

When children are afraid of a parent's deportation

As immigration enforcement orders intensify, many children are afraid of being separated from their parents and other loved ones. This document, prepared by child mental health professionals, describes steps that immigrant and refugee families can take to support their children's resilience and healthy relationships during this frightening time.

Starting conversations:

- Parents may worry that conversations about deportation will further traumatize their child. However, research shows that when children go through scary things, they are less afraid if they have been prepared about what to expect. Even though these conversations are hard, it is important to start them early.
 - Always take a moment to relax and calm yourself before starting a conversation like this. If you do not feel ready, take care of yourself and try again later.
 - You may need to talk with your child again and again about this topic to answer their questions and reassure them.
 - Use words your child understands and speak in a calm voice.
- Some children keep their worries private because they do not want to trouble their parents. Make sure your child knows that you want to hear about their private thoughts. You may say things like:
 - *"I was so sad when Mr. Jiménez was taken away this week. I wonder if you are afraid that the same thing will happen to me."*
 - *"I wonder if you have heard anyone at school saying mean things about people who moved here from another country."*
 - *"It is okay if you feel scared or mad or sad when we talk about this. I am not afraid of your feelings, and I always want to know what is on your mind."*
- Your child may hear things that suggest undocumented people are criminals or enemies. It is important that children know their parents are doing their best to be good people. Give them [alternative language](#) to understand what it means to be undocumented. We suggest emphasizing that it is an administrative problem. For example:
 - *"People need papers to be in the U.S., and many people (like me) are still waiting for ours. This does not mean I am a bad person; it just shows that it takes time to get these papers. I may have to live elsewhere for a while while I wait."*
- Even if your child is very young, tell them who will take care of them if you have to go away, what their days might look like at that person's house, and how you will be able to stay connected from afar. For example:
 - *"Jovi's parents will wake you, take you to daycare, play with you, give you dinner, brush your teeth, read you a story, and say goodnight."*
 - Make sure the child has spent time in this home and knows this adult loves them.



- Children feel safest when their parents find ways to validate their feelings and also stay calm. When you have these conversations with your child, express your feelings in a way that is calm and reassuring. For example:

- *“If I have to go away for a while, I would be so sad. I’d miss you daily and pray for us to be together again. And you would be safe every day with Tía Angela.”*



In the meantime:

- Complete a family preparedness plan for each child in your family. [This example](#) is from Massachusetts; find a version reflecting laws in your state.
- Make sure you have completed a [form](#) designating a trusted individual or family to care for your child if you are deported. Bring this to a notary public to make sure it is official.
- Help your child to build pride in who they are. Immigrant children in the U.S. do best when they are able to navigate U.S. culture while having a strong positive connection to their heritage. You can do this by:
 - Making recipes from your culture
 - Listening to music from your home country
 - Involving your children in religious and spiritual practices that matter to you



- After short separations (e.g., at school pickup), tell your child you were thinking of them, and help them understand you are connected when you are apart.

- If your child hears negative language about immigrants or Latino people, validate their feelings of hurt and anger. Then, teach them that the comments are wrong. For example:

- *“That makes me mad that someone said that. There are some people who believe that the way people look, the language they speak, or where they come from has to do with how good or important they are as a person. Those people are wrong, and really confused!”*

- Continually repeat the most important facts (that the child is just as good and important as everyone else). For older children, you can talk about reasons that racist or anti-immigrant beliefs are wrong.
- It is important for children to have a sense of agency when they are afraid. You may talk to your child about a special “job” they will have if you have to go away, like reading one book a day to a younger sibling, or keeping a journal or drawing pictures about their daily lives that they can share with you someday.



- Routines provide security and help your child build their identity. Maintain established family routines (school attendance, meals, bedtime stories, religious services, etc.).
 - Talk to the person who may care for your child in your absence to make sure that these routines will be maintained if you are separated.
- Repeatedly name and describe the people who will keep loving and supporting the child no matter what (teachers, aunts and uncles, pastors, etc.).
- Your own mental health closely affects the health of your child. Connect regularly to people and practices that help you to feel well, and consider talking to mental health professionals or other community leaders.

- Books can help children know that they are not alone in their feelings. Even better: If you read them together, it shows that you are able to talk to them about these experiences.

- [El hilo invisible](#)
- [La luna mango: Cuando la deportación divide a una familia](#)
- [Amigos del Otro Lado](#)
- [From North to South / del Norte Al Sur](#)

For babies and very young children:

- Show your child photos of loved ones who live far away and practice sending them “friendly wishes” (e.g., blow kisses at the photo).
- Send a photo of your family to the person who may care for your child so your child can send friendly wishes to you if you are separated.



- Young children use play to make sense of their feelings and experiences. Joining them in their play can help them communicate with you. Tune in to what is holding their attention and talk more about it. Offer encouragement and praise, and express that you enjoy playing with them.
- Familiar songs and voices can help your baby feel safe and connected to their culture. Choose a song to sing with your baby regularly, make a recording of your voice singing it, and share it with the person who may care for your baby if you are gone.

For older children and teenagers:

- Older children and teens often feel responsibility to care for younger siblings and work at paid jobs if a parent is deported. Make sure they feel capable at these roles – for example, that they know how to take younger siblings to school and clean the house. Teenagers adapt best to stress when they can feel competent and purposeful.

- Make sure that anxiety does not get in the way of your child doing what will support their development in the long term: succeeding at school, sleeping well, and building friendships. Make it clear you want them to keep doing these jobs even if you are deported.
- Make sure your teenager knows that they are still your *child* even when their roles change. Use all of the tips from this pamphlet to convey that you are committed to caring for them even if you are not together in person. Repeatedly name the people who will help care for the teen and advocate for them. Express that you want your child to have balance and rest in their life.

“Taking care of Sol and Jhonathan is a full-time job, and I am so glad they will have you! Pastor Luis and your school counselor will get you more support if it’s hard to do all these jobs. Your mother and I have certainly needed that at times.”

- Help your teen connect regularly with a mentor, such as a family friend, relative, coach, community leader, therapist, or teacher. This relationship may help provide stability if you are separated.



Areas to use caution:

- Try not to describe or show media footage of frightening elements of deportation, like detention centers or forced arrests.
- Try not to talk negatively about other groups on the whole (e.g., “Americans,” “Mexicans,” “White people,” “Black people”). As your child keeps growing, it will be important for them to form positive connections with different kinds of people. Emphasize instead that most grown-ups want to help kids, and that all sorts of people can be safe and kind.

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