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A Study  
of the Settlement Experiences  
of Eritrean and Somali Parents in Toronto

2001

Community Information Centre for the City of York  
Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto  
SIWA - Somali Immigrant Women Association

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# A Study of the Settlement Experiences of Eritrean and Somali Parents in Toronto

by  
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## Advisory Committee

The project's advisory committee met monthly to provide direction, resources and advice. Members of the committee were:

Erica Lawson	African Canadian Legal Clinic
Doug Hum	Children's Aid Society of Toronto
Elisete Bettencourt	Citizenship and Immigration Canada
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## Project Staff

The project was a joint initiative of three organizations and the project's staff were:

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## Project Volunteers

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### Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto

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Muna Farah	Hodan Salat
Safia Gassim	Hawa Warsame

# Executive Summary

## Goal

This report explores the parenting issues faced by Eritrean and Somali parents in Toronto, as they adjust to living in a new culture. The research was part of a larger project of three community agencies: Community Information Centre for the City of York, Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, and SIWA - Somali Immigrant Women Association. The overall goal of the project was to 'develop a model to facilitate the integration of newcomer African parents and their children, particularly those of Somali and Eritrean origin.' The project was funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ontario Administration of Settlement and Integration Services (OASIS).

## Method

Data for the research was collected using a structured survey. This was divided into four main areas: settling children into the Canadian school system, experiences with the child welfare system, parenting in a new culture, and demographic details. Some 50 Eritrean and 50 Somali parents completed the survey that was used in this study. Additional research information was collected from a series of parenting workshops attended by 57 Eritrean and 62 Somali parents; all workshop participants were women. As well, the research included extensive consultations with the settlement staff of the three agencies sponsoring the project, and feedback and information from members of the advisory committee. The study also included secondary research, drawn from a review of the literature on the experiences of Eritreans and Somalis in Canada.

## Background of the Eritrean and Somali Communities

Eritrea and Somalia are East African countries and both are primarily agrarian societies. Eritreans began to enter Canada in significant numbers in the mid-1980s and most came as permanent residents (landed immigrants). Somalis began to arrive in Canada in the 1990s mainly as refugees. Both Eritrean and Somali communities differ notably from mainstream Canadian society in terms of language, religion, race, family size and culture.

There are few studies that deal directly with the Eritrean community in Canada. Until recently, most Eritreans who came to Canada were documented as Ethiopians. As well, Eritreans seeking help with settlement issues were often referred to agencies serving the Ethiopian community. In this

study, background information on the Eritrean community is often inferred from studies of Ethiopians.

In Toronto, the Eritrean and Somali communities are extremely poor. Their socio-economic profile indicates that their unemployment rate is two and a half times that of all Canadians, and their median income is a third less than other Canadians.

## Key Findings

From the surveys used in this study, the typical respondent was female with three or more children. Approximately 70 per cent of the Eritreans were Muslims and 30 per cent were Christians. All of the Somalis indicated that they were Muslims.

Eritrean parents were most likely to be Canadian citizens and the Somalis tended to be permanent residents (landed immigrants) or Convention Refugees. The children in the Eritrean community were mainly born in Canada while most of the Somali children were born overseas.

Most of the Eritrean and Somali parents who took part in the study had a secondary or high school level of education. A large number of Somali parents had only basic education. This and other research indicates that a low level of formal education limits the parents' ability to help their children with the Canadian school system.

The Eritrean parents who took part in this study were most likely to be employed. The Somali parents were most likely to receive their main income from government assistance.

There were significant English language differences between the two communities. Eritreans were most likely to be comfortable using and understanding English. The 22 per cent of the Eritrean respondents who were male has skewed this result. Subtracting the male responses lowers the overall percentage of those who were comfortable with English from 62 per cent to 40 per cent. Somalis were most likely to be uncomfortable using and understanding English. Having limited English language skills negatively affects both parents and children, as for instance, parents are less likely to find appropriate employment and are less able to help their children with homework.

Both communities had difficulties with settling their children into Canadian schools, due to language, cultural barriers and religious barriers. However, Eritreans tended to be satisfied with the school system. Somalis were most likely to have negative experiences with the school system and continued to be dissatisfied with it. Somali parents reported that a notable proportion of their children had difficulties with homework, teachers, class-work, and were being suspended. Somali students also had significant problems with English.

The Eritrean and Somali parents who took part in the study were isolated from mainstream Canadian society and settlement services. Few had heard of parent-child drop-in centres. In the feedback discussions with the parents many said they would use these services if they were available in their language and staffed by people who are sensitive to their culture and religion.

Approximately one-quarter of the Somali parents who participated in the study had had experiences with a children's aid society. While the parents understood why the children's aid society was called, they did not feel that the agency understood or respected their religious or cultural beliefs, or that they received proper information on what was happening. Most of the parents reported that services were delivered in a language that they did not understand.

In Toronto, Eritreans and Somalis seem to be at different stages of adapting to life in Canada. Eritrean parents are focused on maintaining their culture and heritage, and understanding the Canadian school system. However, the findings for the Eritrean community must be taken with extreme caution as so little is known about the true needs of the community. Very limited background research has been done on the Eritrean community in Toronto. Settlement workers at the agencies sponsoring this research feel that the needs of the Eritrean community are grossly under-estimated. As well, they are concerned about the lack of settlement services for the Eritrean community, who were not seen as separate and distinct from the Ethiopian community upon arrival in Canada. This, they feel, has led to the invisibility of the community, and the general lack of information that we encountered during this research project.

Somali parents are in the early stages of the settlement process, and their needs are focused on basic living such as finding employment, adequate housing, and learning English.

## Recommendations

### Settlement Support

**Recommendation 1:** Initial settlement programs, services and materials aimed at Eritrean women should be translated or interpreted into Tigrigna or Arabic.

**Recommendation 2:** In order for initial settlement programs, services and materials to be effective for the Somali community, they should be translated or interpreted into Somali.

**Recommendation 3** Further research is needed to understand if and how Eritrean and Somali parents are using the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada classes and other ESL programs in the community to learn English

**Recommendation 4:** Further research is needed to investigate access to employment and employment support services for Somali women as the majority who took part in the study were poor.

**Recommendation 5** The outstanding issue of settlement services for the Eritrean community should be addressed as they did not receive settlement services separate from the Ethiopian community when they first came to Canada.

**Recommendation 6:** As settlement is a two-way process between newcomers and the host society, agencies serving Eritreans and Somalis need to educate the newcomers about the social and community services system that is available to help them with settlement and integration.

**Recommendation 7:** Settlement agencies need to do strategic outreach and target specific programs to the Eritrean and Somali communities to increase their awareness of and usage of services which are available in the community, particularly parent-child drop-in centres.

## Parental Support

**Recommendation 8:** Parenting programs, information and services aimed at Eritrean and Somali mothers should be translated into Tigrigna, Arabic and Somali to increase their effectiveness.

**Recommendation 9:** Further research is needed on what are the most effective ways to reach and educate Eritrean and Somali parents on the Canadian school system and the child welfare system.

**Recommendation 10:** Parenting programs and services aimed at or used by Eritrean and Somali parents should be sensitive to their cultural and religious beliefs.

## Canadian Schools

**Recommendation 11:** Boards of education's programs, information and services aimed at Eritrean and Somali parents should be translated into Tigrigna, Arabic and Somali to increase their effectiveness.

**Recommendation 12:** Boards of education need to put in place a special program for Eritrean and Somali parents which explains the basics of how the education system operates, including parents' rights and responsibilities.

**Recommendation 13:** Boards of education need to develop a program that would formally identify students who are refugees, as without proper identification the unique needs of these students may be underestimated.

**Recommendation 14:** Boards of education need to promote to the Somali community, existing programs and services that are available to help immigrant and refugee students to adjust to the school system.

**Recommendation 15:** Further research is needed to explore why the Somali community has such a high level of dissatisfaction with the school system.

**Recommendation 16:** Further research is needed on how and why a relatively high number of Somali students are being suspended from schools. The schools need to either explore a more constructive alternative to dealing with these students, or if these alternatives already exist, promote them to the Somali community.

**Recommendation 17:** Boards of education need to promote to Eritrean and Somali parents its policies on respecting cultural and religious differences in schools, as well as what to do if the parents feel that the policies are not being practiced.

**Recommendation 18:** Boards of education should consider cultural sensitivity training for both students and teachers so that they are able to understand and appreciate the different traditions and norms of students from diverse backgrounds.

**Recommendation 19:** Boards of education need to develop an outreach strategy that would encourage Eritrean and Somali parents to be more involved in school councils and other volunteer activities.

**Recommendation 20:** Boards of education should develop a mother-tongue mentoring and tutoring program for Eritrean and Somali students who are experiencing problems with English language and with school-work. This program should be available to students from grade one.

**Recommendation 21:** Boards of education should develop a parental support program that would instruct Eritrean and Somali parents on how they can support their children with school-work, even when the parents have limited English language skills.

**Recommendation 22:** Boards of education should develop a heritage language program specifically for Somali students.

## Children's Aid Societies

**Recommendation 23:** Children's aid societies should translate or interpret its programs, services and information into the languages of the clients being served. In the case of the Somali community, these should be in Somali. This will allow the parents to understand the process and thus to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

**Recommendation 24:** Children's aid societies need to recognise and be sensitive to the impact of post-traumatic stress on refugee parents and children in the Somali community.

**Recommendation 25:** The staff of children's aid societies should be sensitive to the religious, cultural and parenting norms in the Somali community. There could be a more delicate balance between this community's traditions, values and practices and the necessary upholding of Canada's child welfare laws.

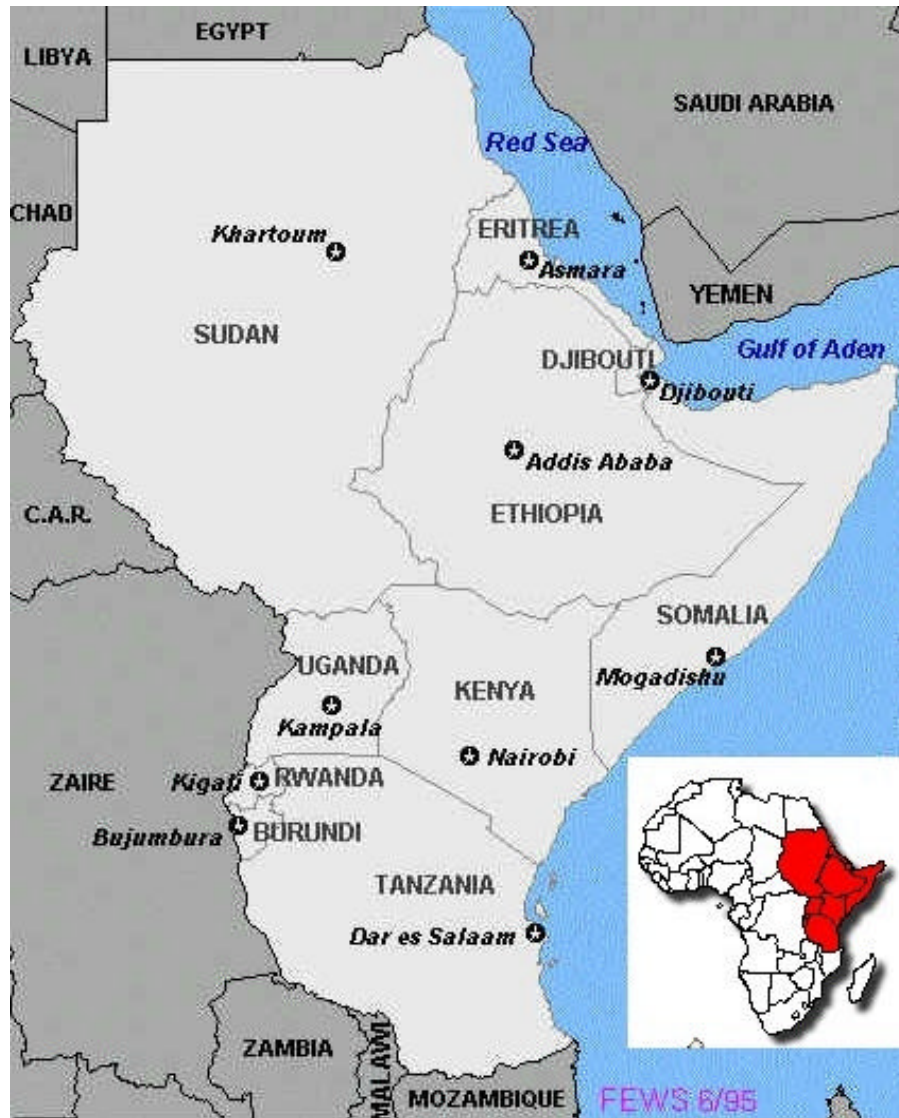
**Recommendation 26:** Children's aid societies need to explore ways to support informal networks for substitute care that exists in the Somali community.

**Recommendation 27:** Further research is needed on how children's aid societies can attract, recruit and retain Muslim foster parents and homes for Muslim children who are at risk.

## Basic Research

**Recommendation 28:** More in-depth general research is needed on the Eritrean community. Information on the community is scarce and this contributes to their invisibility and marginalization.

# Map of East Africa



## Introduction

The three agencies that coordinated this project were Community Information Centre for the City of York (CICCY), Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto (ECCC) and SIWA - Somali Immigrant Women Association (SIWA). For the past few years the agencies had been working in partnership to deliver settlement services for newcomers, funded by the provincial government by Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, under its Newcomer Settlement Program

Staff and volunteers at the agencies began seeing patterns with a number of the African clients that they were serving. Many were immigrant mothers who were having problems with the children's aid societies, the education system or the legal system in regards to their children. The mothers were finding that language and cultural issues made dealing with the different systems very frustrating. The agencies were struggling to help these clients, on a one-to-one basis, without having a full understanding of the context and the prevalence of these issues.

It was clear that a coordinated response was needed. The three agencies submitted a joint proposal to the federal government to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), Ontario Administration of Settlement and Integration Services (OASIS).

In 1998 CIC consulted with newcomers and other stakeholders in Ontario to determine their settlement needs and priorities, with the aim of matching funding to these needs. Newcomers identified accessing accurate settlement information and services, in their native languages, as a high area of need (1998, The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs. *Consultation on additional settlement dollars: A summary report. A public consultation for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Settlement Directorate – Ontario Region*). In implementing the recommendations from the consultations, CIC issued a call for proposals for one-time projects that would meet the needs and priorities identified during the consultations. All project proposals were reviewed by OASIS staff and by a panel that included representatives of the City of Toronto (Access and Equity Department and Public Health Unit), the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, and Ryerson Polytechnic University (School of Early Childhood Education).

The panel recommended that the joint proposal from CICCY, ECCC and SIWA should be funded under the Access One-Time Project criteria, as it met the requirements of providing access to settlement information and services. The overall goal of the project was to 'develop a model to facilitate the integration of newcomer African parents and their children, particularly those of Somali and Eritrean origin.'

The objectives of the project were to:

- Identify and clearly articulate the issues facing newcomer African parents.
- Improve access to parenting information and services for newcomer African parents.
- Increase participation in parenting programs and family drop-in centres by newcomer African parents who are in need of such support.
- Identify and make accessible language-specific parenting information that will assist African newcomer parents to adjust and integrate into the community.
- Improve working relationships with Children's Aid and education system workers in the matter of early identification of children-at-risk and the provision of parenting support for newcomer African parents.
- Foster greater involvement of newcomer African parents in their children's schooling and school activities.
- Address the applicability of the recommended model to newcomer parents of other ethnic origins.

This report deals only with the research component of the project. There are some limitations to the study. First, the research is exclusively focused on the Eritrean and Somali communities. During the Advisory Committee meetings it became clear that it was beyond the resources of the project to deal with the diversity of the African community in Toronto. The Advisory Committee recommended that the research focus on Eritreans and Somalis, as they were the main groups using the settlement services of CICCY, ECCC and SIWA.

Second, the report tries to give information that is specific to the Eritrean and Somali communities. Where this is not possible, inferences are made from data covering the African or Black communities. For example, there are few records or studies that deal directly with the Eritrean community. All Eritreans who came to Canada up to the mid-1990s were documented as Ethiopians, as Eritrea was not yet an independent country.

Third, during the research it transpired that many members of the Eritrean and Somali communities were still experiencing significant settlement issues - even though they had been living in Canada for more than five years. In order to provide a more rounded picture of the needs of these communities, and to document their experiences, both newcomers and more established immigrants were included in the study.

Fourth, the research is a descriptive study of Eritrean and Somali parents. It was not intended as a comparative study of the two communities. Moreover, as the research is small in scale, and the sample of 100 participants was non-randomly selected, the research findings are tentative.

There are five chapters in the report. Chapter one is the introduction, and sets the context for the report. Chapter two gives some background information on the Eritrean and Somali communities in Toronto. It covers the pre-migration history of the communities, their settlement patterns, their socio-economic profile, and the parenting issues faced by the newcomers. Chapter three describes the methods used in the study. Chapter four presents the findings of the research. It gives a general profile of the typical respondent and includes a demographic description of the two communities. The results are then discussed under the headings of language, children and the Canadian education system and parenting. Chapter five is a summary and presents the recommendations from the study.

Appendix one is a list of the acronyms used in the report. Appendix two is a copy of the research survey.

# Background on the Eritrean and Somali Communities in Toronto

This chapter provides a brief overview of the Eritrean and Somali communities. It discusses their traditional family structure, the seeds of their migration, settlement patterns in Toronto, the socio-economic profile of the communities and the parenting issues that they encounter in Canada. Throughout the chapter inferences about Eritrea are mainly drawn from Ethiopian studies, as there are few documented studies dealing with Eritreans in Toronto.

## Family Structure in Eritrea and Somalia

Eritrea and Somalia are both countries in East Africa in the Horn of Africa. The nations are primarily agrarian societies with the majority of the population involved in farming or livestock (Tebeje, 1989; Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). In agrarian societies the extended family and kinship network are the foundations of social structure. People turn to their kin when they need advice, accommodation, and assistance with earning an income or with schooling. In agrarian societies a typical household may consist of parents, children, grandparents and a few other family members (Hoogvelt, 1983; Tebeje, 1989).

Children are highly valued in agrarian societies. They are seen as gifts from God and are the wealth of the family (Ibrahim, 1991). In the absence of retirement saving plans, pensions and insurance, parents rely on their children to take care of them when they are old. The more children a couple have, the richer they are perceived to be. Children are brought up to be self-reliant, obedient and to be helpful. When the primary caregiver is not available, the children are taken care of by the extended family and are looked after by the community.

In Eritrea and Somalia, women gain status from having children and their role is centred on the home and caring for their children. Women living in the cities are more likely to have careers outside of the home, but in rural areas this would be the exception (Ibrahim, 1991). As women's role is restricted to home life, until recently education for them was not a priority. When the family's resources are limited and education has to be paid for, invariably the boys in the family are given preference. In Somalia, only about 14 per cent of adult women are literate (Ibrahim, 1991).

Traditionally, one-parent families were extremely rare in Eritrea and Somalia. Although women play a crucial role in family life, they are not often the head of the family (Adan, 1992; Tebeje, 1989). Exceptions occur only in cases of divorce or with the death of the husband. However, most often when a woman is widowed, her husband's next of kin takes on the role of provider and protector of the widow and her children. In the case of divorce, the woman's father, brother or next of kin takes this responsibility unless she remarries. These cultural practices highlight the fact that women were not socialized to raise their children alone.

Traditional family structures and childrearing practices were affected by the wars in Eritrea and Somalia. In Eritrea, the war created new opportunities for women, as approximately 40 per cent of the liberation army were women (Atsuko, 1999). They were soldiers, mechanics, organizers and nurses. Many of these women delayed marriage and having children long past the traditional age for these rites. Currently about 20 per cent of Eritrea's members of parliament are women. In Somalia, the changes in women's roles are more recent. The war and subsequent refugee process created a large number of single-parent households, headed by women.

## The Seeds of Migration

Eritrea is one of Africa's newest independent republics, gaining its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Eritrea is a multicultural and multilingual society with nine main ethnic groups. Though the exact proportion varies, it is estimated that slightly more than half of Eritreans are Muslims and the rest are Christians (Paice, 1996). The 30-year war of independence made many Eritreans refugees, and the number of refugees increased in 1999 with renewed fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the border dispute.

Somalis are from a homogenous society where 95 per cent of the population belong to the same ethnic group, speak the same language, share the same culture and are predominantly Muslims (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). For the past 30 years Somalia has suffered from a military dictatorship and civil unrest. In the 1990s the civil war became more intense and affected the whole country. The war, coupled with a famine, led to a large exodus of refugees to neighboring African countries. Many of these spent years in refugee camps before fleeing to Canada and other countries.

## Settlement Patterns in Toronto

On settling into a new country, refugees face a number of new challenges. Their pre-migration experiences affect how easily they are able to rebuild their lives. To integrate successfully into the new society, refugees must find a middle ground between maintaining their own traditions and the new culture (Scott, 2001). Their settlement is also affected by the relationship to the host society.

According to the 1996 census, there were 7,005 Ethiopians (including Eritreans) in Toronto (Ornstein, 2000). The current number of Eritreans in the city is unknown. Prior to the formation of Eritrean community agencies, Eritreans seeking assistance with settlement issues were referred to the agencies serving the Ethiopian community. There are few records or studies that deal directly with the Eritrean community. This is a major problem as in effect the community is invisible, hence marginalized, and this makes it difficult to assess their true needs. As well, Eritreans live in all areas of Toronto. This geographical diversity makes it more difficult for the community to be visible or for agencies to deliver services to them.

Most Eritreans who came to Canada in the 1980s, came as permanent residents (landed immigrants). They arrived under a government resettlement program in collaboration with the United Nations (Aman, 2001). Often the Eritreans did not come directly to Canada as they were widely scattered in African countries including Sudan, Somalia, Kenya and Egypt, as well as in European countries such as Italy, Greece and Germany.

Many of the Eritreans were single young men. (Aman, 2001). Once they had settled and gained Canadian citizenship, many went back to Eritrea to marry. They then sponsored their wives to join them in Canada.

From the 1996 census, there were 7,200 Somalis in Toronto (Ornstein, 2000). Since then there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Somalis in the city. Their actual number is debatable, ranging from 40,000-100,000. The Globe and Mail (2000) used the conservative figure of 40,000-50,000. Somalis are geographically concentrated with large numbers in Etobicoke and Scarborough, others have settled in York, North York and downtown Toronto.

Most Somalis came to Canada as refugees. While an examination of Canada's immigration and refugee policies and procedures is beyond the scope of this research, they will be briefly sketched here, due to their impact on the Eritrean, and to a greater extent, the Somali community. In very broad terms, refugees must follow a prescribed series of immigration steps before attaining the ultimate goal of Canadian citizenship.

First, they must be formally recognized as refugees by the government (as Refugee Claimants). Refugee Claimants are expected to live on assistance from the government, as generally, only those who cannot do so are eligible for employment authorization for temporary work permits (CIC, 2001). Refugee Claimants have to go through a formal hearing with the Refugee Division of the Immigration and Refugee Board. If the hearing is successful, Refugee Claimants are deemed to be Convention Refugees, and as such are protected from forced repatriation to the place where they would face persecution. If the hearing is unsuccessful, Refugee Claimants have a number of ways in which they can appeal, depending on circumstances. Ultimately, if the appeal is unsuccessful, Refugee Claimants will be asked to voluntarily leave the country or they will be deported.

The next step in the process is the application to become permanent residents (landed immigrants). There are two streams for processing these applications, the regular that applies to Convention Refugees and the special that applies to a sub-category of Convention Refugees called

'Undocumented Convention Refugees'. Once permanent residency is granted people can subsequently apply to become Canadian citizens.

Most Somalis are Undocumented Convention Refugees. All immigrants and refugees need official documents to confirm their identity. Due to the civil war and the collapse of the Somali state, most Somalis do not have birth certificates or passports. To handle these types of refugee cases, the Canadian government amended the Immigration Act to create a new category for refugees without identity documents – the Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class (Israelite, et al, 1999). This came into effect in 1997. According to the Act, Undocumented Convention Refugees had to maintain their refugee status for five years before they could apply for permanent residency. This waiting period was recently reduced to three years (CIC, 2001). Currently, Undocumented Convention Refugee status applies only to citizens of Somalia and Afghanistan.

In Canada refugees generally face restricted access to entry, employment and education (CCR, 1999). In general, refugees cannot sponsor family members and thus face difficulties in reuniting their families. If refugees leave the country before becoming permanent residents they will not generally be readmitted unless they have obtained a Minister's permit. Refugee status also affects access to post-secondary education as refugees are ineligible for education loans from Ontario Students Assistance Program. This creates an enormous barrier as refugee students may not be able to pay the high cost of post-secondary education. Refugees also face employment barriers, as they are eligible only for temporary work permits. While these permits can be extended as needed, some jobs are closed to the holders of these permits and many employers will not hire workers with this type of restriction (Israelite, et al, 1999). Becoming self-employed is another obstacle for refugees, as they are not eligible for bank loans or other forms of credit if they wish to start a business.

Undocumented Convention Refugee status places enormous burdens on the Somali community. In effect people must live in suspense for a minimum of three years. This means that families cannot be reunited; restarting a career becomes an uphill task as people are effectively shut out of higher education and appropriate employment (CCR, 2000). This has a particular impact on the youth in the Somali community. Once they have finished high school, their prospects largely consist of 'hanging out' with little to do (SIAO, 1988). This may reinforce feelings of depression, powerlessness and victimization.

Once refugees are eligible for and apply for permanent residence, they must then wait another 12-24 months for their application to be processed. All those applying for permanent residency, including refugees, must pay fees of \$500 per adult and \$100 per child to the federal government to have their immigration papers processed (CIC, 2001). Prior to February 2000 they also had to pay a right of landing fee of \$975 per adult (CCR, 1999). These fees formed an insurmountable barrier for many Somalis. The federal government acknowledged this by exempting refugees from paying the right of landing fees.

Until 1999, Somalis were at a distinct disadvantage compared to other refugee communities (Adan, 1992). They encountered systemic barriers and discrimination at each step of the refugee process. In the absence of official identity documents, Somalis were required to maintain their refugee status for several years compared to as little as 18 months for others who also came to Canada as Convention Refugees.

## Social and Economic Profiles of the Communities

As refugees settle into their new homeland, a first priority is to generate an income. Education, employment and income are interrelated, as together they determine a person's overall socio-economic status. In Canada, racialised groups as a whole face severe disadvantages in employment and income compared to the rest of the population (Kunz, 2000). While some of these are due to differences in education, when this is accounted for, people of colour are still at a disadvantage. Racism and discrimination are part of their daily reality (Li, 1998).

Education is a key indicator of employment and income. As Canada is a knowledge-based society, a high school diploma is often the minimum qualification for jobs that pay more than minimum wage. Ornstein's analysis of the 1996 census shows that the higher a person's level of education, the less likely it is for them to be unemployed, and the more likely it is for them to have higher income. The census does not distinguish between Eritreans and Ethiopians; therefore, once again, information about Eritreans is inferred from data about Ethiopians. From the 1996 census, Ethiopians and Somalis are most likely to be high school graduates with few university graduates (Ornstein, 2000).

When examining employment, Ornstein shows that the unemployment rates are highest among the Black groups. Their overall rate of 19 per cent is nearly twice the Toronto average of 10.8 per cent. Within the Black groups, unemployment is highest among Ethiopians and Somalis with an average of 24 per cent.

Ethiopians and Somalis are poor. Ornstein's analysis of the 1996 census show that the median income for persons in full-time, full year work in Toronto is \$30,000 for women and \$35,000 for men (table 1). In contrast, Ethiopian women earn \$16,400, and Somali women \$21,300. Nearly half of all Somali women and men are in lower-skill manual jobs. Among the Ethiopians, three-quarters of the women and men were found in these types of jobs.

Table 1: Median Income from Full-time, Full-Year Employment

	Women (\$)	Men (\$)
Total Median Income	30,000	35,000
African, Black, Caribbean	25,000	26,000
Somali	21,300	25,000
Ethiopian	16,400	21,000

Adapted from Ornstein, 2000, p.62

Approximately 23 per cent of people in Toronto are poor (Ornstein, 2000). According to Ornstein's assessment, Ethiopians and Somalis are among the poorest of the poor. About 70 per cent of

Ethiopians and 63 per cent of Somalis are poor. Both groups have one of the highest rates of child poverty in the city.

## Parenting in a New Culture

Most newcomers face issues and challenges when settling into a new society. The most tangible of these are finding a place to live, suitable employment and learning a new language. The socio-economic profile of the Eritrean and Somali communities indicates that they experience severe hardship in these areas.

Intangible aspects of migration focus more on the psychological and cultural adaptation of newcomers. In general, the larger the distance between the home and the host cultures – the harder it is for the cultures to understand each other, and for the newcomers to integrate (Beiser, 1999). In the case of Eritreans and Somalis, there is an enormous cultural gap between them and mainstream Canadian culture. They differ in every aspect including race, family size, language and religion (Tebeje, 1989; Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). The cultural differences are evident in parenting norms.

Somalis have a fertility rate of 6.8 children compared to the Canadian rate of 1.2 children (Elmi, 1999). In Toronto, families that are large and poor, encounter enormous difficulties in finding affordable and appropriate accommodation. In the city, Somali families mainly live in over-crowded apartments (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995).

In traditional societies, such as Eritrea and Somalia, children are subordinate to their parents. They are expected to seek approval from their parents and to follow their guidelines. Independent thinking is not encouraged and physical punishment is a common way for disciplining children (Tebeje, 1989). While children have privileges and are protected under Islamic law, the idea that they have 'rights' is an alien concept (Nkado, 2000).

In Canada, immigrant parents often feel that children's rights undermine their authority and responsibility as parents (Scott, 2000). As the children more readily learn and adapt to the values of their Canadian peers, it may lead to increased conflict between them and their parents. These inter-generational conflicts and misunderstandings often centre on dating, manners, discipline and fashion. For example, in Eritrea and Somalia 'dating' may be taboo, as sexual relations should only exist within the context of marriage. Furthermore, females dress conservatively, and for those who are Muslims, they may be required to cover their heads with a scarf (hijab) when outside of the home. These practices are the norm and are taken for granted in a culture where Muslims are the majority. Eritreans and Somalis are minorities in Canada, and as such may find that their traditional cultural and religious practices are interpreted differently, most often negatively, by the majority society.

Moreover, the power dynamics in the family may shift towards the children as they often have a better command of English, are more aware of the social services available to families, and often act

as interpreters for their parents. As a reaction to the new culture and multiple changes and challenges, parents try to hold on to the values of their homeland. This may increase the conflict as the children see their parents as overly strict and old-fashioned.

In Eritrea and Somalia, disagreement between parent and child were often mediated by the extended family. In Canada, the guidance of the extended family is often missing due to immigration and other difficulties. The nuclear family itself may be incomplete. There are large numbers of Somali households headed by women who do not have much support, as their husbands were killed in the war or are still stranded in refugee camps. Siad (1991) reported that the community was not aware of the services to help newcomer families, and that it was outside the cultural norms of Somalis to seek professional help. In cases where people did seek help they often faced multiple barriers in terms of language and cultural misunderstandings (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). When conflict in the family reaches a certain stage, the parents may find themselves involved with children's aid societies or the police.

Schooling can also become an issue between Eritrean and Somali parents and their children. According to the Toronto Board of Education (1997) 'nearly half of its students are from non-English speaking families representing over 76 different language groups'. The Board of Education has a wide range of programs and services to help students with special needs within the school system. These include basic needs programs that provide food, clothing and financial assistance. Other programs help with language/cultural support in terms of ESL and with 'fostering cultural identity, understanding and appreciation'. There are also specific programs to help immigrant and refugee students and their families to adjust to the school system. In addition, the Board of Education has parent and community programs that aim to foster 'parental involvement and community partnership in education.'

The parents know that their children often have issues with the Canadian school system. However, they may frequently feel powerless in helping their children to navigate through the system. Integrating into the school system is even more difficult for students who are refugees (Yau, 1995). Simple activities such as following instructions, sitting still or speaking up in class can cause enormous stress. The students may have fundamental gaps in basic education due to disruptions caused by wars; they may have emotional and behavioral problems caused by witnessing life-threatening events. These pre-migration experiences affect their integration into the school system. In addition, the children may try to conceal their personal struggles with these issues in order to better fit in with their peers.

In Canadian schools, teachers, Eritrean and Somali parents and children may find themselves struggling with different pedagogies. For instance, in Eritrea and Somalia classrooms are formal, teacher-centred and children learn mainly by rote. In contrast, Canadian classrooms tend to be activity or child-centred with an emphasis on interaction and experiential learning. Thus, for example, children may learn mathematics by manipulating building blocks, colouring and cutting out charts or by measuring sand. To an Eritrean or a Somali parent these activities may seem like 'play' and they may question if the children are really learning anything. These different expectations of what constitutes appropriate learning activities often lead to misunderstandings and confusion for all concerned as they are rarely articulated.

Many parents of refugee children may have only a high school or less level of education. And, if they are poor and do not speak English, they are much less able to provide homework support for their children (Cheng and Yau, 1999). Cheng and Yau found that students whose parents had professional jobs were more likely to be enrolled in advanced programs than those whose parents were unskilled labourers or unemployed.

In their study, Cheng and Yau (1999) found that the parents of African-born students were less likely to be active in school activities, such as parent-teacher interviews. African-born students themselves were under-represented in university-bound advanced level programs, and the gifted and French Immersion programs.

The parents of refugee students may face difficulties in providing equipment (such as computers) and in finding a quiet place for the children to study at home. Cheng and Yau (1999) found that 22 per cent of African-born students used the public or school library for completing homework compared to three per cent of the overall population.

Yet despite these challenges with the school system, Cheng and Yau (1999) found that African-born students were the most positive in their responses on perceptions of school, teachers and programs. They were the group that was most likely to indicate that many of their teachers made them feel comfortable talking about schoolwork.

In Toronto, Eritrean and Somali families are minorities in a society that differs significantly from theirs in terms of culture, religion, race and family structure. These differences compound the usual settlement and adjustment issues that most immigrants encounter. Furthermore, as most of the Eritreans and Somalis were refugees, one cannot underestimate the impact of post-traumatic stress on the lives of the parents and the children. Each may still be reliving memories of the war and the refugee camps. In Canada, the current generations of Eritrean and Somali parents and children have spent most of their lives in crisis. In such situations opportunities for normal activities such as keeping the family together and schooling were disrupted as the focus was on surviving.

# Method

This chapter gives an overview of the methods used to gather the data for the study. These were: a survey, a series of workshops for parents, and information and feedback from members of the project's advisory committee. The research also included extensive consultations with the settlement staff of CICCY, ECCC and SIWA, as they had first-hand knowledge and experience of dealing with the Eritrean and Somali communities.

## The Survey

The main research tool was a structured survey that asked Eritrean and Somali parents about their settlement experiences (see appendix two). The survey covered four key areas: settling the children into the Canadian school system, involvement with child welfare systems, parenting in a new culture, and demographic details. The survey was printed in English and was orally translated while being completed.

In the education section of the survey, questions asked whether the parents had issues with settling the children into Canadian schools, and how active the parents were in their children's schooling. In the child welfare section, parents were asked if they were involved with children's aid societies, whether services were available in a language that they understood, and where did they go when they needed legal help.

The parenting section of the survey asked open-ended question such as what would have made it easier for the parents to raise their children in Canada. The last section of the survey gathered demographic data such as the level of education and main source of income of the parents, their gender and immigration status.

The survey was accompanied by a research consent form that outlined the goals of the project, the agencies involved and what steps would be taken to keep the respondents' information confidential and anonymous. All respondents signed the consent form, indicating that they understood the purpose of the research and agreed to participate in it.

About 30 volunteers from the Eritrean and Somali communities administered the survey, either in one-to-one interviews or in small groups. The volunteers came to two formal training seminars. The first was held in English, and there, the volunteers role-played completing the survey both as interviewer and interviewee. The information from the seminar was used to check the clarity of the survey and to answer any questions and concerns from the volunteers. The second seminar covered the same agenda, but it was held in Somali for the Somalis and Tigrigna for the Eritreans. Informal training and support was provided to the volunteers as needed by the staff of ECCC and SIWA.

A total of 100 surveys were completed for the study, 50 from the Eritrean and 50 from the Somali communities. The data from the surveys were analysed in two ways. Qualitative information was assessed using content analysis. That is, the text was coded and then analysed to elucidate common themes from the respondents. Quantitative data was coded and tabulated, the information was then analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, the mean and the modal (see chapter 4). In this report quantitative information is presented in the form of charts for ease of presentation and analysis.

## The Workshops

Additional information for the research was gathered from a series of workshops aimed at Eritrean and Somali parents. Approximately 57 Eritrean and 62 Somali parents attended these workshops. All the workshop participants were women. The workshop topics were:

- Your Child and Special Education Tests
- Safe Children in Safe Schools
- Working with the Children's Aid Societies
- Parenting in Canada
- Religion in Schools
- Communicating with your Children about HIV

The workshop topics were chosen based on consultations with settlement staff and from preliminary research findings. All workshops were delivered in Tigrigna or Arabic for the Eritreans and Somali for the Somalis. The staff of ECCC and of SIWA organized and facilitated the workshops. They also translated from English to Tigrigna, Arabic or Somali as needed. Each workshop consisted of a presentation followed by a question and answer period. Presenters were from Toronto District School Board, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, Toronto Police Service, African Community Health Services, Macaulay Child Development Centre, and Muslim Education Network, Training and Outreach.

## The Findings from the Survey

This chapter presents the findings from the survey. It begins with a profile of the typical Eritrean and Somali respondent, followed by a profile of the communities. The chapter then examines language issues, interactions with the Canadian school system, and parenting issues.

### Profile of the Typical Respondents

The typical Eritrean respondent is a Muslim woman who speaks Arabic or Tigre at home (when added together Arabic and Tigre speakers account for 45% of the respondents). She is somewhat comfortable with speaking and understanding English. The woman has one to three children and she is a Canadian citizen. She is employed and is most likely to have a secondary/high school level of education.

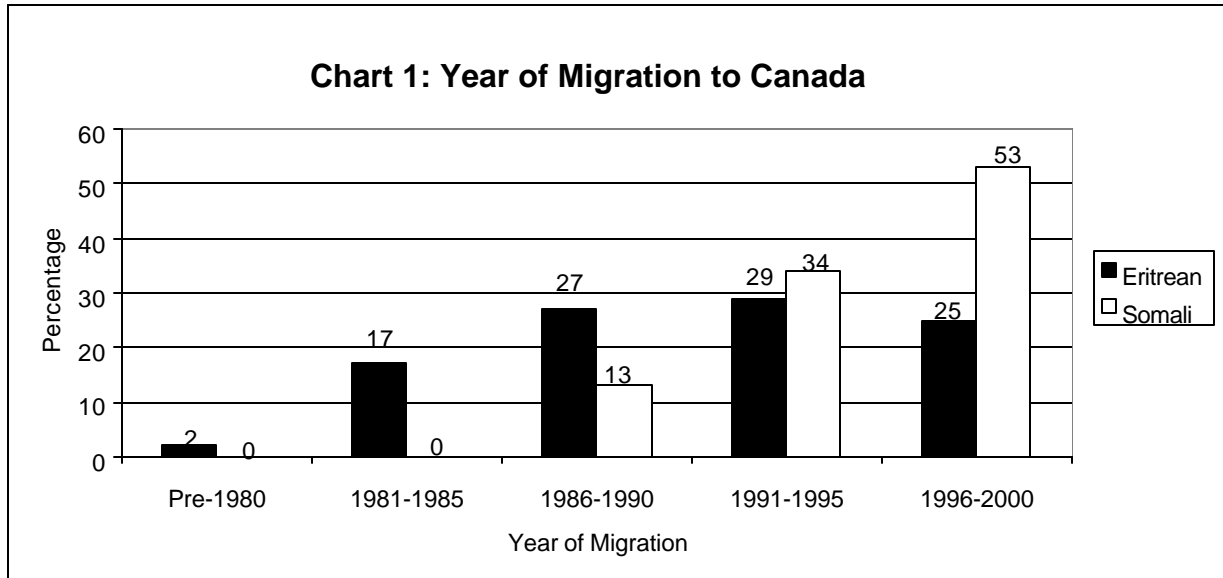
The typical Somali respondent is a Muslim woman and speaks Somali at home; she is very uncomfortable with speaking and understanding English. She is most likely to have four or more children and is a permanent resident (landed immigrant). Her main source of income is support from the government, and she has an elementary or a secondary school level of education.

Some 22 per cent of the Eritrean and four per cent of the Somali respondents were males. We did not analyse the responses of the males separately from the females due to the small numbers. However, it was notable that nearly all Eritreans with more than a high school level of education were male.

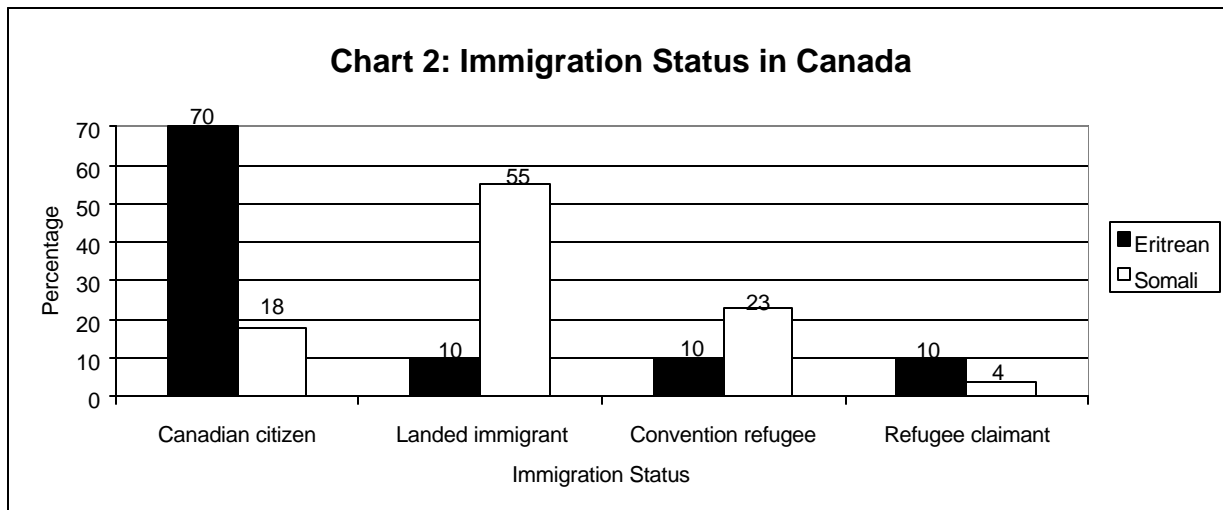
### Profile of the Communities from the Survey

Among the Eritreans who part in the survey, 70 per cent indicated that they were Muslims and 30 per cent were Christians. All of the Somali respondents stated that they were Muslims.

The Eritreans have been living in Canada since the 1980s, although most of the respondents arrived after 1986 (chart 1). From chart 1, the Somalis mainly arrived in the 1990s, with more than half (53 per cent) arriving between 1996-2000.



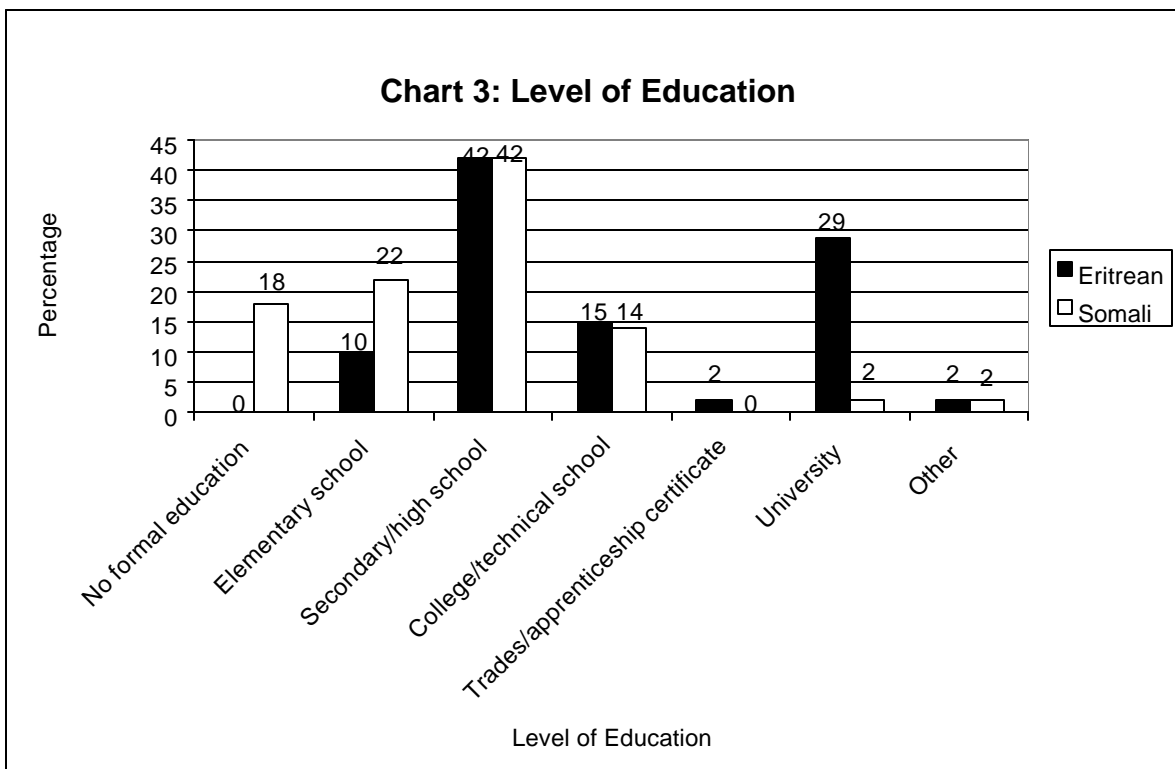
Some 70 per cent of the Eritreans are Canadian citizens (chart 2). The immigration status of the remainder was equally divided between Convention Refugees, Refugees Claimants and permanent residents (landed immigrants). From chart 2, the Somalis are most likely to be landed immigrants (55 per cent) or Convention Refugees (23 per cent). Some 18 per cent of the Somalis were Canadian citizens.



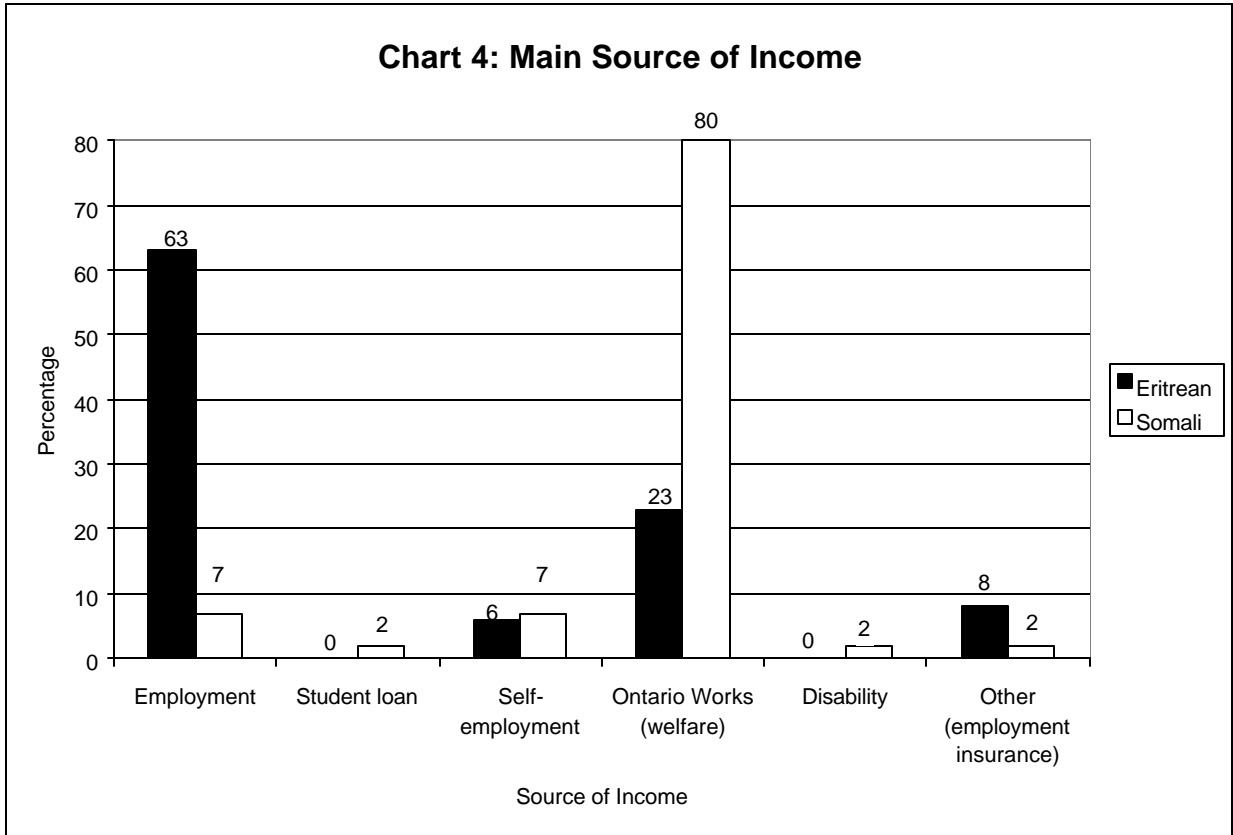
Next we looked at the level of education of the respondents. From chart 3, 42% of the Eritreans who took part in the survey had a secondary/high school level of education. Furthermore, 29 per cent had attended university and 15% had attended college or technical school.

Among the Somalis (chart 3), 42 per cent had a secondary/high school level of education, and 22 per cent had elementary schooling. A small minority (two per cent) of the Somalis who participated in the research had attended university.

Note that the education findings may be skewed by the gender differences between the two communities. As previously stated, 22 per cent of the Eritrean and four per cent of the Somali respondents were males. Nearly all Eritreans with more than a secondary/high school level of education were male. Thus, the gender differences account in great part for the higher proportion of Eritreans who had attended university.



Next we looked at the main sources of income of those who completed the survey. Chart 4 indicates that 63 per cent of Eritreans received their income from employment. About a quarter (23 per cent) of the Eritreans received their main income from the government in the form of Ontario Works payments. Among the Somalis, 80 per cent received their main income from the government (chart 4). Some seven per cent of the Somalis were employed or self-employed.

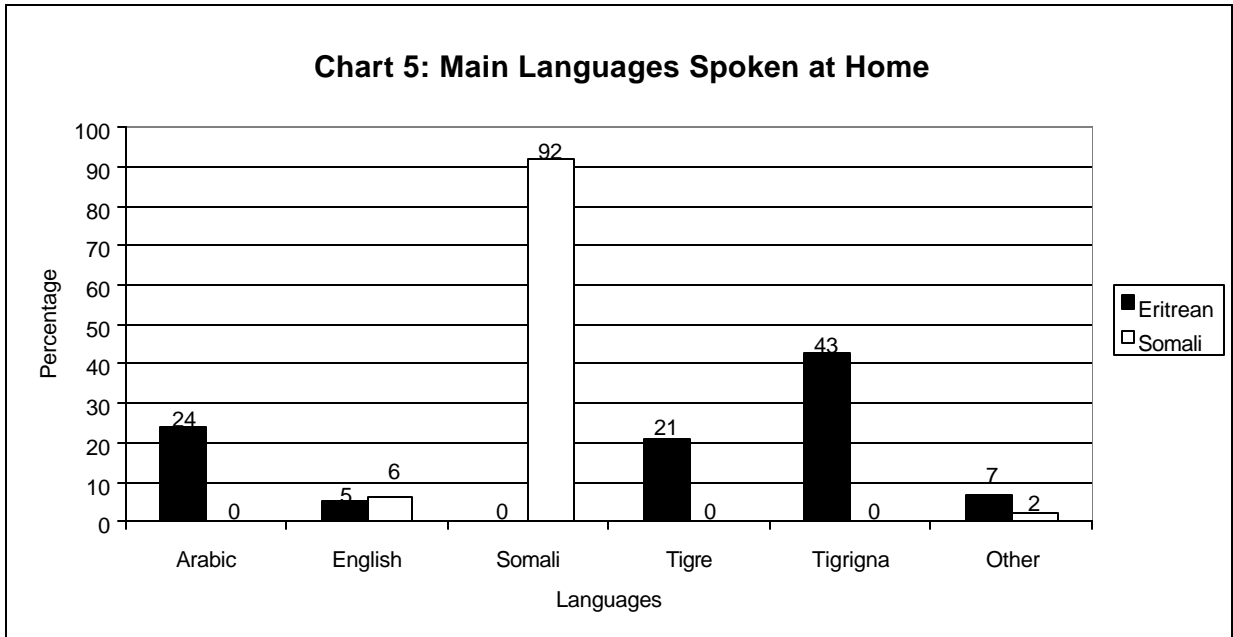


The general profiles of the communities have many implications for the parenting issues and challenges that Eritreans and Somalis may encounter in Canada. These implications are explored in the rest of the chapter.

## Languages

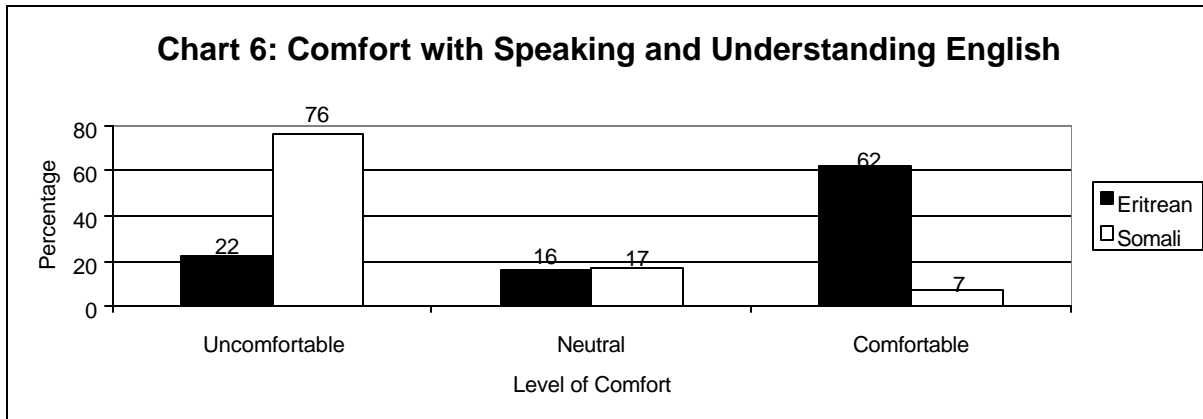
We wanted to know the main language the respondents spoke at home. Generally, first generation immigrants speak their native tongue at home. Each succeeding generation is more likely to speak the language of their new country in the home. This is a normal part of the adjustment process for immigrants, and the Eritreans and Somalis in this study followed the pattern.

Eritreans spoke multiple native languages, among these, 43 per cent spoke Tigrigna and 24 per cent spoke Arabic (chart 5). Tigrigna speakers were Christians, and Tigre and Arabic speakers were Muslims. Among the Somalis, 92 per cent spoke Somali at home (chart 5). Only five per cent of the Eritreans and six per cent of the Somalis indicated that they also spoke English at home.



The next language question asked the parents to rate how comfortable they were with speaking and understanding English, on a scale of one (very uncomfortable) to five (very comfortable). To simplify the presentation of the results, we combined some of the scales. Chart 6 shows that 62 per cent of the Eritreans were comfortable or very comfortable with speaking and understanding English. The 22 per cent of the Eritrean respondents who were male has skewed this result. Only one Eritrean male indicated that he was uncomfortable with English, all others were either neutral or comfortable. Subtracting the male responses lowers the overall percentage of those who were comfortable with English from 62 per cent to 40 per cent. In general, Eritrean males have been in Canada for many years and may therefore have had more time to learn English. Conversely, Eritrean females are more recent arrivals and tend to be less comfortable with the language.

Among the Somalis, 76 per cent indicated that they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with English. As Somalis are more recent arrivals, they are still in the early stages of acquiring proficiency in English. One Somali workshop participant expressed the dilemma and frustrations faced by parents who do not speak English. In this case her child was sent home from school with a note explaining why he was suspended. The mother was not able to read the note and sent the child back to school the following day. This mishap continued for three more occasions until the intervention of settlement workers from the Board of Education and from SIWA who acted as translators.



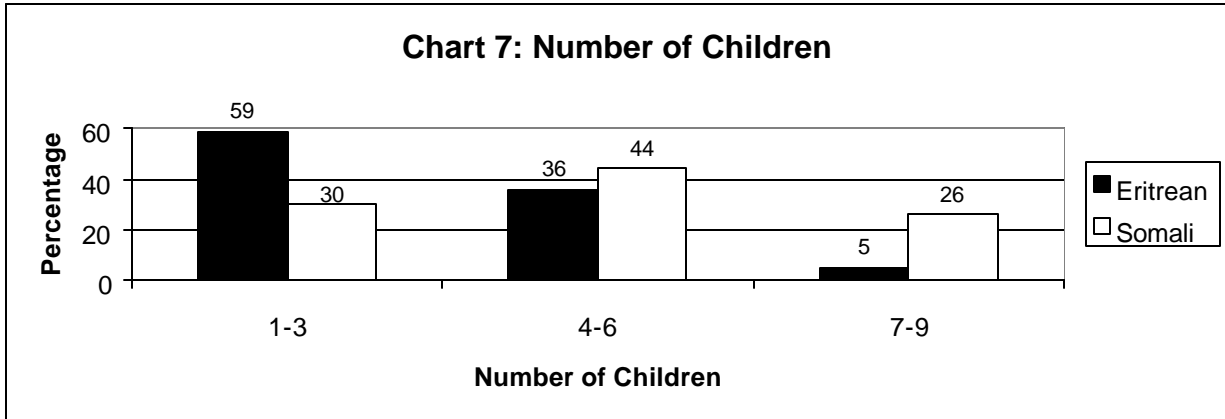
The survey did not ask respondents if they used the Language Instruction of Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. This program is free and teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) to newcomers who are permanent residents (landed immigrants), Convention Refugees or Undocumented Convention Refugees. LINC classes are funded by CIC and are primarily delivered by community and educational organizations. Moreover, LINC offers child minding in all areas and home study in some areas. Further research is needed to investigate if Somali parents are aware of the LINC program, and if so, what challenges they face in attending this or other ESL classes.

Limited English skills impact on both parents and their children. For example, it limits employment opportunities for parents, and they may face difficulties in accessing and using information and community services. As English is generally the language of instruction in schools in Toronto (except for French Immersion programs), parents who do not speak the language are less able to help their children with their homework.

The level of parental involvement in their children's education is a predictor of the children's scholastic success. Parents who are active in the school system are better placed to understand the school's expectations, can help their children with the homework process (though not necessarily with the content), can build relationship with teachers, and can participate in activities such as volunteering in the classroom. The limited English skills of Somalis imply that they may have major problems in these areas.

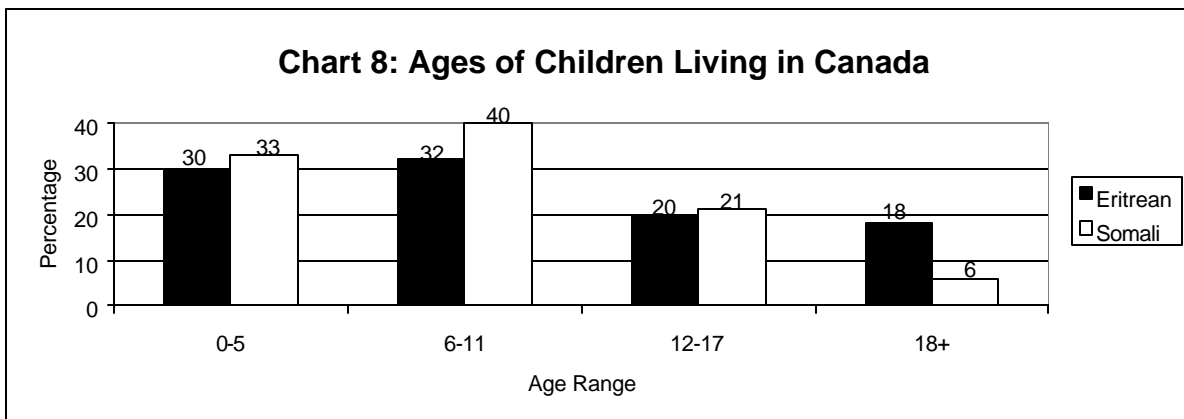
## Children

Next we asked about the children. We wanted to know how many children were in the family, their age, how many were living in Canada and how many overseas. From chart 7, 59 per cent of the Eritrean respondents had one to three children. Among the Somalis 44 per cent had four to six children.



Examining the ages of the children living in Canada (chart 8), it was found that Somali children are generally younger, with 40 per cent aged between 6-11 years. Cross-referencing the age of the children to the year of migration, it was found that about 60 per cent of the Eritrean children were born in Canada. In contrast, approximately 80 per cent of the Somali children were born overseas. This suggests that Somali children may need additional help in schools both to learn English and to adapt to a new society.

Refugee families are often separated with members living in different countries. This was verified by asking the parents how many of their children lived outside of Canada. Some 10 per cent of the Eritreans and nine percent of the Somalis had children living overseas. While these numbers are small, they do include one unfortunate mother who had five of her six children overseas.



The families were not separated by choice, with the exception of one Eritrean family. Both Eritrean and Somali parents listed immigration difficulties as the main barrier to reuniting their families. The Somalis were also twice as likely to mention that financial reasons kept the family apart.

All the children living overseas were aged 12 or more years. In Canada, only permanent residents and citizens can sponsor family members to join them (CIC, 2001). Neither Refugee Claimants nor Convention Refugees can do so. Furthermore, Undocumented Convention Refugees must wait a minimum of three years before they can apply to become permanent residents. Once this is completed, sponsorship applications for family members can take up to another two years to be processed. Thus, by the time the Eritrean and Somali families are reunited, the children may no longer be children. They may be young adults and may no longer qualify to be sponsored as dependents. Currently, dependents are defined as sons and daughters who are less than 19 years of age and are unmarried. This age limit may soon be increased to 22 years (CIC, 2001).

In Eritrea and Somalia large families are the norm. In Canada large families are the exception and can be both a blessing and a challenge. On one hand, the children always have playmates and their older siblings may be able to help them with homework and with understanding their new homeland. On the other hand, it takes more resources and energy to care for large families. Simple activities, such as getting the children ready for school or cooking meals can become major daily undertakings. Settlement staff at CICCY, ECCC and SIWA have helped several families who were at risk of eviction due to repeatedly damaging or wearing out appliances, merely through the heavy use necessary in the day to day preparation of meals or washing clothes for ten or more family members.

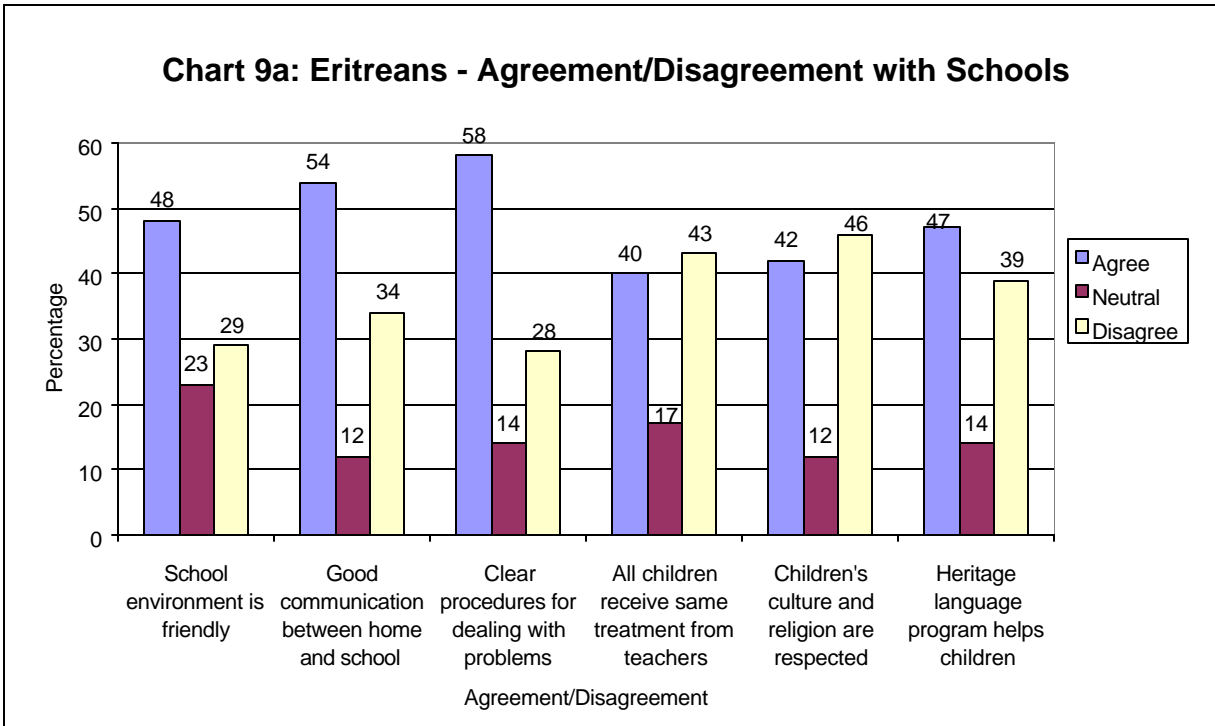
As the children in this study are relatively young, they are more demanding of their parents' time and attention. Other research (see chapter two) has identified that many Somali families in Toronto are headed by single women, mainly due to deaths of husbands in the war. These women may find it even harder to be parents, as they are without the financial and emotional support of a spouse or extended family members. Furthermore, these women were not socialized to raise children alone.

## Understanding Canadian Schools

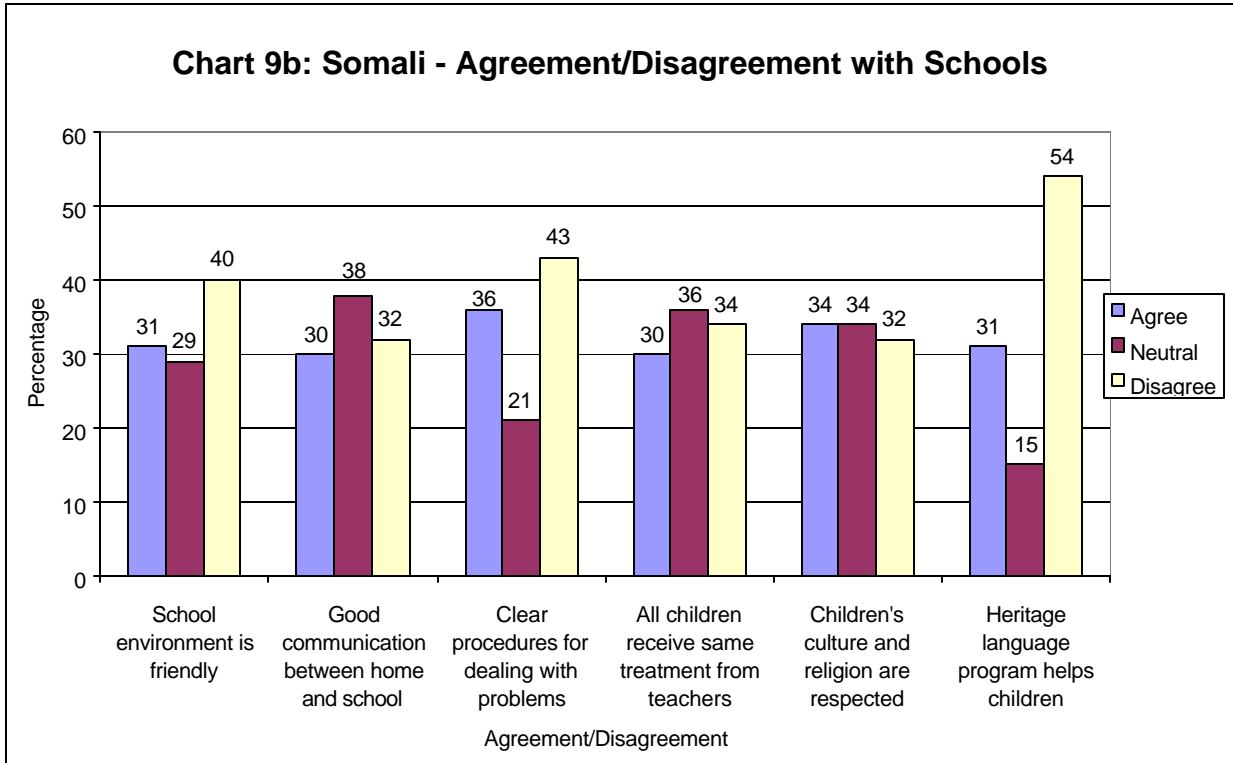
The survey investigated the parents' thoughts about the schools their children attended. They were asked what issues, if any, they had with settling their children into school and what difficulties the children had with the education system.

The parents were asked a series of questions, and for each one, they had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements, on a scale of one to five. For ease of presentation some of the scales were combined in the following charts. From chart 9a, the Eritreans who took part in the study were generally satisfied with the school system, as they were most likely to agree with the statements. For example, 58 per cent felt that there were clear procedures for dealing with problems, and 54 per cent felt that there was good communication between home and school. As well, Eritreans were most likely to agree that the heritage language program helps their children, as there is a Tigrigna heritage program. The Eritreans somewhat disagreed with the statements that

all children receive the same treatment from teachers (43 per cent) and that children’s culture and religion are respected (46 per cent).



\*In each group of columns the percentages adds to 100. Percentages do not add across the chart as parents could check more than one answer.



\*In each group of columns the percentages adds to 100. Percentages do not add across the chart as parents could check more than one answer.

The Somalis who took part in the study were generally dissatisfied with the school system (chart 9b). Overall, they were either neutral or did not agree with any of the statements. For instance 40 per cent of Somalis disagreed with the statement that the school environment is friendly and 43 per cent that there were clear procedures for dealing with problems.

Somalis also disagreed with the statement that heritage language programs helped their children. This is attributed by settlement staff to the fact that these programs do not exist in schools specifically for Somali students. Heritage programs were originally developed to help black students deal with issues of identity. Since that time the programs have been expanded to include students from other ethnic backgrounds. Heritage programs help students to continue learning in their first-language or mother tongue. The goals of the programs are to 'to facilitate learning and second language (English) acquisition; to promote confidence and identity; to develop cultural understanding and appreciation; and to offer newcomers reception and first language support' (1997, Toronto Board of Education).

Other survey questions investigated the specific issues, barriers and challenges that the parents had with settling their children into Canadian schools. In general the Somalis were most likely to check multiple barriers compared to the Eritreans. From chart 10, 62 per cent of Eritreans mentioned cultural differences as the main barrier to settling their children into school. This figure is significant

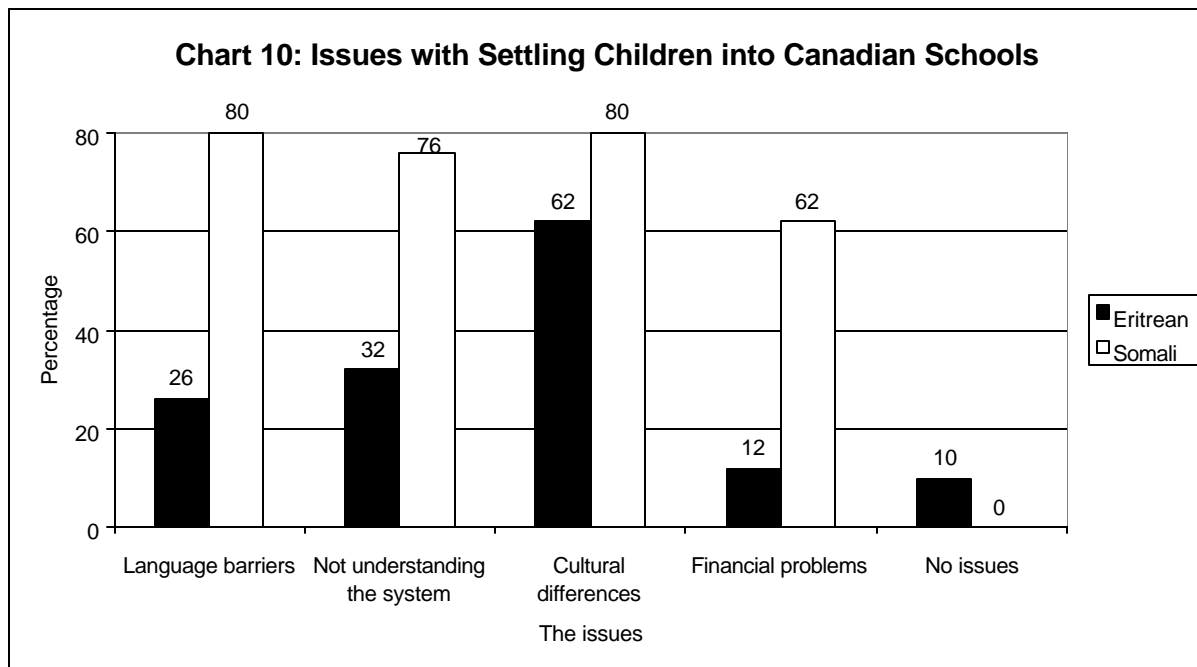
given that the community has been in Canada for 15 years and that most of their children were born here. It is also significant that about a third (32 per cent) of the Eritreans felt that they did not understand the school system. The following quotations are representative comments from Eritrean parents:

“The children are losing their culture, not respecting their religion and their elders.”

“My daughter would like to celebrate Christmas with her school-mates, even though we are Muslims and we have our beliefs.”

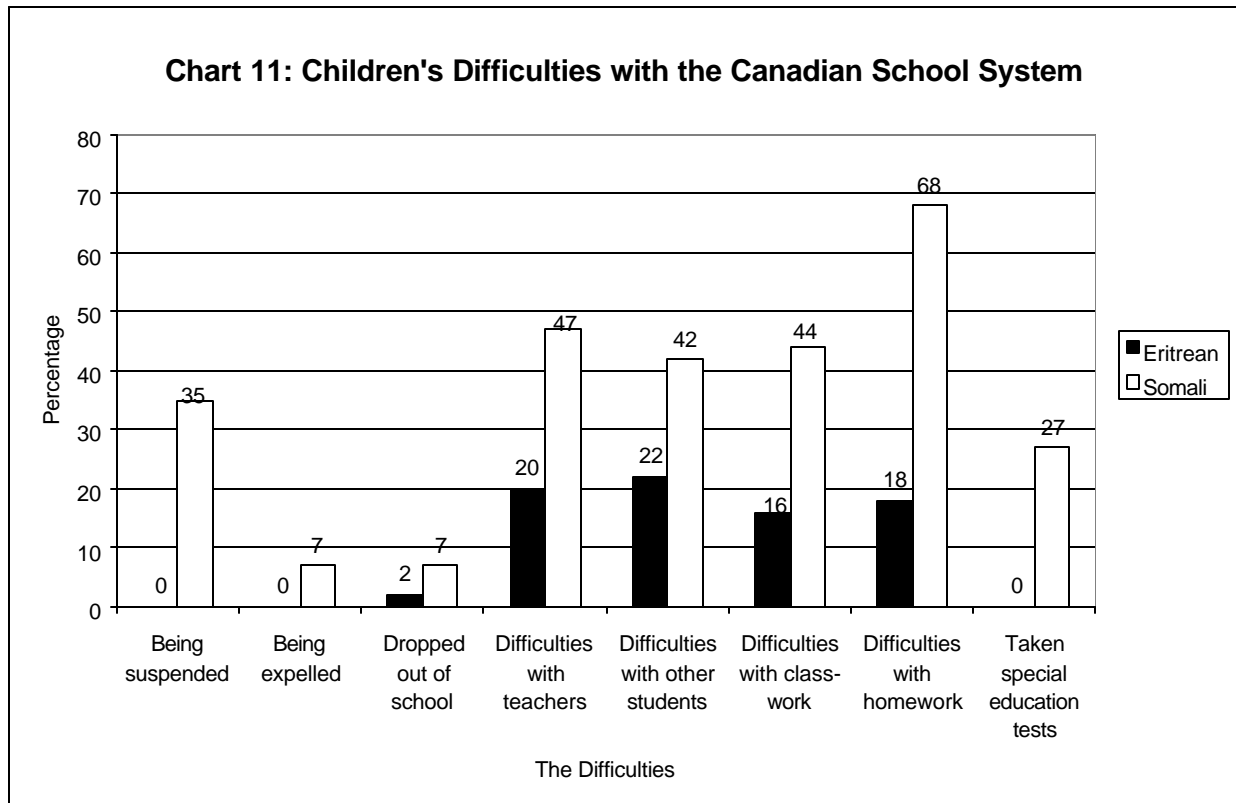
“My children are always being teased. They don’t fit in with either the other black kids or with the white kids.”

The Somali parents who took part in the study also had issues with settling their children into schools. Approximately 80 per cent cited language and cultural differences as barriers to settling their children (chart 10). This was closely followed by 76 per cent who mentioned not understanding the system and 62 per cent who cited financial problems. In the workshops some Somali parents mentioned that they usually kept their children at home when the class had planned field trips, as often they did not have the finances to pay for the trips.



\* As parents could check more than one answer, the percentages do not add up to 100.

Next, we examined the things that the children had difficulties with in the Canadian school system. These are presented in chart 11. The Eritreans indicated that their children were most likely to have difficulties with other students (22 per cent) and with teachers (20 per cent).



\* As parents could check more than one answer, the percentages do not add up to 100.

From chart 11, Somali parents were most likely to state that their children had difficulties with homework (68 per cent), with teachers (47 per cent) and with class-work (44 per cent). The parents mentioned that limited facility with English was often the foundation of these problems. As three Somali parents noted:

“Sometimes my children need help with their class-work and homework because it is so difficult. I cannot help them due to the language barrier.”

“Other students tease her many times because of the way she speaks and the way she dresses. In class, she has language difficulties and often cannot complete the task.”

“My children fight with other children who call them names because they don’t always understand English. The teacher does nothing about it.”

A few Somali parents had hired private tutors to help their children with schoolwork. Many more parents wanted this extra help but could not afford to pay for it. More than half of the Somali parents mentioned that discrimination by students and teachers contributed to the problems their children were experiencing.

From chart 11, it is significant that 35 per cent of Somali parents reported that their children were suspended from school at some point compared to zero Eritrean students. Perhaps because the Somalis are recent refugees, the students may still be experiencing post-traumatic stress. For example, many of the parents reported that their children had behavioral problems in school, poor social skills, were not able to work in groups and had difficulty focussing on what was happening in the class. As a result the children were often picked on by other students and were disciplined by the teachers.

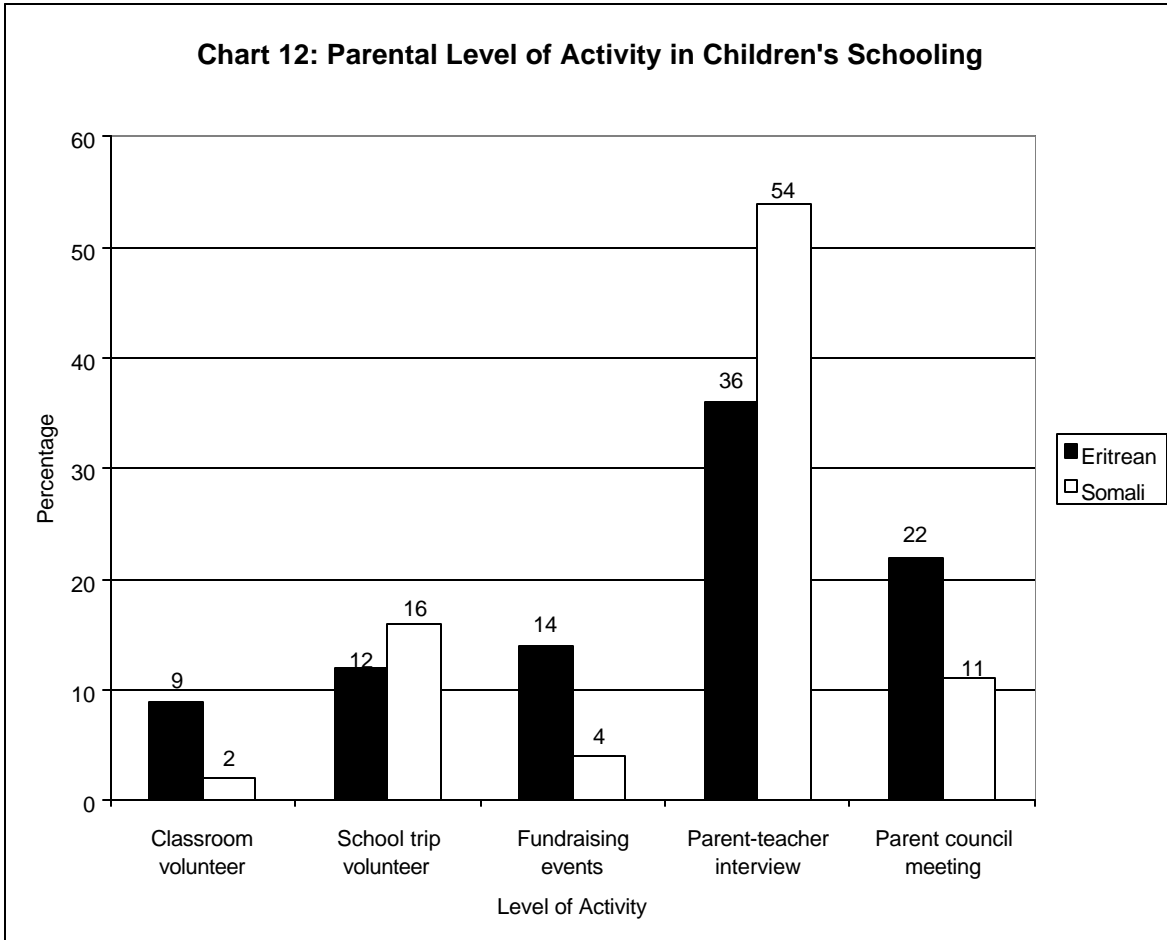
The school's response to the students' difficult behaviour was to suspend them. In the short-term this may give both students and teachers a break; in the long run it is detrimental to the students and to the Somali community. Further research is needed to explore the relatively high suspension rate, and to investigate alternatives to suspension for students who are refugees.

Next we wanted to know what the parents understood about special education tests. All schools have access to the Identification and Placement Review Committee that can designate that children take special education tests. Based on the results, the Committee can then recommend that the students remain in the regular class or attend special classes for slow learners or gifted students.

From chart 11, none of the Eritrean and 27 per cent of the Somali parents indicated that their children had taken special education tests. We asked if the parents understood the purpose of the tests. Some 35 per cent said it was to place their children in a special education class and 25 per cent said that the tests were to help their child. None of the children who took the special education tests were placed in gifted classes. The parents were most likely to mention that the children were recommended for classes for slow learners, for those with learning disabilities or for ESL programs.

The research investigated how active the parents were in their children's schooling. From chart 12, Eritreans were most likely to attend parent-teacher interviews (36 per cent) or to go to parent council meetings (22 per cent). Somali parents were active in their children's schooling, more than half (54 per cent) went to parent-teacher interviews, and 16 per cent of them were volunteers on school trips.

The parents who were inactive in their children's education were most likely to cite language problems as a barrier to participation. Somali parents were also most likely to mention lack of childcare as a disincentive.



The lack of understanding of the Canadian education system makes parenting more challenging and frustrating for both the parent and the child. Like all parents, Eritreans and Somalis want the best for their children. In the Canadian context, this means that the children must have more than a basic education. In this study, language barriers seriously hamper the parents' ability to help their children to understand the education system or to complete their schoolwork. To add to the challenges, many parents have had limited schooling themselves and are thus even less able to help their children.

## Finding Parenting Support

The research investigated what support systems the parents used, and their experiences with the child welfare systems, the police and the legal system.

From the survey, when Eritrean and Somali parents need help or support with parenting, they turned to their family, friends and members of their community. Even though few sought help from outside of their community, the parents were not content with their isolation from mainstream services. Many of them wanted to know more about the wider Canadian society and the services that were available. However, the few who did try to access mainstream services were often hindered by language, cultural and religious barriers.

As settlement is a two-way process between newcomers and the host society, this finding may also be interpreted as that agencies serving Eritreans and Somalis also need to educate the communities about the mainstream services that are available to help them with settlement issues. At the federal level of government, services funded to help new immigrants include the Host Program that matches newcomers with resident Canadians (CIC, 2001); this is a volunteer friendship program that aims to help form a bridge between the newcomers and the host society. Other federal services for newcomers include LINC, and the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP). ISAP funds are available to mainstream and ethno-cultural agencies to provide a broad range of settlement services to newcomers. These services include information and orientation, translation and interpretation, referral to other mainstream organizations and services, and employment related services.

In this study, only 20 per cent of the Eritrean and 16 per cent of the Somali parents had heard about parent-child drop-in centres. These centres are community-based and provide information, workshops and a space for parents to meet and learn from each other as well as from professional staff. The low response rate suggests that either the question was unclear or that the drop-in centres have not done enough outreach to the Eritrean and Somali communities. In the feedback discussions with the parents, many said they would use the drop-in centres if their services were available in their language and staffed by people who were sensitive to their culture and religion.

The parents were questioned on their experience with the child welfare system. None of the Eritreans in this study were involved with these agencies. Some 22 per cent of Somalis had had experiences with a children's aid society. Most understood why the children's aid society was called. In two instances there was conflict in the marriage, and it was the husbands who called claiming that the wives were unfit mothers. However, in most cases the school called children's aid society, due to a problem with a child's behavior. As two Somali parents mentioned:

“Every time the children's aid society tells me that they will take my kids away from me. The school keeps reporting my kids to the children's aid society, because the teachers say my kids are hyperactive and that I can't handle them.”

“My kids were fighting because other kids in school made fun of them. The police called the children's aid society and they nearly took my kids away. There was no need to call children's aid society.”

Only 10 per cent of the parents who were involved with a children's aid society felt that they received proper information about what was happening, that the workers at the children's aid society understood or respected their religious or cultural beliefs, or that the services were delivered in a

language that they understood. In other words, 90 per cent of the Somalis who were involved with children’s aid societies were dissatisfied with the agencies. This suggests that children’s aid societies needs to outreach to the Somali community to explain how their services can help parents and their children. As well, children’s aid societies should consider implementing new practices that take into account the cultural and religious needs of the Somali community.

Next we looked at the parents’ experiences with dealing with the police and the legal system. The Eritreans had no experiences with these services. However, 16 per cent of Somalis had used legal services because of a problem their children had with school or children’s aid societies. They were most likely to use a legal clinic for help.

No Eritreans and only seven per cent of the Somali children have ever been involved with the police. Less than 10 per cent of the parents in either the Eritrean or Somali communities were aware of community policing in the schools. These numbers are too small for further analysis.

The research investigated what would have made it easier for the respondents to be parents in Canada. Table 2 shows the top five things mentioned by both communities. For the Eritreans, the issues focussed on maintaining their cultural identity. They wanted an Eritrean community school and programs that help their children to accept their own culture. In contrast, the Somalis are concerned with basic needs such as finding employment, speaking English and finding adequate housing.

Table 2: Things that Would Have Made it Easier to be Parents in Canada

Eritrean	Somali
1. Eritrean community school	1. Finding employment
2. Understanding Canadian schools	2. Speaking English
3. Children respecting their own culture	3. Adequate housing
4. Less isolation	4. Getting immigration papers
5. Less discrimination	5. Less discrimination

Common remarks from Eritrean parents include:

“Children here have no respect for elders. They talk back to you and they want to date. That is not acceptable in my culture.”

“I wish that there was a place where our children and teenagers could go to learn about our culture. It is too expensive to send them back home each summer.”

Representative quotations from Somali parents include:

“People should try to understand where we are coming from and be easy on our community. We are new to the system. We need help with understanding it so that we can raise our children properly. The system makes it harder for us to do that right now.”

“I have had bad experiences and I feel it was racial. When you are my colour you get less respect, and if you don’t understand the language it causes even more problems.”

In summary, the finding from the research suggests that the Eritrean and Somali communities are at different stages in adapting to life in Canada. Eritreans, in general, seem to have dealt with their primary needs, even though a significant number still needs help with settlement issues. However, given the paucity of direct information about the Eritrean community, this finding must be taken cautiously. Moreover, the settlement staff of CICC, ECC and SIWA, who deliver direct services to members of the Eritrean community, feel that the settlement needs of the community are grossly under-represented and historically unmet. Additionally, emerging needs of newcomers or those who have been here for several years and only becoming parents, are not addressed since the community receives only a small amount of support for settlement services, and only from the provincial level of government. Somalis are in the primary stages of settling into a new society and the research indicates that they need help with all areas of the adjustment process.

## Summary and Recommendations

It is not easy being a parent in a new and strange society. When the migration is unplanned and forced - as is the case with the Eritrean and Somali refugees in this study - it adds to the stress of settling into the new country.

As newcomer parents, Eritreans and Somalis have to take care of two sets of needs – their own and those of their children. Immediate parental needs are centred on finding appropriate housing for the family, generating an income and learning English. Another key need is to deal with their immigration status so that the family can begin to feel settled in Canada, and start the long process of reuniting members that may be scattered in other countries. The parents who took part in this study experienced stress in all these areas.

Eritrean and Somali children also need to adjust to the new society. Those who came as refugees may have gaps in basic education due to the war and the long wait in refugee camps. As a result they may require additional help to understand and adjust to the school system in Canada. The children may have to learn new rules in their day-to-day school activities, such as relearning how to sit still in class, work in small groups and how to speak up. All these are more difficult when the children are learning a new language and therefore may not fully understand all that is being said to them. Other children may be curious about the Eritrean and Somali newcomers, and welcome them as peers and friends. Often times, however, Eritrean and Somali parents reported that their children were teased and stigmatized for being different.

The parents in this study feel that the school itself, as an institution, was not sensitive to the needs of their children. This feeling was greatest among the Somali parents. While the Board of Education has policies and procedures for integrating newcomers and for respecting the diversity of Toronto's population, they mean little to parents who are unaware of them.

As the parents are busy coping with their own adjustment issues, they may not fully appreciate that their children are facing the same dilemmas. What the parents do know is that their children are rapidly absorbing the values of Canadian culture. They want to dress like their peers, celebrate the same religious holidays and behave like their friends. These Canadian norms are very different from the values of Eritrean and Somali parents, thus may lead to conflict between the parents and their children and add to the stress of both.

There are times when all parents need a little extra help. This could range from where to find a good babysitter, to advice on how to best deal with a problem with the children. In this study, Eritrean

and Somali parents rely on members of their own community for help. When they attempt to go outside of their communities, they often encounter barriers based on language, religion and culture. The parents were not happy with this isolation, as they wanted to understand more about their new country and what services are available to help them and their children to settle down.

When Somali parents have to deal with external agencies, such as children's aid societies, they were often hindered by language, cultural and religious barriers. This makes a potentially tense situation even more stressful for the parents.

The parents in both communities seem to be at different stages of adapting to life in Canada. Eritrean parents are mostly concerned with maintaining their culture and heritage, and mainly need help with understanding the Canadian school system. However, the findings for the Eritrean community are tentative as so little is known about the true needs of the community. Settlement workers at the agencies sponsoring this research CICC, ECCC and SIWA, feel that the needs of the Eritrean community are grossly under-estimated. As well, they are concerned about the lack of settlement services for the Eritrean community, who were not seen as separate and distinct from the Ethiopian community upon arrival in Canada. This, they feel, has led to the invisibility of the community, and the general lack of information which we encountered during this research project.

Somali parents are in the early stages of the settlement process. Their needs are more focused on the basics such as finding employment, adequate housing, and learning English.

## Recommendations

### Settlement Support

**Recommendation 1:** Initial settlement programs, services and materials aimed at Eritrean women should be translated or interpreted into Tigrigna or Arabic.

**Recommendation 2:** In order for initial settlement programs, services and materials to be effective for the Somali community, they should be translated or interpreted into Somali.

**Recommendation 3:** Further research is needed to understand if and how Eritrean and Somali parents are using the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada classes and other ESL programs in the community to learn English

**Recommendation 4:** Further research is needed to investigate access to employment and employment support services for Somali women as the majority who took part in the study were poor.

**Recommendation 5** The outstanding issue of settlement services for the Eritrean community should be addressed as they did not receive settlement services separate from the Ethiopian community when they first came to Canada.

**Recommendation 6:** As settlement is a two-way process between newcomers and the host society, agencies serving Eritreans and Somalis need to educate the newcomers about the social and community services system that is available to help them with settlement and integration.

**Recommendation 7:** Settlement agencies need to do strategic outreach and target specific programs to the Eritrean and Somali communities to increase their awareness of and usage of services which are available in the community, particularly parent-child drop-in centres.

## Parental Support

Eritrean and Somali parents are often isolated and are concerned about finding their voice in a new and very different culture. Both communities need access to services and programs that support immigrant and refugee parents and their children.

**Recommendation 8:** Parenting programs, information and services aimed at Eritrean and Somali mothers should be translated into Tigrigna, Arabic and Somali to increase their effectiveness.

**Recommendation 9:** Further research is needed on what are the most effective ways to reach and educate Eritrean and Somali parents on the Canadian school system and the child welfare system.

**Recommendation 10:** Parenting programs and services aimed at or used by Eritrean and Somali parents should be sensitive to their cultural and religious beliefs.

## Canadian Schools

A high proportion of Eritrean and Somali parents do not understand the basics of the Canadian school system.

**Recommendation 11:** Boards of education's programs, information and services aimed at Eritrean and Somali parents should be translated into Tigrigna, Arabic and Somali to increase their effectiveness.

**Recommendation 12:** Boards of education need to put in place a special program for Eritrean and Somali parents which explains the basics of how the education system operates, including parents' rights and responsibilities.

**Recommendation 13:** Boards of education need to develop a program that would formally identify students who are refugees, as without proper identification the unique needs of these students may be underestimated.

**Recommendation 14:** Boards of education need to promote to the Somali community, existing programs and services that are available to help immigrant and refugee students to adjust to the school system.

**Recommendation 15:** Further research is needed to explore why the Somali community has such a high level of dissatisfaction with the school system.

**Recommendation 16:** Further research is needed on how and why a relatively high number of Somali students are being suspended from schools. The schools need to either explore a more constructive alternative to dealing with these students, or if these alternatives already exist, promote them to the Somali community.

**Recommendation 17:** Boards of education need to promote to Eritrean and Somali parents its policies on respecting cultural and religious differences in schools, as well as what to do if the parents feel that the policies are not being practiced.

**Recommendation 18:** Boards of education should consider cultural sensitivity training for both students and teachers so that they are able to understand and appreciate the different traditions and norms of students from diverse backgrounds.

**Recommendation 19:** Boards of education need to develop an outreach strategy that would encourage Eritrean and Somali parents to be more involved in school councils and other volunteer activities.

**Recommendation 20:** Boards of education should develop a mother-tongue mentoring and tutoring program for Eritrean and Somali students who are experiencing problems with English language and with school-work. This program should be available to students from grade one.

**Recommendation 21:** Boards of education should develop a parental support program that would instruct Eritrean and Somali parents on how they can support their children with school-work, even when the parents have limited English language skills.

**Recommendation 22:** Boards of education should develop a heritage language program specifically for Somali students.

## Children's Aid Societies

None of the Eritrean, but approximately a quarter of the Somali parents in this study had been involved with a children's aid society.

**Recommendation 23:** Children's aid societies should translate or interpret its programs, services and information into the languages of the clients being served. In the case of the Somali community, these should be in Somali. This will allow the parents to understand the process and thus to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

**Recommendation 24:** Children's aid societies need to recognise and be sensitive to the impact of post-traumatic stress on refugee parents and children in the Somali community.

**Recommendation 25:** The staff of children's aid societies should be sensitive to the religious, cultural and parenting norms in the Somali community. There could be a more delicate balance between this community's traditions, values and practices and the necessary upholding of Canada's child welfare laws.

**Recommendation 26:** Children's aid societies need to explore ways to support informal networks for substitute care that exists in the Somali community.

**Recommendation 27:** Further research is needed on how children's aid societies can attract, recruit and retain Muslim foster parents and homes for Muslim children who are at risk.

## Basic Research

**Recommendation 28:** More in-depth general research is needed on the Eritrean community. Information on the community is scarce and this contributes to their invisibility and marginalization.

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# Appendix 1: List of Acronyms

CIC:	Citizenship and Immigration Canada
CICCY:	Community Information Centre for the City of York
ECCC:	Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto
ESL:	English as a Second Language
LINC:	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
OASIS:	Ontario Administration of Settlement and Integration Services
SIWA:	SIWA - Somali Immigrant Women Association

# Appendix 2: The Survey

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## Eritrean, Somali and other African Parents

Name of interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please tell everyone you interview:**

1. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey.
2. Your answers will help us to find out the issues faced by Eritrean, Somali and other African parents and their children as they settle into Canadian schools, and as they deal with the children's aid societies and other services.
3. The information is being collected by the Eritrean Canadian Community Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, SIWA - Somali Immigrant Women Association and the Community Information Centre for the City of York.
4. No one will be able to identify you from the survey. In the final report we will add all the statistics and present them as findings from the group as a whole. When we use quotes in the report there will be no names attached to them.
5. The survey may take up to an hour.

1. What language do you mostly speak at home? **CIRCLE ALL THAT APPLIES**

- (a) Tigrigna      (b) Tigre      (c) Arabic  
(d) Somali      (e) Swahili      (f) Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. How comfortable are you with speaking and understanding English?



(a) Language barriers                      (b) Not understanding the system                      (c) Cultural differences

(d) Financial problems                      (e) No issues

(f) Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Have any of your children ever been suspended? (For example, told by teachers that s/he is not allowed to come to school for a few days)                      Yes                      No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Have any of your children ever been expelled? (For example told by teachers that s/he is not allowed to come back to school anymore)                      Yes                      No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. Have any of your children dropped out of school? (For example, they decide that school is a waste of time and refuse to go anymore)                      Yes                      No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. Have any of your children had difficulties with teachers?                      Yes                      No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. Have any of your children had difficulties with other students?                      Yes                      No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. Have any of your children had difficulties with class-work? Yes No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. Have any of your children had difficulties with homework? Yes No

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. Have any of your children ever taken special education tests without your prior consent? (Tests to see if the child is a slow or very fast learner, needs extra help to keep up with the rest of the class, is hyperactive)

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Don't know ***IF (B) OR (C) GO TO Q 18***

17. If yes, what did you understand was the purpose of the test?

- (a)  To help your child
- (b)  To help the teacher
- (c)  For placement in a special class
- (d)  Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

18. Has your child ever been involved with the Identification and Placement Review Committee, IPRC? (The IPRC can ask your child to take special education tests, and recommend that they can stay in the regular class or go to special classes for slow learners, gifted children, etc.)

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Don't know

If yes, explain \_\_\_\_\_

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Educational Absences

19. Since coming to Canada, were any of your children out of school for a long time?

Yes                      No                      ***IF NO GO TO Q24***

20. If yes, how long? \_\_\_\_\_

21. For what reason? \_\_\_\_\_

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22. Did your child have problems when they returned to school after the long absence?

Yes                      No                      ***IF NO GO TO Q24***

23. If yes, what kind of problems?

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Involvement in your Children's Education

24. How have you been active in your children's schooling? CHECK ALL THAT APPLIES

Classroom volunteer

Parent-teacher interview

- School trip volunteer       Parent council meetings  
 Fundraising events       None of these  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_ ***IF YES TO ANY GO TO Q26***

25. What has prevented you from being active in your child's schooling? ***CHECK ALL THAT APPLIES***

- No time       No babysitter  
 " Don't fit in "       Health reasons  
 Language barriers       Financial reasons  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

26. Do you know about parent-child drop-in centres?      Yes      No      ***IF NO GO TO Q29***

27. If yes, have you used them?      Yes      No      ***IF YES GO TO Q29***

28. If no, why have you not used them?

- Language barriers       Money difficulties  
 Doesn't meet my needs       Don't understand what they do  
 Too far from home       Hours of operation  
 Other (explain)

### Child Welfare System

29. Have you ever been involved with child welfare authorities such as the children's aid society?  
Yes      No      ***IF NO GO TO Q35***

30. If yes what happened?

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31. Did you understand why the children's aid society was called?                      Yes                      No

32. Did you feel that the agency understood and respected your religious/cultural beliefs?

Yes      No

33. Were the services available in a language that you understood?                      Yes                      No

34. Did you feel that you received proper information about what was happening?

Yes      No

Legal/Police

35. Have you ever used legal services because of a problem your child had with school or children's aid society?                      Yes                      No                      ***IF NO GO TO Q37***

36. If yes, what kind of legal help did you use?

Lawyer

Legal Clinic

Paralegal

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Are you aware of community policing in the schools?                      Yes                      No

38. Have your children ever been involved with the police?      Yes    No    **IF NO GO TO Q43**

39. If yes, what was the issue? CHECK ALL THAT APPLIES

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical violence | <input type="checkbox"/> Verbal threats /verbal abuse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Racial harassment | <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weapons           | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                 |

## General Parenting Experience

40. What other issues have you faced in raising your children in Canada? (E.g. dating, respect and friends).

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41. What would have made it easier for you to raise your children in Canada?

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49. What is your highest level of education? ***CHECK ONE***

- (a) No formal education                      (b) Elementary school (c) Secondary/High School  
(d) College/Technical School              (e) Trades/Apprenticeship Certificate (f) University  
(g) Other \_\_\_\_\_

50. What is your religion, if any?

- (a) Islam    (b) Christian                      (c) Jewish  
(d) No religion                                  (e) Other \_\_\_\_\_

51. Do you have any questions or comments about this research project?

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Thank you very much for taking the time to help us with the research. Your answers are confidential and they will help us to better serve Eritrean, Somali and other African parent.