

"Like Blind Kittens" – Immigrant Families in Israel and the Services for their Children who have Special Needs

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The Social Service Department at the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption commissioned this study from the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute due to its concern that children with special needs of immigrant parents might not be getting the full range of services enjoyed by the children of non-immigrant Israelis. This concern is consistent with research from abroad about immigrant populations and their difficulties in utilizing services.

The study aimed to examine whether significant barriers are indeed preventing immigrant families from utilizing services for children with special needs effectively, and to describe such barriers. Another goal was to indicate possible responses and solutions that could help overcome these barriers.

The study was limited to families with preschool children (birth to 6 years), as this is a critical stage for identifying special needs and starting treatment. For the purposes of this study, we define children of immigrants as children who immigrated themselves, as well as children born in Israel to parents who immigrated since 1990 (or prior to that year in the case of immigrants from Ethiopia, in keeping with Ministry of Immigrant Absorption policy).

To allow for a full examination of the topic, the study was qualitative and consisted of in-depth interviews with dozens of professionals as well as with immigrant parents of children with special needs. It focused on the predominant immigrant populations – those from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and from Ethiopia.

The study identified multiple barriers that limit immigrant families' ability to utilize services for their children with special needs. Some barriers concerned the characteristics of immigrant families: Difficulties in integrating into Israeli society,

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limited command of Hebrew, and culturally different ideas about child development, about available services and about ways to cope with Israeli bureaucracy. Other noteworthy characteristics of this population include a high rate of single-parent families, economic hardship and living in peripheral areas of Israel. Another group of barriers is connected to a lack of diagnostic procedures that are adapted to the languages and cultures of the immigrant children and to a poor knowledge of cultural differences and their significance among Israeli professional staff members in various services. Some of these barriers affect the whole immigrant population and some are specific to immigrants from the FSU or from Ethiopia.

Many recommendations were collected from parents and professionals interviewed in the study. These recommendations include expanding existing services that have already been successfully tried, sometimes on a limited, local base, and providing others that do not yet exist, but may help overcome the described barriers.

The findings may serve government ministries and other organizations specializing in treating children with special needs and their families as a basis for developing policy and services for such children in immigrant families.