



THE COALITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

# fact sheet

## *Understanding the Issues of Abuse and Neglect and Asian American Families*

Traditionally, Asian American communities have not been considered a population of primary concern in child welfare. As a result, child welfare policies and services are rarely designed to meet the needs of the Asian American community. The Asian American community is in no way immune to the problems surrounding child abuse and neglect. Asian American families, especially immigrant families, may unknowingly get in trouble with the law simply because of differences in cultural influences on child rearing. ❖ Child welfare professionals, mandated reporters and the community in general need assistance to better understand the immigrant families that they encounter. Clearly, no one wants a child be in danger, or suffering from physical or emotional neglect or abuse. At the same time, no one wants to traumatize a child and family by unnecessarily removing a child from a home because a reported incident of abuse or neglect is in fact merely a cultural difference.

### **LINGUISTIC OBSTACLES**

► Immigrant families who have limited English proficiency face difficulties while seeking preventive services, during an investigation, and at Family Court. This is due in part to the lack of bilingual and bicultural child welfare professionals and the families' lack of knowledge of the child welfare system.

► Though using a child as an interpreter for parents who are not proficient in English is in violation of the parents' civil rights, this practice is not uncommon. The consequences are:

- The child may exercise inappropriate control over a parent and could falsely report abuse or neglect to punish the parent, or
- the child may feel obligated to protect the family and fail to disclose any information.

► Language barriers may lead to improper notification of families of the removal of their child. The

situation may be further aggravated when notifications are only in English and caseworkers and lawyers are not bilingual.

### **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Asian American parents may not know which child rearing practices are considered abusive or neglectful in the U.S.

► Traditional Asian disciplinary practices include spanking. Asian American parents may not be familiar with alternative parenting skills and disciplinary practices, such as time-outs.

► Traditionally, Asian families may not be as verbally or openly affectionate toward children as families are expected to be by American standards.

► Traditional Asian homes are more hierarchical in nature. In Western families, the parent-child relationship may seem more peer-like and equal.

► Culture can influence a parent's deci-

sion to determine whether or not a child is mature to be left home alone. A child who is considered old enough to be left at home alone by Asian immigrant parents, may be considered too young by American standards.

► Many Asian parents may choose to use traditional Asian medicine to treat ailments before seeking treatment from Western clinics or emergency rooms.

► Some forms of traditional medical treatments, such as "coining" or "spooning," may leave red marks on the child's skin that can be mistaken for evidence of abuse.

► Asian families that come from rural areas may dress children in clothing appropriate for their home country but not appropriate here because of climate and weather.

► The sharing of rooms and beds is not only culturally appropriate but also an economic necessity given that nearly one-fifth of *see page 2 >*

all Asian households in New York City are overcrowded.

### ISSUES OF NEGLECT

Among all reported child welfare cases, 92 percent are ones of neglect rather than abuse. Frequently, neglect cases result from the families' financial situation and lack of resources. There is a great need among low-income Asian American families for affordable health care, child care, and youth programs in New York City.<sup>1</sup>

In many immigrant households both parents must work long, and often late hours to support their families. Many families may not be able to afford quality child care. The waiting lists for subsidized child care is so lengthy that eligible children may have to wait for years. Others may not have family or find babysitters to care for their children. These families may face charges of neglect when they decide to bring their children to potentially dangerous workplaces or leave children home alone.

Some parents may face charges of educational neglect. Some children may miss days of school because they have to stay home to watch younger siblings, or have to act as interpreters for parents, or simply skip school on their own volition. Parents may not respond to letters from the school

because they may not be able to read the letter or not realize the consequences of truancy.

### FOSTER CARE

Asian American children removed from their homes are rarely placed with Asian American foster care families except those who are placed in kinship care. When children are placed into families of entirely different backgrounds, problems regarding culture, language, and religion can arise. For example, foster families may prepare foods that are forbidden by the child's religion. Also, young children who do not speak English may not be able to communicate with their foster parents, and may eventually lose the ability to speak the language of their birth parents.

### IMMIGRATION LAW

► Many Asian American families may not access needed services such as child care, foster care, and preventive care due to unfounded misconceptions of the consequences.

- Documented families may fear that accessing these service would have negative repercussions on their citizenship application.
- Undocumented families may fear their citizenship or immigration status would be questioned, even though states are not

required to verify status.

► Families may not realize that undocumented immigrants can serve as kinship care families.

► Undocumented status also has an impact on family reunification.

- Undocumented children who are placed into foster care are eligible for a green card, or permanent resident status.
- For parents who are undocumented, a report of child abuse can lead to their arrest and deportation, even if their child is being kept in the U.S. in foster care. A parent overseas will not be able to meet a court's requirements to be granted custody again, and all chances at returning a child home may be lost.

A child's life should never be endangered, but sometimes a decision to remove a child from a home is made without taking into account the family's cultural context or the functioning of the parents as a whole. Though ignorance of the law is not a sufficient excuse and the safety of the child must be protected, a more balanced investigation of suspected Asian American child maltreatment is urged in light of the profound cultural differences and the pervasive lack of knowledge about the American child welfare philosophy. ❖

<sup>1</sup> CACF, *Half-Full or Half-Empty*

For more information, please refer to CACF's report on child abuse and neglect issues in the Asian American community.

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**THE COALITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES** seeks to improve the quality of life for the New York City Asian American community by facilitating access to health and human services that are sensitive to all Asian American children and families.

**OTHER FACT SHEETS IN THIS SERIES:** ❖ Snapshots of New York City: An Overview of Asian American Families ❖ Child and Family Health of New York's Asian American Community ❖ Education and New York's Asian American Children

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