helped. Keep the tone curious, not interrogating. Younger children may draw or use feeling words; adolescents may prefer walking, cooking, or driving conversations rather than face-to-face discussions.

Map the conflict: Identify whether the issue is safety, culture, development, school rules, peer pressure, or parental stress.

State the value: Explain the family value behind the rule, such as respect, education, faith, health, or mutual responsibility.

Offer bounded choice: Give children some control within safe limits, such as choosing which family tradition to help with or which supervised activity to attend.

Use logical consequences for children: Consequences should be related, proportionate, and predictable, not humiliating or frightening.

Review and adjust: If a rule repeatedly fails, ask whether it is unclear, too strict, too loose, or mismatched to the child's developmental stage.

Over time, this approach helps families move from power struggles to collaborative problem-solving with adolescents and younger children alike. The goal is not a conflict-free home. The goal is a home where conflict can be discussed safely and repaired.