

Development in Children of Immigrant Families



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KEYWORDS

• Immigrant • Refugee • Children • Pediatric • Development

KEY POINTS

- Understanding contexts of migration and settlement is an essential component in the developmental and behavioral evaluation of an immigrant child.
- Acculturation, ethnic identity formation, and bilingualism are fundamental developmental processes for the immigrant child.
- Although bilingualism brings multiple cognitive and social benefits, dual-language learners are at increased risk of low academic achievement.
- Risks of stereotyping and unconscious bias are high in cross-cultural interactions; understanding the unique experience of each immigrant child relies on applying general knowledge to the specific interaction from a stance of cultural humility.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is one of the major societal issues of the day, bringing challenge and opportunity to those working to support the health and well-being of children. In the United States, the youngest segment of society has diversified fastest, with children from immigrant families increasing from 15% to 24% of the younger than age 18 population between 1994 and 2014.¹ By 2050, they are expected to make up one-third of all US children (**Fig. 1**).² Parents of immigrant children in the United States come from all regions of the world and show diverse settlement patterns (**Fig. 2**), whereas refugee families tend to come from specific regions in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Just less than two-thirds of refugees who resettled in the United States in 2014 came from Iraq, Burma, and Somalia.³

In pediatric settings, as the number of children from immigrant families increases, the need to understand the special issues they face becomes more pressing. Recent

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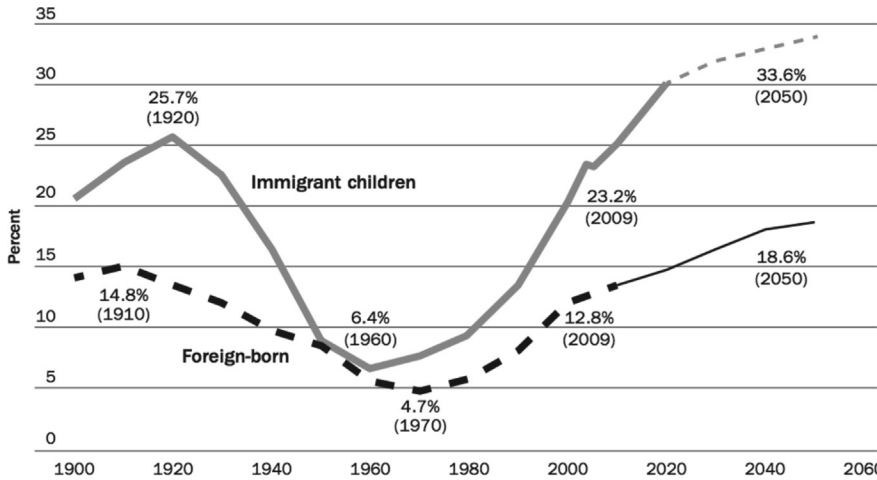


Fig. 1. Total foreign-born as share of total population and immigrant children as share of all children, 1900 to 2050. (Population estimates for 1900–1950 are based on Integrated Public-Use Microdata Series; Edmonston B, Passel JS. Ethnic demography: U.S. immigration and ethnic variations. In: Edmonston B, Passel JS, editors. Immigration and ethnicity: the integration of America’s newest arrivals. Washington: Urban Institute Press; 1994; Data for 1960–2000 and 2010–2050 are from Passel JS, Cohn D. U.S. population projections: 2005–2010. Washington: Pew Hispanic Center; 2008; and Data for 2001–2009 are from tabulations of the March Current Population Survey with imputations for legal status and corrections for undercoverage. See technical appendix; and From Passel JS. Demography of immigrant youth: past, present, and future. *Future Child* 2011;21(1):23; with permission.)

publications, such as the *Immigrant Child Health Toolkit* from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)⁴ and the article by Linton and colleagues,⁵ address the broad health needs of children of immigrant families. Here we focus on what is known about the effects of immigration on child development. Understanding of this area has expanded rapidly through work in multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, psychiatry, public health, public policy, and developmental pediatrics.

This article offers the practicing pediatric provider an orientation to current knowledge about child development in the immigrant context and a clinical approach to caring for immigrant children. In it, we provide a description of how child development theories have incorporated immigration, followed by a discussion of issues with special relevance to children living in an immigrant context. Finally, we outline tools and interventions applicable in the clinical setting.

Variations of “child of an immigrant family” are used throughout this article, as the phrase captures two distinct situations of interest to the pediatric practitioner: a child who immigrates from one country to another, also called first generation; and a child who is born in a new country to which a family has immigrated, or second generation. For brevity, the term “immigrant child” is also used to denote a child of an immigrant family, regardless of generational status. Although developmental processes and outcomes can differ widely for first- and second-generation immigrant children, research in this area is not yet well-developed, so generally they are treated together here (except where noted). Specific types of immigrant children, including refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, unaccompanied immigrant children, and undocumented immigrants, are defined in **Box 1**.

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