

PS 9

Service Delivery to Clients from the Former USSR: Clinical Considerations

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***Note: for the purposes of efficiency, all clients and families are referred to as being "Russian." However, this is just for brevity. Families from the former USSR may have come from one of any number of countries such as Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Siberia, Georgia, and others. SLPs must remember to never automatically refer to a family as "Russian" in their presence. It is very important to ask the families for information about where they came from. Families who are from Uzbekistan, for example, may be offended if referred to as "Russians." As one Ukrainian said, "We have fought wars and died in order to be called according to our individual nationalities" (Dubya, personal communication, March 2001).

BACKGROUND

Most Russians have come to the U.S. because of religious persecution, economic hardship, and limited educational and vocational opportunities for themselves and their children. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000), there are currently 2.9 million Russians living in the U.S. Sacramento and New York are major American centers for Russian families. Commonly, Russians immigrate to cities where there are churches that provide support for them.

As stated, a number of Russians have come to the U.S. because of religious persecution in their country. Evangelical Christians in the former USSR have historically been killed, put into prison, tortured, harassed, exiled, and denied an education for themselves and their children because of their faith in God (Soldatenkov, personal communication, May, 2000). Pentecostal Christians have especially been persecuted and many have attempted to immigrate to the U.S. This situation has improved since the USSR formally dissolved. Russian Christians who refused to join the Communist party because of religious beliefs generally were denied opportunities for career advancement and remained at a low socio-economic level. SLPs need to be sensitive to situations in which immigrants have experienced job discrimination and financial hardship because of their refusal to give up their religious values.

FAMILY AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Historically, Russians have married at an early age. Marriage is a primary concern for young women. Society dictates that they marry and raise children to help increase the population. Thus, Russian women tend to start families at younger ages than American women. Most urban couples have only one or two children, whereas rural families are larger (Rimashevskaja, 2007). Extended families are quite common in Russia even today. Most families are strongly united and mutually interdependent; they tend to rely on each other a great deal. Mothers may be especially close to their sons (Leipzig, 2006).

Russians value their families greatly. Unfortunately, however, the divorce rate in Russia is high (over 30 percent) and is rising. Reasons associated with the high divorce rate include alcoholism, adultery, personality and cultural differences, and lack of privacy due to

the housing shortage (Christians don't drink alcohol, however). Because it is hard to obtain housing, young couples often live with their parents for some time, even up to several years. Urban apartments are small by American standards, and a family of three people or more may live in one room. Many Russian men hold very traditional views of women (Goehner, 2005). However, attitudes toward women vary from region to region. For example, in Ukraine (in contrast to Russia), authority in the home is shared by husband and wife.

Fathers may spend much less time with children than mothers, and many Russian men are minimally involved in household maintenance activities. Changes in the roles of men within the family unit, however, are beginning to occur. Many Russian men prefer that their wives work inside the home managing the household and caring for children (Panansenko, personal communication, April, 2001). For children, the emphasis on becoming independent at an early age is not as strong in Russia as it is in the United States. Discipline may be quite lax by American standards.

Boys are permitted a considerable amount of behavioral freedom, although the level of permissiveness varies from republic to republic (A. Borodovsky, personal communication, May, 2001). SLPs should not label boys as "immature" or "delayed." Boys from Russia may also be mislabeled as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, when in reality, their behavior is consistent with the mores of their familial and cultural values. Russian parents do not encourage independence at an early age as strongly as do mainstream American parents. What mainstream parents and SLPs might consider as "babying" a child might be viewed as a demonstration of love, especially by Russian mothers (Leipzig, 2006).

Punctuality in Russia is viewed as less important than punctuality in the U.S. In Russia, time is not money and many Russians have a very relaxed attitude toward timelines and deadlines. When Russians arrive for a meeting or appointment, they may engage in a number of rituals before getting down to business. Discussions relating to family and personal issues, small talk, and refreshments (e.g., something to drink) may precede a business meeting. For many Russians, when dealing with professionals, the person comes first; his ideas are secondary. Relationships are all-important to Russians, and good personal relationships take priority over business. Also, many Russians welcome inquiries about their families and are genuinely interested in knowing about the families of others. SLPs can remember that it is important to have a "personal touch" when dealing with clients and families from the former USSR.

Because older Russians have been accustomed to obeying the government without question or argument, it is a great change for them to learn to discuss issues, compromise, be creative, and take risks. Thus, if SLPs are working with middle-aged and older Russian parents or adult patients, they might appear to have a "fatalistic" attitude and to not question the SLP's decisions. The adults might accept everything the SLP says without question, and rely almost completely on the SLP for their child's special needs or for care for the older adult. It is important that these adults be encouraged to be contributing partners in the clinical relationship. Many older Russians, even today, have a great distrust of the police, government, and military. SLPs should remember that some Russians may not feel

comfortable responding to personal questions; under Communist rule, providing answers to these questions could lead to prison or even death. It is ideal to work with a Russian interpreter or cultural mediator in these situations. Family members can also be very helpful.

Although many Russian immigrants are very grateful to be in the U.S., they encounter challenges that may leave them discouraged. Professionals need to be sensitive to these challenges. Limited proficiency in English is an obvious barrier for many Russian immigrants (Domyancic, 2000). A related problem for many Russian immigrants is that their skills and educational background are not acknowledged in the U.S. (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). For example, Russian doctors and architects may work as custodians in the U.S. because of differing laws for licensing and professional practice. It is critical for professionals to be sensitive to this; the mother who is washing dishes at a restaurant in the U.S. might have been a heart surgeon in Russia.

BELIEFS ABOUT DISABILITIES

SLPs must be aware of families' beliefs about disabilities in children. There may be negative stereotypes about children with special needs such as developmental delays (Martz, 2005; Moskovkina, Pakhomova, & Abramova, 2001; E. Panansenko, personal communication, personal communication, 10/8/07). For example, in the country of Russia, individuals with disabilities are generally concentrated in special boarding schools located in industrial centers. In Russia today, most exceptional children continue to be placed into these boarding schools at an early age. However, there is a growing trend to place children with milder disabilities at regular schools, with opportunities to interact with typically-developing children. "Although schools such as this are exception rather than the rule in Russia today, their very existence is encouraging" (Korkunov, Nigayev, Reynolds, & Lerner, 1998, p. 188).

In the late 1990s, children with disabilities in Russia were categorized under one of the following labels: *speech defects, delay in psychological development, mental defects, hearing defects, sight defects, defects of movement, and other anomalies*. There were no categories involving *language learning disabilities or behavior disorders* (Korkunov et al., 1998). Thus, SLPs need to realize that many families may be somewhat unfamiliar with these terms. The assistance of interpreters and cultural mediators from the community may be needed in these situations. Families may need information about the role and responsibilities of SLPs. In addition, because of the negative stereotypes that may be held by some families, SLPs should draw attention to the special, positive qualities of a child with a communication disorder.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Families from the former USSR demonstrate varied experiences as well as beliefs about disabilities in children. SLPs can utilize the assistance of cultural mediators and can also provide specific information about the profession of speech-language pathology, what constitutes a communication disorder, and what course of intervention is most appropriate

for each individual client.

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