Supporting Children After a Parent's Deportation or Detention

The deportation of a parent can be a very stressful and frightening event for a child of any age. Children may show mental health and behavioral challenges as they process the separation and adjust to the change in their lives. This document was prepared by child mental health professionals, and it describes ways to support healthy development and resilience for children in this difficult situation. It is intended for children's primary caregivers, along with other supportive adults, like teachers and neighbors.
You may also reference this document.

Help the child feel safe

- Children feel the safest when the adults around them can regulate their own emotions well. Make sure that you take good care of yourself during this transition by relying on your support network, processing your feelings with other adults, and using your coping skills. That way, you are more likely to be calm when you talk to the child.
- A parent's deportation can make a child feel like the world is an unsafe, unkind place. One of the most important things you can do for a child in this situation is to help them trust that their basic needs will be met. If they have moved to a new home, make sure they know where they are sleeping, how to get a cup of water, and where to find snacks.
- Children may have anxiety about their own safety and their family's safety. Show them all the things you do to keep them safe and healthy, like wearing seatbelts and brushing their teeth. Older children and teens may appreciate knowing what their communities are doing to protect people from deportations and learning what they can do to stay safe.
- Help the child connect to familiar, safe people, like teachers, relatives, and pastors.
- Try to maintain the same routines the child had before the parent was deported. For example, regular meal times can help the child know that they do not have to worry about having enough to eat. Regular bedtimes help their brains heal from stress.

Listen to the child

- When you talk to a child about their parent's deportation, start by relaxing your own body and voice. If a child sees that you can handle your own feelings, they know that you can handle their feelings as well.
- It is important to start conversations by learning what a child already understands and believes about deportation. This approach lets the child guide the conversation, helps you meet them at their developmental stage, and avoids introducing new fears. Sometimes, children have heard things that are not true, and you may need to correct their beliefs.

- One of the main ways that children share their thoughts and feelings is through play. When you pay attention to a child's play, you learn what they are thinking about the world, and you also show them that you care about their thoughts and feelings. Some common themes that children may play about after a parent's deportation are arrests, jail, punishment, family separation, and families finding each other again.

- While a child is playing, give them your full attention and narrate what you see them doing ("Oh, the mommy bear is looking for her baby bear!"). You do not need to ask questions or explain things to the child while they are playing; you help them the most when you just pay attention, listen, and accept their thoughts in play.

- Many children keep their difficult feelings silent until a grown-up gives them permission to talk about them. Even if the child seems okay, try helping a child label and name their own feelings. Emphasize that all feelings are normal and okay. You can say things like:

  "I wish your mom was here to see your recital today. I wonder if you were thinking about her."

  "When people see a parent get arrested, they may feel scared and mad. You can share these feelings with me, even if they are hard to talk about. I always want to hear what is on your mind."

Helping children understand deportation

- It can be hard to describe deportation to a child, but it is still important to help them understand what has happened. Being honest in age-appropriate ways can help strengthen the child's trust in the adults around them. Most importantly, children need to know that their loved one did not want to leave them behind.

- It is important for children to understand that their parents are trying hard to be good people. When you talk with children about deportation, try not to describe the parent as a "criminal." Instead, use language like this:

  "To move to the U.S., people need permission papers. It takes a very long time to get those papers, and a lot of people are still waiting for them for years after they move to the U.S. Waiting for these papers doesn't make someone a bad person. It just shows how many other people are waiting for their permission papers, like a long line in a store. Sometimes, a person has to move to another country while they wait for their papers."

- Young children often blame themselves for bad things that happen. Reassure children that nothing they did or didn't do caused their parent's deportation.

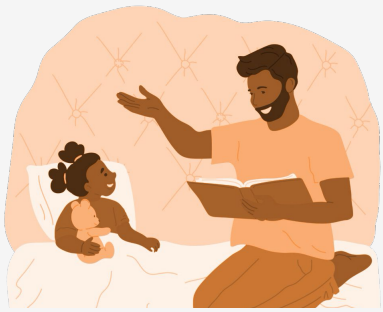
  "It can be very sad and scary when a parent is arrested and deported. It's not a kid's job to keep a parent safe from that. There wasn't anything you could have done or said to stop your dad from being deported. It was about grown-ups' rules and it doesn't have anything to do with kids."

  "It isn't your job to bring your dad back here. Your job is to be a good big brother, and to work hard in school, and to help your auntie with chores. Grown-ups are doing everything they can to help families get back together."

- You can be a supportive listener even if you do not have to have all of the answers to their questions. If a child asks when a parent will return, or why agents targeted them, you can reply, "I don't know. I promise to tell you if I find out more." Remind the child that they can keep asking you questions as often as they need to.

- Try to promise only what you know is true. Instead of promising that no other loved ones will be arrested, promise the child: *"You will always have adults around you who do their best to take care of you. You will always be so loved and so important."*

- Find age-appropriate books about deportation, previewing them before sharing them with children. Plan a time to read when you can support a child's emotional response during and after reading together; bedtime may not be the right time. Follow the child's lead while reading, allowing for repetition, questions, skipping parts, or reading the ending first if a child needs to know what happens. Offering comfort and physical closeness when reading (hugs, snuggles, etc,) can help a child feel loved and safe.



I Wish You Knew by Jackie Azúa Kramer

Something Happened to My Dad by Ann Hazzard and Vivianne Aponte Rivera

Until Someone Listens by Estela Juarez and Lissette Norman

Mama's Nightingale by Edwidge Danticat

Mango Moon by Diane De Anda

A child's behavior

- Many children show some difficult behaviors after a parent is deported, such as acting aggressively or struggling to follow rules. Help them identify the feelings underneath their behaviors and find other ways to take care of these feelings.

  "I see that you are hitting your cousin. I wonder if you're feeling mad or sad or scared right now. Would you like to tell me what's on your mind while I braid your hair, or do you want to go run around at the soccer field?"

- Other children may show regressive behaviors. They may act like a younger child, or seem to "lose" skills that they had before, like toilet training or impulse control. Some children become more scared of separation from caregivers. This is a very common response, and it is temporary. Be patient towards the child, and do not make them feel ashamed for acting younger. Keep up age-typical expectations in all the ways the child is able to (e.g., clearing their plates, doing homework, etc.), but be flexible as well. For example, a child may need to share a bedroom with an adult for a while in order to feel safe at night.

- Support positive ways to express difficult feelings. This can include play, writing, active movement/exercise, art, and music.

- Some children are well behaved after a parent's deportation, but they are feeling difficult feelings on the inside. Let them know it is okay to share sadness, anger, and fear.

Keep the connection strong

- Work with the child to put up photos and other reminders of the parent. If you have videos or recordings of the parent's voice, offer to listen to them with the child.
- Read books like *The Invisible String*, *No Matter What*, and *The Kissing Hand* that help the child understand how they are still loved even when their loved one is far away.
- Support the child in staying close with the parent from afar. Set up phone calls, video calls, and letters with the parent if possible. Meanwhile, help the child feel connected in their heart. Ask questions about the parent, help the child share or draw about positive memories with them, or pray for them together if this is a part of the child's tradition.
- Remind the child of all of the things the parent loves about the child.
- Young children often think that their parents control everything about the world. In fact, some may think that their parents wanted to go away. They may need reassurance that some things were out of the grown-up's control and the parent did not choose to leave them behind.

> *"Your mommy loves you very much, and she was so sad when she had to go away. She did everything she could to stay here, and she'd be here if she could."*

Support the child's development in other ways

After children go through difficult experiences, you can help them stay healthy and develop well using these simple supports:

- Helping a child stick to routines
- Supporting school success and engagement
- Teaching the child to manage their emotions
- Providing opportunities to play and be a kid
- Bringing the child to familiar religious and cultural spaces
- Building friendship skills
- Offering chances to take on age-appropriate responsibility (like chores)
- Giving the child practice solving problems in their lives
- Practicing making goals and meeting them
- Promoting sleep health
- Helping the child build spaces to belong (like with relatives or friends)

Mental health providers like therapists and school counselors can help children with these needs.

Perhaps the most important resource for children who have been through a stressful experience is a stable caregiver. Taking good care of yourself will make it easier to respond well to the child's needs each day.

Above all, it is important to stay hopeful about the child's future. The most common response to trauma is recovery. In fact, after going through very difficult events, most children are doing quite well a few years later. The child you are caring for has a bright future. Whether you are in this child's life for a short time or a long time, the safety, stability, and love you offer now will support their thriving for the rest of their lives.

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