

How do service providers define cultural safety when working with newcomer families of autistic children?

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Background

Newcomers represent a growing population in Canada, with recent data indicating that 437,180 immigrants arrived in 2022, over 40% of whom settled in Ontario (Singer, 2022). While many newcomers move to Canada in search of better opportunities and support for their families, they continue to face significant barriers in accessing autism services. One barrier that has previously been identified is the lack of culturally safe services. Yet despite this, there remains a poor understanding of what this concept means to service providers.

Methods

Interviews with 15 service providers (e.g., developmental pediatricians, social workers, psychologists, occupational, behavioural, and speech therapists).

A minimum of one year of experience (average: 11.4 years) working with newcomer families of autistic children in Ontario.

Thematic content analysis and open coding was conducted.

Objectives

The goal of this research was to explore how service providers define and conceptualize cultural safety in the context of working with newcomer families of autistic children.



Results

Theme 1

Providing holistic and responsive care to meet basic needs (e.g., housing, employment, and social support)

“I would like to see service providers take a more holistic approach because if the family has no money to pay rent how attentive are they gonna be to the the child's needs. With newcomers it is a very vulnerable demographic, because they're dealing with a lot of problems at once.”

“We had another family from Afghanistan, their home had been bombed, and they lost everything. And then they came to Canada and had a child with disability. And the dad was so depressed. So helping the service providers understand where families are coming from and why they're behaving the way that they are.”

Theme 2

Practicing humility and self-awareness while avoiding assumptions or stereotypes

“Being open minded, willing to take that active listening role, practicing cultural humility, and understanding when you're speaking to the family. Yes, you're the specialist but at the same time that family knows more about themselves and their culture than you do, and there's something valuable in what they say.”

“What we would consider typically naturalistic about how you may play or engage with your child is not appropriate for some families. So it's making sure staff understand that there are other ways that we can promote development within that family's routine and respect the values and cultural beliefs a family has. And sometimes it's by including a sibling, because the sibling can play with the child. So how can we be creative about using resources within that family structure?”

Theme 3

Creating welcoming, inclusive spaces where diverse languages and cultural backgrounds are represented

“A culturally safe service is one that doesn't place too many roadblocks to accessing services. The more flexible we are and the more representation in our staff so that families see themselves in the employees that work here will allow families to feel safe and connected. How do we remain humble enough to realize that we don't have all the answers, and that we need to ask people more about what they need.”

Community Engagement



Conclusions

Current findings advance our understanding of how service providers define cultural safety and provide insights that can help promote equity in service provision for newcomer families.

