

Navigating Public Spaces Together: Lessons on How to Better Support Immigrant and Refugee Families with Neurodivergent Children



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Kim Mayer, Lucero Vargas, Tsedale Aregawi, Melissa Uwera, Atiya Syeda, Julie Zhu, Abdullah Ahmed, Yvonne Chiu, Rispah Tremblay, Wubetu Biabeyin, Danielle Schulte, Leah Johnson, Kemoh Mansaray, Robel Araya, Samina Sana, Ucy Gernati, Andrea MacLeod, Rosslynn Zulla

Background

Canada took in 471,808 immigrants together with 74,979 refugees throughout the year 2023. Public services together with inclusive facilities remain out of reach for families who have neurodivergent children which affects their social inclusion and mental well-being. Parks, faith centers, malls and other public spaces need to provide safe environments that are accessible to all visitors.



Methods

1 The research project was overseen by Edmonton-based ethnocultural and settlement agencies working with local universities. Members were caregivers, service providers and academics from various backgrounds.

2 The research design used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to foster equality in knowledge development through partnership work.

3 Individual and focus group interviews collected participants' experiences. Data was analyzed using an inductive approach to reflect participants' voices.

4 The study learned from families who were immigrants or refugees with neurodivergent children, aged six to eighteen years old. Community workers shared their perspectives.



Research Questions



How do immigrant and refugee families who have a neurodivergent child navigate public spaces?

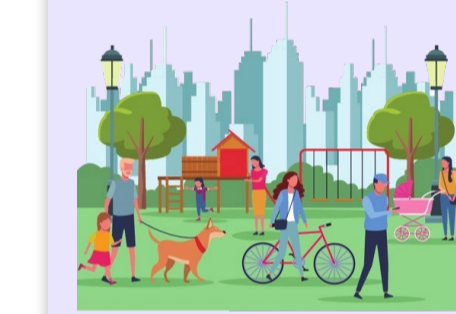
Key Findings



Creating a meaningful experience in a public space is a co-constructive process that evolves within the relationship between the individual(s) and their environment.



Visiting and using a space is a mutual experience for the neurodivergent child and the family.



The quality of the service delivery infrastructure shapes families' ability to navigate public space.

Results

Participant Insights:

We conducted interviews with 16 families (or 19 caregivers and 1 neurodivergent young adult) from different ethnocultural backgrounds. We also collected data from 17 community workers from diverse professional sectors. Community workers were formal or informal providers who worked at settlement agencies, disability organizations and churches. We aimed to have multiple perspectives to attain diverse insights into navigating public spaces.



Encountering Spaces:

Migrant families with neurodivergent children visited various public spaces but faced challenges like information gaps, transport issues, financial constraints, and sensory difficulties. Re-visits depended on previous successes, though unexpected stressors could hinder experiences.



Meaning of Spaces:

- Visiting spaces was meaningful when activities aligned with the neurodivergent child's interests and involved familiar family members.
- Safe and welcoming environments depended on community workers' engagement and inclusive interactions.
- Enjoyment was influenced by sensory stimuli, familiar objects, and supportive social dynamics.



Accessing Spaces:

- Accessing public spaces for neurodivergent children involved assessing the child's interests, obtaining relevant information, and navigating logistical challenges.
- Barriers included language issues, complex websites, poor digital literacy, societal stigma, and stressors related to public behavior.
- In-person wayfinding support helped families feel welcomed, reduced anxiety and ensured smoother access to public spaces.



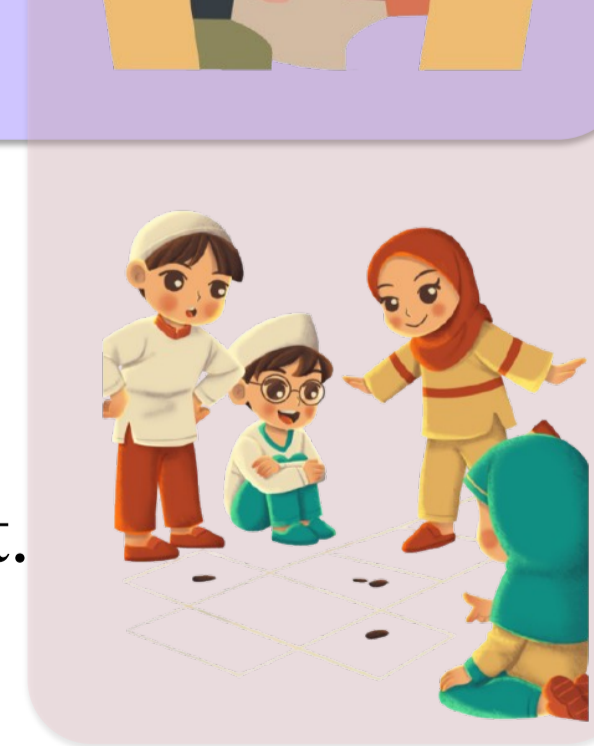
Using Places:

- Four dimensions influenced neurodivergent children's use of spaces: sensory safety, physical safety, relational safety, and degree of adaptation.
- Each dimension uniquely affected each child, evolved with time, and impacted the child and family.
- Adaptations involved strategies like noise-canceling headphones, environmental adjustments, and social actor support.

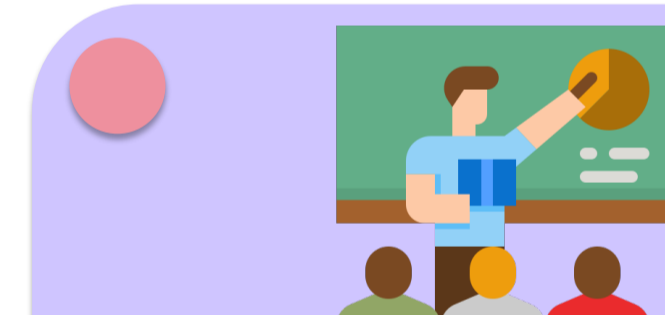


Family and Community Factors:

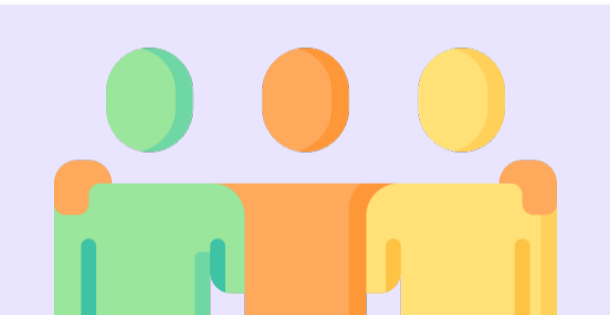
- Family and community assets, such as the neurodivergent child's adaptability, caregiver knowledge, supportive neighbors, and community workers, helped navigate public space stressors.
- Negative perceptions of disability and ableism impacted neurodivergent child and family involvement.
- Community workers often faced invisibility and systemic barriers, impacting their morale and the quality of support they provided to neurodivergent children and their families.



Recommendations



Building Staff and Resource Capacity: Enhancing staff training and increasing resource availability are essential for providing culturally responsive and neurodivergent-inclusive support. Strengthening these areas helps create more accessible spaces.



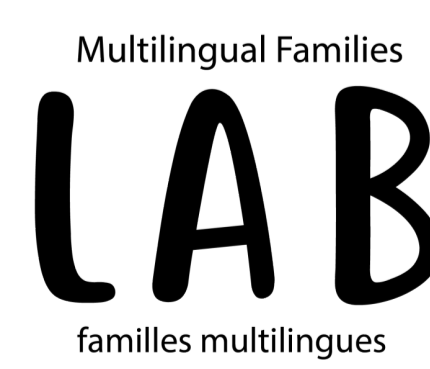
Strengthening Wayfinding Support: Community workers play a vital role in guiding families through available resources and advocating for necessary support. Expanding these efforts can significantly improve access to information.



Expanding Public Education and Awareness: Increasing public awareness and sensitivity through targeted education initiatives can foster more inclusive environments for immigrant and refugee families with neurodivergent children.



Enhancing Environmental Adaptations for Safety and Inclusion: Prioritizing safety in multiple ways (sensory, relational and physical) and ensuring adaptation in a public space will ensure better access and inclusion for neurodivergent children and their families.



For questions, please contact:
Andrea MacLeod, andrea.a.n.macleod@ualberta.ca
Rosslynn Zulla, rzulla@ucalgary.ca