Cross-Cultural Parenting Practices: A Comparative Analysis of Western Countries and Somalia

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Abstract

This research paper examines the distinct parenting practices between the U.S., Western countries, and Somalia. The importance of this study arose with many cases of war refugee families in the community being referred to the child protection system due to their parents' discipline approaches. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, this study explores how values, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic factors shape parenting approaches in these cultures. The findings reveal significant differences in disciplinary methods, family structures, educational expectations, and child-rearing philosophies. While Western culture's parenting tends to emphasize individualism and child autonomy, Somali parenting practices prioritize collective responsibility, respect for elders, and traditional gender roles. Understanding these differences is crucial for educators, healthcare providers, child protection, and policymakers working with diverse populations.

Suggested Citation:

Service-learning has emerged as a significant educational approach that bridges classroom learning with community engagement, creating opportunities for bidirectional knowledge

exchange and value creation. This study examines a large regional teaching university in the Intermountain West (hereafter "the University") and its Academic Service-Learning program as a case study to analyze both the tangible and intangible impacts of service-learning on surrounding communities, while critically evaluating its effectiveness as an institutional strategy for community engagement.

Parenting practices vary dramatically across cultures, reflecting deeply rooted values, traditions, and social structures that have evolved over generations (Lansford, 2022). The way children are raised, disciplined, and prepared for adulthood differs significantly between Western individualistic societies and traditional collectivistic cultures (Cai, 2024). This comparative analysis examines parenting practices between Western countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Finland, Sweden, United States) and Somalia, nations with distinct cultural backgrounds, religious influences, and historical contexts. Additional parenting complexity occurs due to families from Somalia having all suffered war trauma, having been granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and then relocated to Western countries.

Culturally, Western countries in general represent individualistic societies that emphasize personal autonomy, self-expression, and democratic decision-making within families (Triandis, 1995). In contrast, Somalia embodies traditional African societal values with strong Islamic influences, where collective responsibility, respect for authority, and preservation of cultural heritage take precedence (Abdullahi, 2001). These fundamental differences create unique approaches to child-rearing that impact children's development, educational outcomes, and social integration. Misunderstandings and conflicts can arise when healthcare providers, child protection workers, and others interact with these families through a Western lens and focus (Milos, 2011). With 5.2 million Somali refugees and asylum-seekers registered globally, understanding their approach to parenting by service providers is critical (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025).

Methods

This comparative analysis examines peer-reviewed articles and grey literature reporting the differences in parenting practices between Western countries and Somali parents. Given the limited research on Somali parenting, studies from the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Europe are included to assist healthcare providers, child protection workers, and others when interacting with Somali families who are seeking services.

Research Questions

This review addresses: (1) a comparative analysis that examines parenting practices in Western countries and Somalia, nations with distinct cultural backgrounds, religious influences, and historical contexts.

Search Strategy

In July of 2025, MEDLINE, EBSCO (Academic Search Ultimate), and Google Scholar were searched (2000 to 2025) using the following keywords: (Somalia OR Somalian OR Somali) AND (Parenting Styles OR Parenting Practices OR Parenting OR Parenting Attitudes). The search strings were used consistently across all the databases that were searched, and no truncations were used. Review articles were searched for additional relevant citations. No authors were contacted. Subsequently, research librarians provided additional recommendations in July 2025, incorporating grey literature.

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

After removing a large number of duplicates, 168 articles/documents were further reviewed. Subsequently, the titles and abstracts of the remaining articles/documents were examined for relevancy and an additional 139 were excluded. The 29 remaining articles and documents were then examined and read for this literature review (see Figure 1).

Findings and Analysis

Diana Baumrind's seminal work on parenting styles provides a foundational framework for understanding cross-cultural differences in child-rearing approaches. The four primary parenting styles, authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful, serve as analytical tools for comparing foundational practices across cultures (Baumrind, 1967). However, recent research emphasizes that these Western-derived categories may not fully capture the complexity of

non-Western parenting approaches (Ren et al., 2024; Wen et al., 2025).

Cultural approaches to parenting suggest that practices congruent with cultural norms are more effective in transmitting values from parents to children, creating more positive, consistent, and predictable child-rearing environments (Bornstein, 2012). This cultural congruence theory helps explain why certain parenting practices that may appear problematic from one cultural perspective can be highly effective within their original context (Wen et al., 2025).

Figure 1: PRISMA-style flowchart of study selection process (2000–2025).

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│   •  MEDLINE (n = 38)               │
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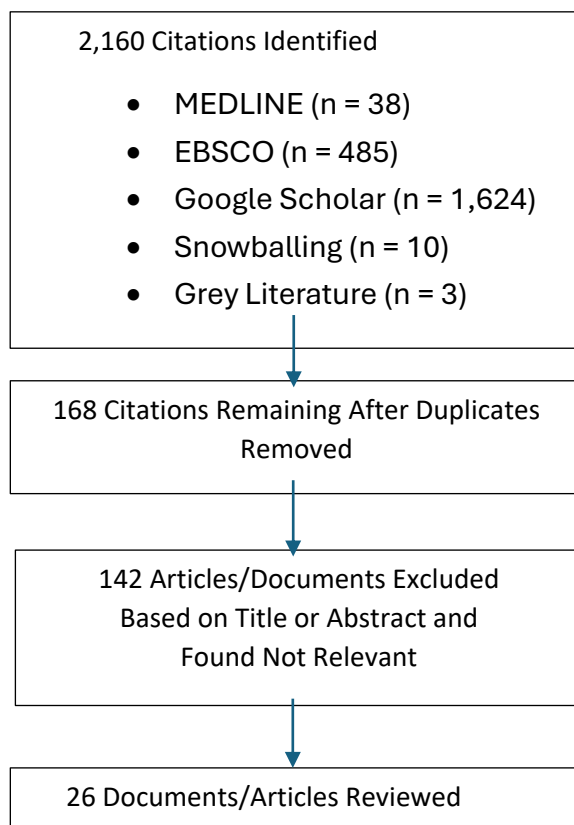
Western Parenting Practices

Western parenting has evolved significantly over the past several decades, with contemporary approaches emphasizing democratic participation, emotional expression, and individual achievement. Research indicates that Western parents increasingly favor authoritative parenting styles that combine high warmth with reasonable control, promoting children's autonomy while maintaining clear boundaries (Bi et al., 2018).

Modern Western parenting trends include "gentle parenting," which emphasizes emotional validation and collaborative problem-solving rather than traditional punishment-based discipline. According to recent surveys, American opinions on parenting effectiveness are divided, with 46% considering gentle parenting effective and an equal percentage viewing it as ineffective (YouGov, 2023).

Key characteristics of Western parenting include values such as an emphasis on individual achievement and self-expression (Triandis, 1995). In general, Western families have a democratic family decision-making process. They tend to place a high value on and focus on building children's self-esteem and confidence. In schools and at home, there is an encouragement of questioning, discussion, and independent thinking. Western parents provide structured extracurricular activities and educational enhancement. They often employ mother's helpers, nannies and professional childcare providers. Early childhood education and preschool is often utilized.

Although grouped under the umbrella of "Western parenting," countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, and Sweden reflect distinct cultural norms and policy environments that shape parenting styles in unique ways. For example, parenting in Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden, Finland) is heavily influenced by egalitarian values and generous welfare systems, which support emotionally responsive, autonomy-encouraging parenting with minimal emphasis on punishment (Lansford, 2022). In contrast, American parents, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, may emphasize independence, achievement, and discipline, often reflecting socioeconomic pressures and individualistic ideals (Lareau, 2011; Triandis, 1995). While the authoritative style is generally seen as ideal across Western contexts, its expression, particularly in terms of how warmth, monitoring, and autonomy are balanced, varies by culture, class, and policy (Sorkhabi, 2005; Lansford et al., 2018). Therefore, research findings from one Western context (such as the U.S.) should be generalized

with caution to others with different institutional and cultural foundations.

Western parenting practices have also evolved significantly over the past century, shaped by broader social, psychological, and political transformations. Early 20th-century parenting in the West was often authoritarian, grounded in religious and moral discipline. The mid-20th century saw a shift toward child-centered approaches, influenced by developmental psychologists like Piaget and educators like Dr. Spock, who promoted warmth and sensitivity to the child's emotional world. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this evolved into "concerted cultivation" among middle-class families, an approach characterized by structured extracurricular activities, negotiation, and verbal engagement (Lareau, 2011). More recently, trends such as gentle parenting and positive parenting emphasize emotional attunement, co-regulation, and collaborative boundary-setting. These historical shifts reflect changing beliefs about childhood, the role of parents, and the balance between authority and emotional connection in family life.

Somali Parenting Practices

Somali parenting traditions reflect a greater emphasis on resilience, community solidarity, and Islamic values. Traditional Somali child-rearing practices prioritize collective responsibility, where children belong not just to their parents but to the entire clan or community structure (Boyle & Ali, 2010). Consequently, as Bowie, Wojnar, and Isaak (2017) describe, many Somali parents in established U.S. communities engage in child-rearing as a "balancing act," blending tradition with adaptation to Western systems, rather than emphasizing clan-based collective responsibility (p. 273–289). Research on Somali refugee families reveals significant challenges when traditional parenting practices encounter Western educational and social systems (Moinolmolki et al., 2020). For instance, some Somali parents often struggle with concepts like "purposeful play" and structured reading activities, which are foreign to their traditional child-rearing approaches but essential for Western educational success (Bowie, Wojnar, & Carlson, 2011). Other researchers have found Somali parenting utilizes clan-based or community collective child-rearing responsibilities, and that there is a strong Islamic identity formation from

early childhood (Suleiman et al., 2024). There is also an emphasis on oral culture and storytelling traditions with parenting (Osman et al., 2021a). Clear gender-differentiated expectations and responsibilities are ingrained from early childhood. A respect for hierarchy, status, and age-based authority exerts a strong influence on children. Finally, Somali families emphasized resilience and adaptability in their survival through war, challenging relocation processes, and integration into Western culture (Degni, Pöntinen, & Mölsä, 2006).

Nonetheless, despite broad cultural generalizations, Somali parenting practices are far from monolithic. Within Somali communities, parenting approaches vary significantly based on region, clan affiliation, urban versus rural residence, education level, and socioeconomic status (Helander, 1999; Tiilikainen, 2025). For example, urban and more formally educated families may encourage greater paternal involvement in education and emotional development, while rural families often rely more heavily on extended kinship structures and traditional hierarchical discipline (Tiilikainen, 2025). Similarly, generational differences influence parenting strategies, as younger parents, especially those educated in diaspora, may integrate more Western-style responsiveness or democratic parenting approaches, while older generations tend to preserve more authoritarian or collectivist frameworks (Osman et al., 2021a; Degni, Pöntinen, & Mölsä, 2006).

The refugee experience itself also generates within-group variation. Families who have spent extended time in refugee camps, for instance, may have developed more adaptive or survival-based parenting strategies, emphasizing obedience and structure, compared to families who migrated directly through formal education or employment pathways (Moinolmolki et al., 2020). Trauma exposure, resettlement context, and the degree of community support further shape how Somali parents engage with their children in the host culture (Suleiman et al., 2024). Even among Somali families in Western countries, some maintain clan-based collective child-rearing practices, while others shift toward nuclear family models due to isolation, housing limitations, or school system pressures (Boyle & Ali, 2010; Bowie et al., 2017). These intra-cultural variations are essential to understanding

Somali parenting not as a static tradition, but as a dynamic, responsive set of practices shaped by context, history, and lived experience.

Comparative Analysis

Disciplinary Approaches

The most striking differences between Western and Somali parenting practices emerge in disciplinary methods. Western parenting increasingly favors positive reinforcement, natural consequences, and collaborative problem-solving. Time-outs, privilege removal, and discussion-based discipline are common approaches that aim to teach children internal motivation and self-regulation (Triandis, 1995). These methods reflect broader values of child autonomy, emotional development, and internalized moral reasoning.

In contrast, Somali culture traditionally employs more direct disciplinary methods, including physical discipline when deemed necessary (Kohli & Fineran, 2020). These practices are typically rooted in religious and cultural beliefs about respect, obedience, and family honor. For many Somali families, discipline is viewed not merely as behavior correction but as character formation within a collective value system. Somali parents often believe that strict discipline prepares children to become resilient, respectful adults who honor family and cultural expectations (Degni, Pöntinen, & Mölsä, 2006).

However, this difference often creates conflicts when Somali families migrate to Western countries, where such practices may be viewed as inappropriate or illegal. Refugee parents report confusion, fear, and even legal consequences when their traditional discipline methods are misunderstood or reported (Bjørknes & Manger, 2013). For example, a Somali father in Norway described feeling "criminalized" after using moderate physical discipline, unaware of local laws prohibiting it. These conflicts can lead to mistrust between families and service providers, further isolating already vulnerable populations. Cultural misunderstandings about discipline are one of the most common triggers for child protection referrals among Somali refugee families (Nilsson et al., 2012). Supporting these families requires culturally competent education about local laws and parenting norms, coupled with recognition of the values that underpin Somali disciplinary traditions (Osman et al, 2021a).

Family Structure and Authority

Western families typically operate on relatively egalitarian principles, with children encouraged to express opinions and participate in family decisions. Parent-child relationships often resemble partnerships, with parents serving as guides rather than absolute authorities. Emotional attunement, negotiation, and individual well-being are emphasized. Many Western parents believe that a child's ability to self-advocate and participate in decision-making builds confidence, self-regulation, and lifelong interpersonal skills (Wilson et al., 2014).

In contrast, Somali families maintain more hierarchical structures where parents and elders hold unquestioned authority (Suleiman et al., 2024). Children are expected to demonstrate respect through obedience and deference to adults. This authority-based model is grounded in Islamic principles and clan-based values that emphasize social cohesion and intergenerational accountability. The household operates not as a partnership but as a moral order, with parents, particularly fathers, functioning as guardians of tradition (Ahmed, 2013; Scuglik, 2005; Scuglik et al., 2007).

This hierarchical approach extends beyond the nuclear family to include extended family members, clan elders, and community leaders who all play roles in child guidance and discipline (Degni, Pöntinen, & Mölsä, 2006). For example, when a Somali grandmother was asked by an American teacher, "How do you handle a teenager talking back to you?" she explained that it would not likely occur due to the way the child was raised from birth to respect authority. For many Somali families, discipline and structure are reinforced by a larger cultural ecosystem that shares responsibility for the child's development (Degni, Pöntinen, & Mölsä, 2006).

To cope with the stressors of their new life, Somali families often fight to preserve traditional cultural and religious values (Bowie, Wojnar, & Isaak, 2017). However, younger generations raised in Western contexts may resist hierarchical authority, leading to intergenerational tension and confusion. Service providers must recognize that Somali family structures reflect deeply held values

and should avoid imposing Western models of egalitarianism without cultural sensitivity (Osman et al., 2021a).

Educational Expectations and Involvement

Western parents typically maintain high involvement in their children's formal education (e.g., attending school events, helping with homework, and communicating with teachers). In educational systems like the U.S., Canada, and Nordic countries, there is strong emphasis on individual expression, creativity, and critical thinking. Parental engagement is considered essential to student success, with schools encouraging parents to take initiative when concerns arise (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; OECD, 2017). Middle-class families often adopt an "intensive parenting" style (e.g., monitoring grades, managing extracurriculars, and advocating for their children) (Lareau, 2011).

By contrast, Somali parents frequently approach schooling with a different set of expectations. Deep-rooted cultural respect for educators and hierarchical norms often leads Somali parents to defer to teachers as the primary authorities in their children's academic lives (Ahmed, 2015). Rather than seeing themselves as co-educators, many view their role as instilling good manners and moral behavior at home, while teachers manage formal instruction. This division of labor can be misinterpreted by Western educators as disengagement or neglect (Adam, 2023; Georgis et al., 2014).

Moreover, Somali refugee families often encounter systemic barriers that limit their ability to engage in Western-style school involvement. These include language challenges, unfamiliarity with local educational structures, and limited access to information about school expectations (Hussein & Farea, 2024; Mohamed & Yusuf, 2012; Nderu, 2005). Families newly resettled from rural or refugee-camp contexts may also face logistical hurdles, such as inflexible work schedules or lack of transportation, that make it difficult to attend school meetings or volunteer.

Despite these challenges, Somali parents frequently express strong aspirations for their children's academic success, especially in religious and literacy domains. However, they may prioritize Islamic education and behavioral discipline over extracurricular participation or open dialogue with teachers (Ahmed, 2015). Bridging these cultural gaps requires schools to engage in culturally sensitive communication, provide interpretation support, and avoid assuming parental disinterest when involvement takes unfamiliar forms.

Gender Role Socialization

Western parenting increasingly emphasizes gender equality, encouraging both boys and girls to pursue similar opportunities and express similar ranges of emotions and behaviors. Parents often seek to counteract traditional gender stereotypes by providing equal access to toys, extracurriculars, and career aspirations. Emotional openness is encouraged across genders, and fathers in many Western families are taking on more nurturing roles (Lansford, 2022).

In contrast, traditional Somali parenting involves distinct gender role socialization from early childhood (Abdi, 2022). Boys and girls receive different types of training, expectations, and responsibilities that prepare them for their expected adult roles within the culture (Nilsson et al., 2012; Tetreault et al., 2023). For example, girls may be expected to help with younger siblings and household duties, while boys are trained in leadership and external responsibilities. These divisions are not just practical but moral, rooted in Islamic teachings and community expectations about gender-appropriate behavior (Tiilikainen, 2025).

While some urban or diaspora Somali families are beginning to blur these distinctions, many continue to see strict gender roles as essential to maintaining cultural identity. Tensions often arise when Somali youth are exposed to Western norms promoting gender fluidity or egalitarianism. In such cases, parents may feel their authority is undermined or that their children are losing connection to their roots (Scuglik & Alarcon, 2005, Scuglik et al., 2007).

These divergent gender norms can lead to misunderstandings in schools and social service settings. For instance, a Somali mother might discourage her daughter from playing sports with boys, a practice viewed as controlling or restrictive by Western observers but seen as protective within the Somali context. Professionals working with Somali families must consider how gender roles are

encoded in both religious tradition and communal survival, especially for families who have endured displacement and cultural fragmentation (Mohamed & Yusuf, 2012).

Challenges in Cross-Cultural Contexts

When Somali families immigrate to Western countries, they face significant challenges in maintaining their traditional parenting practices while adapting to new cultural expectations. Research on Somali refugee families reveals a process of "parenthood in transition," where parents must navigate between preserving cultural identity and ensuring their children's success in Western society (Osman et al., 2016). Conflicts between traditional discipline methods and new legal and social expectations frequently occur (Black, 2013). This leads to refugee families (already traumatized from war and relocation) having their children removed and placed in foster care (which often further traumatizes the children and family) (Horn et al., 2017; Kristen et al., 2023). Due to numerous barriers (such as language, finances, time, etc.), it is difficult for Somali families to access culturally appropriate parenting support services (Eurenius, 2019).

Often, generational conflicts emerge as children learn English more rapidly than their parents and also adopt Western values more quickly. The parents' language barriers can affect their ability to interact with their child's educators, child's friends, and neighbors. Although the Somali parents want to encourage their children's integration needs, conflicts arise as they try to preserve their cultural heritage (Suleiman et al., 2024).

Professional Support and Intervention

Healthcare providers, educators, and social service professionals working with these and other diverse populations must understand these cultural differences to provide effective support. Misunderstandings about parenting practices can lead to inappropriate interventions, family conflicts, and reduced trust between refugee families and service providers (Xu, 2014). To provide effective support, it is recommended that professionals utilize cultural competency training (Osman et al., 2017a; Osman et al., 2017b; Osman et al., 2021b). Culturally sensitive and informed parenting programs need to be accessible (Kristen et al., 2023;

Neville et al., 2022; Reincke, 2011). Recognizing the validity of different parenting approaches, along with educating families on the laws of the country or the U.S. state where they reside, is important. Likewise, it is important to support these families in navigating cultural transitions while acknowledging the strengths within traditional parenting systems (Osman et al., 2022).

Recommendations

Based on the evidence from culturally adapted parenting programs, particularly the successful Ladnaan intervention in Sweden (Osman et al., 2021b), several key recommendations emerge for supporting Somali immigrant families in Western contexts:

Implement Culturally-Tailored Parenting Programs

The robust evidence from the Ladnaan program demonstrates that culturally-adapted interventions are significantly more effective than generic approaches. Programs should integrate both practical societal information (child welfare systems, parenting norms, children's rights) with evidence-based parenting techniques modified for cultural relevance. Research with Somali participants illustrates the transformative potential of culturally-sensitive programming that respects traditional values while facilitating adaptation to new contexts (Osman et al., 2021b).

Prioritize Language Accessibility and Cultural Competence

Delivering programs in participants' native language is not merely a convenience but a critical component of program effectiveness. The Ladnaan program's success in Sweden was directly linked to its delivery in Somali by culturally competent facilitators. This approach ensures deeper comprehension, emotional connection, and trust-building that generic translated materials cannot achieve (Osman et al., 2021b).

Address Both Individual and Systemic Barriers

Effective programming must simultaneously support parents' psychological well-being and provide practical knowledge about Western institutional systems. Somali parents need both parenting skills and system navigation knowledge to succeed in their new environment.

Engage Community Infrastructure

The process evaluation of the Ladnaan program highlighted the importance of community leader engagement and practical supports like free transportation in ensuring program participation and retention. Programs should invest in community partnerships and address logistical barriers that might prevent participation among families already managing multiple stressors (Osman et al., 2021b).

Scale Evidence-Based Models

While community-based programs in the U.S. provide valuable support, there is an urgent need to adapt and rigorously evaluate proven interventions, but in American contexts. The absence of randomized controlled trials for U.S.-based Somali parenting programs represents a significant gap that limits our ability to identify and replicate effective approaches.

Support Intergenerational Bridge-Building

Given the documented acculturative tensions between maintaining hierarchical traditions and adapting to egalitarian norms, programs should explicitly address intergenerational dynamics and provide strategies for families to navigate cultural transitions while preserving core values and family cohesion.

These recommendations collectively suggest that effective support for Somali immigrant families requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches toward culturally grounded, evidence-based interventions that honor families' heritage while facilitating successful adaptation to Western contexts.

Limitations

This literature review reveals several significant constraints that limit our understanding of parenting approaches across Somali and Western contexts, highlighting important areas where further research is needed.

Limited Research Base and Geographic Scope

The evidence base for culturally adapted parenting interventions remains narrow, with the Ladnaan program in Sweden representing one of the few rigorously evaluated models (Osman et al., 2021b). While community-based programs exist in the United States, the absence of randomized controlled trials or systematic evaluations significantly limits our ability to assess their effectiveness or make evidence-based recommendations. This geographic concentration of research in Sweden may not capture the diverse experiences of Somali families across different Western contexts, each with unique immigration policies, social services, and cultural landscapes.

Methodological Challenges in Cross-Cultural Research

Comparing research conducted across different cultural contexts presents inherent methodological challenges. Western-developed assessment tools, such as the Child Behavior Checklist used in the Ladnaan evaluation, may not fully capture culturally specific concepts of child development, behavioral norms, or family functioning. What constitutes "problematic" behavior in Western psychological frameworks may be viewed differently within Somali cultural contexts, potentially leading to misinterpretation of research findings or intervention outcomes.

Lack of Traditional Somali Parenting Research

A significant gap exists in systematic documentation and evaluation of traditional Somali parenting practices within their original cultural context. Most available research focuses on Somali families in diaspora settings, potentially overlooking the full spectrum of indigenous parenting wisdom and practices that could inform more effective culturally adapted interventions. This absence of baseline research on traditional approaches limits our ability to understand what elements should be preserved, modified, or integrated in cross-cultural programming.

Heterogeneity Within Somali Communities

The literature often treats Somali families as a homogeneous group, failing to account for diversity in clan affiliations, regional origins, educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and length of residence in Western countries. These variables likely influence both parenting practices and intervention effectiveness, yet research designs rarely stratify findings by these important demographic factors.

Limited Attention to Fathers and Extended Family

The research base appears to focus predominantly on mothers, with limited examination of fathers' roles or the influence of extended family networks that are central to traditional Somali child-rearing practices. This narrow focus may miss crucial family dynamics and limit the comprehensiveness of intervention approaches.

Challenges in Defining "Success"

The literature lacks consensus on how to define successful cultural adaptation or optimal child outcomes in bicultural contexts. Western metrics of child adjustment may not align with Somali community values, making it difficult to assess whether interventions truly serve families' long-term cultural and developmental goals.

These limitations underscore the need for more diverse, longitudinal, and culturally grounded research that can better inform evidence-based support for Somali families navigating parenting across cultural contexts.

Conclusion

The comparison of parenting practices across Western countries and Somalia reveals profound differences rooted in cultural values, religious beliefs, and social structures. While Western parenting emphasizes individualism, democratic participation, and personal achievement, Somali parenting prioritizes collective responsibility, respect for authority, and cultural preservation. These differences are not merely academic curiosities but have real-world implications for refugee families, educational institutions, and service providers. Rather than viewing one approach as superior to another, professionals and policymakers should recognize the validity of diverse parenting styles while supporting families in navigating cross-cultural challenges. Understanding these differences promotes cultural competency, reduces cross-cultural conflicts, and supports the development of more inclusive and effective support systems for diverse families. As societies become increasingly multicultural, this understanding becomes ever more crucial for promoting positive outcomes for all children, regardless of their cultural background. Future research should continue exploring the strengths and challenges of different parenting approaches, examining long-term outcomes for children raised in various cultural contexts, and developing culturally sensitive support systems that honor diversity while promoting child welfare.

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