

# Raise-a-Reader: Afghan family embrace a culture with children's books

*“I always tell my friends to go and register themselves with Canucks Family Education. It’s not only about education, it’s about emotional support. For whoever is coming from outside of the country, for someone who is a refugee or an immigrant, everything is there.” — Mahrukh Barakzai*

Author of the article:  
Shawn Conner  
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A teacher conducts a class at a government middle school in Kabul on August 30, 2021. Photo by AAMIR QURESHI /AFP via Getty Images

When Mahrukh Barakzai first came to Canada from Afghanistan in 2017 she knew a little bit of English. But she was far too self-conscious to try speaking it.

“In Afghanistan, I was taking private courses,” she said. “But I didn’t talk at all. I would take an interpreter with me wherever I was going. But now I’m better.”

Barakzai is studying English and math through courses offered via a partnership between the Canucks Family Education Centre and the Vancouver School Board. Her preschool children take part in CFEC's Get Ready 2 Read (GR2R) early learning program, which runs concurrently while the parents are in class. Funds from The Vancouver Sun's Raise-a-Reader campaign help support the GR2R program. The campaign has raised over \$20 million since 1997.

"I always tell my friends to go and register themselves with Canucks Family Education," Barakzai said. "It's not only about education, it's about emotional support. For whoever is coming from outside of the country, for someone who is a refugee or an immigrant, everything is there."

Barakzai came to the country with her husband and their two daughters. Her husband felt that his job with the World Bank was too dangerous.

"He said we can't live here, because he or our kids might be kidnapped."

The family applied for both American and Canadian visas. When the American visa came through, they left within a week. They were receiving threatening messages from the Taliban. After a month in the U.S., they crossed the border into Canada. They did not know anyone in the country.

Once here, Barakzai, who was pregnant with their third child, found out about the CFEC programs through a social worker at B.C. Women's Hospital. The programs are ideal for her because she can study while her younger children are looked after.

The family has grown to four with the addition of another daughter and a son. The second eldest has finished kindergarten.

"She can already read books very well," Barakzai said. "I think that's because of Get Ready 2 Read."

Both parents read to their kids. In Afghanistan, Barakzai doesn't recall there being any children's books.

"We only read textbooks. It was very strict. I remember if you couldn't read or you couldn't write the teacher hit you with a ruler."

The countries are so different she can't even compare them, she says.

"Here, kids are independent. They read and they enjoy reading. They study and they enjoy studying. It's so fun. They don't know how they learn because every learning is like a game. Last year when everything was online I was telling my kids to do their homework. They went,

‘Mommy, you are so rude. That isn’t how my teacher tells us to our homework.’ I was Wow, you guys are so lucky to be here.”

Of course, the situation back home remains dire. Barakzai stays in touch with her family, but she worries about the future.

“Yesterday one of my brothers went to his office. I talked to him this morning and he said that they (the Taliban) hit him on the leg with a stick and told him to go back home and stay at home,” she said.

“I cried a lot and then my kids asked what happened. ‘Nothing, nothing.’ He texted and said he’s OK. But it’s still a very bad situation. The income my family there has comes from my brothers and my mom, and they are jobless now. They’re not allowed to go back to their office. They want to get out but there’s no way.”

In 2020, Canada took in just over 2000 Afghan immigrants. Since the takeover of the country by the Taliban, Ottawa has committed to taking in an additional 20,000 Afghan refugees.

*Editor’s note: The family’s name in this story has been changed to protect them and family members still in Afghanistan.*

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