

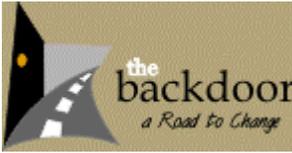
# Understanding and Supporting Immigrant Youth

VIDEO SCRIPT

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## ADAPTING TO CANADIAN CUSTOMS

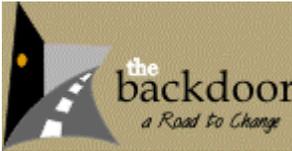
Canada is a country with 2 official languages (English and French), which traditionally is very supportive of immigrants from other countries, and encourages them to maintain their culture. As a result, many immigrants to Canada make an effort to maintain their language and some of the traditions and customs of their homeland, often joining with others from their homeland in establishing community, social, cultural, or religious organizations for this purpose. While they are doing this, they are also operating within the language, social, and legal requirements of Canada.

It can be difficult to operate within two cultures like this, especially for older immigrants who have grown up, studied, and worked in a non-Canadian culture, in a language with which they are much more comfortable than either of the two official Canadian languages. For children of immigrants, this adaptation is generally easier and quicker, for several reasons. For one thing the young mind is naturally built for learning, and secondly, children are required to engage in direct learning in school. School is a place where they will quickly become fluent in English (in most of the country, French, in some parts) and come into contact with Canadian customs and culture on a daily basis. This involves both direct learning in class, and also indirect learning, through following the rules and traditions in school, and socially interacting with other children.

Indirect learning occurs for people not only as a result of their interactions in the outside world, but also because of their exposure to societal communication systems such as television, radio, the Internet, newspapers, and books. Children, especially teenagers, are highly interested in television and music, as a way of connecting to others like themselves, and quickly learn which television programs and music are popular or “cool” within their age group, as they share their viewing and listening experiences with friends and acquaintances. They are also required to study subjects in school, which teach about the history of Canadian society and the way in which it functions today. As a result of these direct and indirect learning experiences, children tend to absorb the language and culture around them very quickly, like a sponge, with little effort.

Children, since they have not undergone the same level of training and experience in their native culture as their parents, and are required to interact every day with other children, whose opinions are very important to them, will tend to adapt to Canadian culture, and begin to internalize this as their own culture, rather than the culture of their parents.

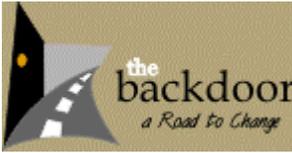
This difference in the speed and depth of language and cultural learning between children and their older relatives can create tensions within the family. This is especially true if older relatives are maintaining close ties with their native community through business, social, or religious activities, and feeling more comfortable in their native language rather than English. If they put pressure on their children to be a part of these activities, it can



result in the creation of a great deal of conflict and tension for them. They are then being asked to operate within a native culture, which is likely to feel more distant and foreign to them than the Canadian culture, which surrounds them everyday, and which will be the environment where they will have to find their future happiness, success, and prosperity. If this conflict is too great, immigrant children can respond with “minority group self-hate”, in which they begin to show disgust and contempt for their native culture, as a way of resolving the conflict within themselves, and making it easier to commit to Canadian Culture. They can also move in the other direction and join racially based gangs as a way of showing respect for their native culture, and reject parts of Canadian culture. This kind of resolution often happens when children feel they are being subjected to racial or cultural discrimination, or being poorly treated in other ways within Canadian culture. Joining in a strong, proud group within their own native culture can then become their way of defending themselves against a culture, which they feel is hurting them.

It is also possible for children to learn to operate effectively within both cultures, deriving a sense of belonging and strength from both. This solution, probably the healthiest, can be encouraged by relatives, if they understand that children growing up in Canada, will not have the same history as themselves and are bound to feel a stronger pull toward Canadian culture. Although this will not necessarily lead to a rejection of their native culture, they will naturally tend to give more importance to Canadian culture than their native culture. Understanding this process as natural and realistic will lead to greater tolerance for children’s choices of the Canadian way over the native way in many areas. This should not be seen as a sign of disrespect, but as a realistic, and practical adaptation to their environment.

The development and growth of children normally involves increasing struggles for freedom and individuality, and can be a difficult process in any family, creating tensions between parents and their children. The additional tensions created by a pull between cultures can make the growing pains of children, especially teenagers, whose struggles for freedom and individuality get a great deal of support from pop culture, particularly severe.

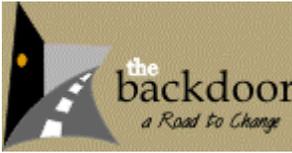


## ADJUSTMENT TO THE CANADIAN COMMUNITY

The wider Canadian community establishes commonly accepted values regarding social manners and courtesies, politeness, fairness, justice, morality, drug use, sexual behaviour, school behaviour, and appropriate employment for children. Some of these values are even likely to be translated into social rules or legal standards. These values, rules, or laws, can be quite different from those that immigrants have been used to in their native lands. For example, in Canada there are minimum wage and minimum age for employment laws, social and legal standards for acceptable clothes, and limits of parental authority standards and laws (for example the use of physical punishment). These standards and laws may be significantly different from those in the family's native country. Children will again tend to absorb these values very quickly through school, and the direct and indirect learning that occurs there. Older relatives are likely to take longer to learn these values, and also may feel that they are unfair or wrong, if they do not fit with their experiences and history in their own country.

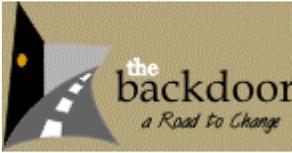
This can also be a source of tension between children and parents. As children grow into teenagers they become increasingly more influenced by their friends and recognize that there is a teen culture in the society around them. They will feel a greater need to fit in with the cultural values that they experience around them, as they go out into the world, daily. In fact they will already experience some tensions between teen culture and adult culture in Canadian society.

Parents may fight against some of the values that they see developing in their teens, some reflecting adult society, some teen society, and some a compromise between the two. Parents may view any particular value as unhealthy or inappropriate, in relation to their own history and experience. Limits to the parental ability to discipline, fashion choices, dating customs, and loyalties to friends versus family, are areas in which such conflicts can typically arise. If they do, it is important to understand the strength of the teen's need to belong within the teen culture, and also the reality that this is the pathway to the future happiness and success of the teen. Native cultural customs although they can be useful in their lives, are likely to be seen by the teen as basically from the past, and not relevant for many of their present issues and challenges. As a teenager, it is more important to fit in with the culture created by the people of their own age, in the society they live in, and satisfy the expectations associated with membership in this society, rather than to satisfy family expectations. Actually, it is not unusual for this balance to shift more in the family direction, when the immigrant teen grows out of his teen years and becomes an adult. Once he achieves a sense of being well-established in Canadian society, it is easier to look back at his native culture and select attractive aspects of it, without the worry that it might compromise his membership in Canadian society. The awareness of this process can sometimes be a source of comfort to parents, who are mourning the apparent rejection of their culture, by the teen.



Parents can understand and navigate their way through these problems more effectively if they make the attempt to learn about Canadian values and standards, particularly the teen versions of these, themselves, so that they can recognize when a teen's rebellious behaviour is simply a challenge of the parents' power, and when it is a reflection of the world as the teen sees it on a daily basis.

Certainly, if there are 2 sets of cultural standards pointing in opposite directions, this can be difficult for anyone, and at least in the first instance, it is easier for the teen to pick the standard, which seems to be supported by more of the important people in his life. This is likely to be the wider external community, rather than the family or the native cultural community. This choice should be seen as simply reflecting reality rather than disloyalty. In fact, parental understanding in this matter is actually more likely to encourage a teen to find ways of also incorporating some of the values and traditions of his native cultural group into his daily life, rather than attempts to forcibly get him to accept these values. If the teen feels that he is accepted in his teen cultural group, it is easier for him to choose to display certain aspects of his native culture which might even be considered "cool" in some segments of teen culture – this often happens in the areas of food, music, clothes, and religion where some native customs and styles can be seen as "in" with some sub-groups within teen culture. Showing off such aspects of his native culture can then actually increase the teen's status within teen society.



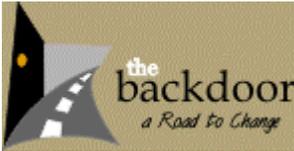
## ADJUSTMENT TO THE CANADIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

The most important cultural influences on teens occur through their attendance at school. School provides direct teaching for teens in both academic subjects like Mathematics, Science or English, for example, but also indirect teaching relating to social manners, customs, and relationships. Teachers may be the people who contribute the most to the teen's direct learning, but interaction with other children, and friendships that are developed as a result provide an immediate sense of connection and belonging for the child. This is a part of Canadian Society, and in school, immigrant teens are learning how to get along in this society, every day. They are learning the "do's and don'ts" of language, manners, and behaviour. They are learning what is considered "cool" in the areas of appearance, fashion, behaviour, music, and movies.

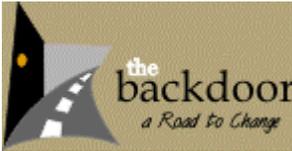
In fact teen culture tends to be more influential on teens than adult culture or the family. When it comes to key concerns for teens like dating, sexual activity, drug use, the attitudes within teen culture tends to influence how they want to behave much more than adult or parental influences.

It is very important for teens in Canadian Society to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within their social group. Failure to achieve this sense of acceptance can create a great deal of stress and emotional pain for teens. If they are struggling to gain this acceptance, it will probably be the most important thing on their mind and their struggles can include dressing or behaving outrageously, or if they feel rejected, joining rebel groups, which are minority groups within teen culture, often identified by specific fashion styles, music, and attitudes. If teens feel that race or culture is the basis for their rejection, this rebel group can take the form of an ethnically based gang, operating on the concept of "strength in togetherness", making it easier to withstand rejection by the larger group, through sticking together and making a virtue out of their race or ethnic background, which they feel is leading to their rejection. In the worst case, these kinds of tensions can lead to violence between these different sub-groups. Violence is a concern for teenagers, although most teenagers are able to avoid it, and report that it is not a major part of their lives.

Much of the time, teenagers will not share with parents the conflicts or stresses they are experiencing at school. It is easy for parents to focus only on school academic performance, such as marks, and ignore the importance of the culture that their children are living in. It is helpful if parents can communicate with teens about these social and cultural issues, and understand that their children have to learn to survive and thrive in a sub-culture, in which traditions and customs from the old world may seem to be irrelevant or even potentially hurtful or damaging.



Ultimately it is important for parents not to pressure teens to hold on to traditional ways, if they do not want to. Many teens will tend to lose touch with their native culture and language, because they simply do not have the energy to maintain these, and are focusing their energies on operating effectively within the teen culture, and the larger Canadian culture. This can be a positive adaptive process, and does not necessarily have to be negative. If you look at a teenager who for example is 18 years old, and arrived in Canada at age 8, it would be expected that this teen will be completely fluent in English, and will feel as comfortable in Canadian culture as other non-immigrant teens. On the other hand it would not be unusual to find older relatives, who having spent the same 10 years in Canada, will continue to feel more comfortable in their native language and in their native traditions and customs. This difference is created largely by the experiences in school, and is a process that is natural and should not be blocked or feared by parents



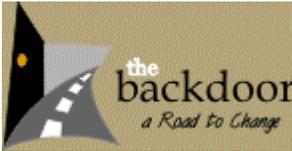
## THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

The Media – television, radio, newspapers – play a very important role in Canadian society. Television programs in particular, both news and drama, are probably the most important reflectors of the way the culture and society works. There are more media outlets in Canada, including those operating from the U.S.A., than in most of the native countries of immigrants. These media outlets have considerable freedom of expression, by Canadian law, and compete with each other for the attention of various segments of the population, with advertising as the main source of revenue. Teens, because of their spending power, particularly in the areas of clothes and music are an important consumer segment for the media.

For teens their culture tends to be transmitted through music and certain television programs which become popular among teenagers, and reflect values, behavioural styles, styles of speech and fashions which are admired and copied by teens. For teens to feel connected to teen society they need to be aware of these styles and values, even if they might personally choose not to follow them. If they do choose to follow them, their behaviour and speech may seem incomprehensible or ridiculous to adults, and their fashions can seem to be uncomfortable, inappropriate and even outrageous. This may simply reflect the need of the teen culture to rebel against adult society so that teens can assert their own independence and freedom. For parents looking at this, and their own experiences of growing up, this may seem like another world, and they may find it difficult to understand or tolerate. This gap between teens and parents can be even greater for parents whose childhood experiences were in another culture, perhaps one in which teens were allowed much less freedom of expression, and were required to follow the culture of adults.

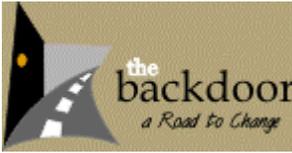
The existence of a teen culture, separate from the adult culture, appears to be a phenomenon which exists primarily in rich societies, in which teenagers do not have to use all their energies to assure their own survival and if any energy is left, contribute to the family. It occurs in a society where teens have the money, time, and social permission, to create their own society. For example, buy CD's which are considered to be cool within their group, and walk around with earphones playing them on their CD players, when not playing them loudly on their stereo systems. Listening to music of this kind makes them feel connected to their own teenage society. This is such a powerful force that many schools allow these personal CD players in school, and sometimes even in class, recognizing that they are dealing with a youth culture that is so strong and prevalent that it is better to co-exist with it, rather than try to attack it or stamp it out.

This attitude is a good one to copy for parents in general, and immigrant parents even more so, since their initial reaction to Canadian teen culture, based on their own cultural experiences, may be one of anger and disgust. They also should look at their children's behaviour as reflective of a teen culture, in which they need to feel they are members. If



they are able to become members then they have the ability to choose which parts of the culture they will personally incorporate and which they will not. However, if they do not achieve membership, then they may feel total rejection. This would be similar to becoming a member or citizen of a country. Once you have achieved this you can make choices around where you will live or work, or who you will vote for, but you cannot make these choices if you are not allowed into the country in the first place. In this sense the teen culture is like a country. If you are allowed in, you feel part of something bigger than yourself, and you have many choices. If you are not allowed in you feel isolated, have few choices, and all your energies are devoted to gaining entry.

One way that immigrant parents can achieve some understanding of the teen “country” to which their children belong is to visit it by sometimes watching their TV programs with them, or listening to their music. Doing so can give parents a better understanding of the rules and values that their teens are absorbing. It is then easier to pick the areas and times in which they can bring forth the values and customs of their own native culture, in ways which make it more possible for the teen to fit some of these into teen culture, recognizing that this is really the teen’s primary culture. If parents get into a struggle to impose their own culture, they will create serious stresses and conflicts in their teens. A teen may feel pressured to make a black-or-white choice between the teen culture in their external environment, and the native culture in their family environment. If forced into this kind of choice situation, then the teen loses, whatever choice he makes. He either chooses to become isolated from the Canadian culture around him, or isolated from his own family. This is not a happy or healthy choice, and is bound to lead to anxiety and trouble at home, school, or with the police. It would be in a teens best interests, to find his own balance between the different parts of the different cultures, deciding for him or herself which weightings to give to each of the parts.



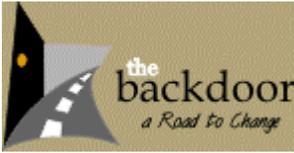
## ADJUSTMENT OR EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

The teenage years are full of difficulties and challenges. This is a period of transition during which the child gradually moves into adulthood. In order for this to happen, growth must occur not only in the physical area, but also in emotional, intellectual, and social areas. This growth naturally involves overcoming challenges and problems, and there are many times during these transition years when the teen may find himself stuck in-between important psychological-emotional stages. They will have left one stage but yet fully crossed the bridge to the next stage. This process of growth and maturing during the teenage years therefore naturally involves changing ideas, emotions, goals, and loyalties. It has been compared to riding in a boat on a stormy sea, a long way from the departure harbour, with still a long way to go to the arrival harbour. For immigrant teens this process can be even more challenging, because they also have to deal with the fact that their parents and family are also having to adapt to unfamiliar territory, and are therefore unable to provide as solid a support system for the teen's journey, as they might have been able to do in their native country.

Emotions, behaviours and attitudes which go up-and-down, and change frequently, are therefore quite normal for teens. However, they can also develop problems beyond the normal, in other words, the boat they are in is not only being thrown about by the waves, but is also developing a leak. The first sign of such problems often occurs in school, since this is where they are required to interact with the outside world on a daily base in a demanding environment, in which rules and expectations need to be observed. Signs of school problems can be direct, such as messages of concern or complaint from the school about behaviour, attitudes, or academic performance. Indirect signs can include not wanting to go to school or making up reasons to miss school, or being consistently negative about teachers and/or children in school.

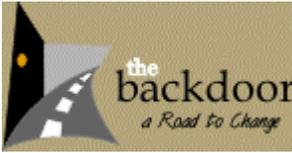
Problems can also become evident at home, increase in argumentative or oppositional behaviours at home, crying a lot, or staying in bed well beyond the usual amount. Unexplained injuries can point to fighting, possibly even involvement in a youth gang, or self-harm behaviours. Unexplained money, or the sudden presence of clothes, CD's, or other equipment, which is beyond the teen's budget, can point to involvement in stealing, either individually, with a friend, or in a gang.

If the teen's emotional behaviour or mood seems to be more intense or changeable than usual, that is considerably more happy, more angry, or more sad than usual, or for longer periods, or with bigger or more frequent swings between positive and negative moods, then the possibility of drug use needs to be considered



Other worrying signs are increasing secretiveness about their activities outside the home, and especially lying about where they are going, what they are doing, or who they are with.

The basic signs of problems beyond what would be considered normal for a teen are therefore significant, lasting changes in the teen's routines, characteristic behaviours, or emotions. If these are noticed, then intervention by the parents is called for, if there has not already been some intervention from the outside community, such as school. Possible approaches to intervention are discussed in the next module.

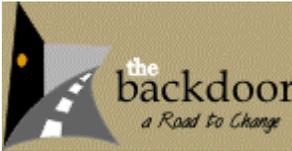


## DEALING WITH ADJUSTMENT OR EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

If problems are first noticed by the school, the school will generally let the parents know. They may wish to discuss the problems with the parent on the phone, or may call a special meeting at the school to be attended by one or both parents, and the various school personnel that have witnessed or been involved with the problem. Generally, the Assistant Principal will be involved in such a meeting (sometimes the Principal), and possibly a School Counsellor if he has been involved in the problem. At such a meeting, strategies for managing the teen's problems will be discussed, and actions may be suggested for the parents. School Board resources may be suggested or offered, and recommendations may be given regarding resources or programs in the community that might be of help in the situation. If the teen's problems continue or worsen, there are likely to be more calls from the school and further strategy meetings. If the problems are of an academic kind, remedial strategies may be tried, and if ineffective, the teen may be moved to a special program within the school, or into a new school. If the problems are disruptive to the school or involve criminal activities, the police may also be involved, and the school authorities are likely to consider suspension or even expulsion from the school. They would normally not reach this point until help efforts over a period of time have failed.

If the teen is not showing problems in school to a level worrying to the school authorities, but is showing problems at home, it would be important for the parents to try to identify the areas which the problems may relate to. Possible areas to be considered are: (1) problems related to school, which could include problems with teachers, problems with other students, or problems on the way to or from school (such as being bullied or threatened); (2) problems relating to life outside school and outside the home, involving social activities and relationships; (3) problems arising from inside the family, about which the teen is feeling upset or angry; (4) problems relating to the teen's personal life, such as depression, drug or alcohol use, worries about health problems, or worries about social popularity, or academic failure. Although the parents may not be able to identify the specific problem, if they can establish the area in which the problem lies, they can be more effective in attempting to find ways to resolve the problem, and in accessing the right helping agents.

Once parents notice a significant negative change in the teen's behaviour or emotional functioning, they should make an attempt to discuss their perceptions or concerns with the teen. This of course will be easier to do, if parents have already established a relationship with the teen which has given them a reasonable idea of what things are important in the teen's life. Parents are then able to talk to the teen about how things are going in the teen's life. If the parents' relationship with the teen is based primarily on setting rules, discipline, and checking academic performance, then it will be very difficult to have a discussion about emotions, worries, and concerns. In that case, other family



members, or even friends of the family, who appear to the teen to have a less power-based relationship with him, may be helpful in uncovering the area in which the teen is having problems. Many problems can be resolved in this way, sometimes just the relief of talking about a problem or worry with someone who listens and cares will take a lot of the heat out of the problem, and make it resolvable by the teen himself or by some simple suggestions or advice.

Even if it is not possible to resolve the problem at the family level, an idea of the area of the problem makes it easier for parents to get good advice about where to seek help. Two common sources of either direct help or suggestions or referrals for more specialized help are the Family Doctor and school personnel (depending on the type of problem, the Principal, Assistant Principal, School Counsellor, or significant teachers can be very helpful in this way). The clearer the problem, of course, the easier it is to provide helpful advice, resources, or identify appropriate resources which can be of help.

If the teen is uncommunicative and unwilling to talk about his problems, these external authorities (the Family Doctor, school personnel) still probably represent the best avenue for obtaining an assessment by a Psychologist, Pediatrician, or Adolescent Psychiatrist to help identify the nature of the problem, after which possibilities for managing or treating the problem can be established.

Even when teens do run into serious adjustment or emotional problems it is important for the parents not to despair. Teenagers are incredibly resilient, and can survive and move beyond the most serious emotional problems to a point where in their early twenties they can be practically unrecognizable as the same people that they were as teenagers.