

# Toronto study finds 'satellite babies' common across immigrant communities <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

The phenomenon of "satellite babies" - children separated from parents and in care of relatives abroad - is more common across immigrant communities than once thought, says a Toronto study.

The custom of temporarily boarding young children with overseas relatives - a strategy that helps newcomers cope with the stress of migration - is not limited to the Chinese, but is also common among South Asian, African and Caribbean immigrants.

However, according to the York University study, the patterns of parent-child separation including timing and length of separation are distinct among those communities."

It is difficult to have a functional family life for them. They have to use coping strategies that are familiar to them, based on their own cultural values," said York University child psychologist Yvonne Bohr, lead author of the study.

In collaboration with community leaders, service agencies and local health centres, researchers interviewed six mental health service providers and 34 parents from these communities in Greater Toronto, all of whom had suffered separation from their children for at least a year.

They found Chinese parents typically sent their children "home" between the ages of six months and 2 years, for 1 to 3 years, due to "the financial ramifications of starting afresh in a new country."

For the Afro-Caribbean community, the separation was mostly driven by the mothers fleeing corruption or escaping partner abuse. These mothers left their children behind and came to Canada, hoping the youngsters would join them once they became established here.

"Mother-child separation was seen as a necessary evil in the pursuit of a better life," said the study, adding children from the community are typically pre-adolescents by the time they are reunited with the parents.

In contrast to those two communities, Bohr said, about half of the separations for South Asian parents took the form of fathers separating from the families for extended periods of time. And when children were separated from both parents, it was usually at an older age.

The difficulties and delays in the immigration process were often cited as major factors in parent-child separations by South Asian parents, who also suggested the lack of foreign credential recognition in Canada as a cause for the fathers having to leave to seek employment abroad.

Bohr said there is no hard data as to the number of children being sent home and raised overseas, often by their grandparents, but she believes it is a growing issue shadowed in global migration.

Such separations could have a detrimental impact on the child's development and parents' mental health, she noted.

"These parents often expressed guilt and remorse for the decisions they made. They also reported issues with their child after they reunited," said Bohr.

In 2006, University Settlement, a community service agency in Manhattan, started a mental health program, called Butterflies, for children under age 5, after seeing a surge of developmental issues among American-born Chinese children who were taken to China and later returned to parents in America.

"The separation from a caregiver is a radical change for the child, with the subtle communication between the child and caregiver disrupted. New caregivers have to learn to communicate and rebuild the attachment," said Bonnie Cohen, director of the Butterflies program.

The program offers support and consultation for the reunited families, identifies and screens children in distress, and provides treatment and therapy to help bridge the connection between the parents and child.

"We have a lot of play, a lot of storytelling to help parents engender resilience and hope. We try to tell the child that grandma still loves you, is still there," said Cohen. "We talk about their home in China. We talk about New York to make them feel comfortable."

In Toronto, the Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre had run a Mandarin-speaking support group since 2004 to guide parents

through the pros and cons of sending their children to China.

However, therapist Connie Tse said the centre terminated the group in the spring after a steady decline in enrolment the past two years.

"It is difficult to explain why, but I've heard that now a lot of families just decide to go back to China altogether," Tse said.

Bohr said the study highlights the importance of recognizing the challenges in employment, affordable housing and inadequate child care faced by newcomers that are often "not of the immigrants' choosing."

Some programs are available to immigrant parents in need but they are not utilized due to a social stigma attached to the practice of satellite babies. Bohr said mental health service professionals must be more culturally competent and reach out to these parents to address their needs.

-reprinted from Metro

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/12/09/toronto-study-finds-%E2%80%98satellite-babies%E2%80%99-common-across-immigrant>

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