



# COPING WITH IMMIGRATION & THE FAMILY

*"Far too many children in this country already live in constant fear that their parents will be taken into custody or deported... No child should ever live in fear. When children are scared, it can impact their health and development."*

*(American Academy of Pediatrics Statement on Protecting Immigrant Children, 1/25/2017)*

When families include members with undocumented immigration status, this can create fear of separation from loved ones, produce psychological stress, and add economic hardship. Children often worry when adults around them are worried or when they hear news reports or adult discussion they do not understand. Children can become distressed when the adults who care for them are experiencing their own emotional reactions. Children of all ages and stages of development experience emotional reactions that vary depending on their age.

Parents worry about the effects on their children and how to manage children's emotions and behaviors. This tip sheet helps parents understand children's reactions to the fear of separation due to immigration, provides some suggestions for strategies to help manage behaviors and emotions, and suggest resources for community support and creating a family plan.

## TRAUMA AND STRESS ON CHILDREN RELATED TO SEPARATION

Parents who migrate in search of a better life must make difficult decisions. Some families have already experienced separation when a parent migrates before the rest of the family, often leaving children in the care of other family members. Many children who live with one or two undocumented parents were born in the US and have not experienced prolonged separation from their parents. Children can live in constant fear of separation, even if they have not experienced separation in the past or do not know anyone that has been deported.

Separation between parents and children can be traumatic with emotionally harmful lasting adverse effects. Fear and stress, particularly prolonged exposure to serious stress, known as toxic stress, can interfere with children's emotional development, capacity for learning at school, and regulation of feelings.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that research shows that, even under stressful conditions, supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress.<sup>2</sup>

## CHILDREN'S COMMON RESPONSES TO FEARS RELATED TO IMMIGRATION AND SEPARATION FROM PARENTS

A child's understanding of and response to fear of separation depends on their age and stage of development, what they are exposed to and the level of support the child receives. Children who live in constant fear of separation may show increased anxiety, irritability, changes in eating and sleeping, frequent crying, clinginess, withdrawal, tantrums, and anger.

Infants and young children are especially sensitive to the emotions of their caregivers. They rely on trust and sense of security that an adult will be available and responsive. For example, a 7-year old might become quiet and withdrawn or might get into fights, a 10-year old might have difficulty paying attention and fall behind in school performance. A 13-year old may talk

about the fear all the time or become sulky or snap at family members or friends. A 16-year old may feel pressure to become the 'man in the house.'

Some symptoms of stress in children living in fear of family member's deportation may resemble the following:

- ♥ **Regression.** Loss of recently acquired skills, behavior younger than expected for their age or return of behaviors seen when the child was younger. Examples might include: disruption of language development or motor skills in toddlers, bed-wetting for a 5-year old, or wanting to sleep in parent's bed for an 11 year old.
- ♥ **Clinginess and difficulty separating.** Children of all ages, who before were fine to be apart from their parents, may become teary, clingy, or angry if required to be separated from their parents. Some children will refuse to go to school.
- ♥ **Sleep disturbances including nightmares.** Children have become upset during bedtime routine, have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Some children may be tired all the time or oversleep.





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- ♥ **Increased irritability and anger.** Depending on the age, children may have increased temper tantrums, defiance, limit testing, aggressive behaviors, or fighting.
- ♥ **Eating and physical complaints.** Children might lose appetite or begin overeating. They may complain of stomach aches, head aches, or other physical complaints.
- ♥ **Withdrawn and sad.** Children may become quiet or upset and withdrawn, spending more time alone. They may be quicker to cry and become sad.
- ♥ **Magical thinking.** This may be guilt that separation might be their fault or that 'The Wall' will be built immediately and their parent sent behind it.
- ♥ **Hypervigilant.** Children may be on the lookout for danger. They may associate immigration officers with police in general, bringing up uncertainty, fear, and reluctance to seek help from police when needed.
- ♥ **Difficulty concentrating, paying attention, remembering.** They may have difficulty following directions. This may lead to decline in school performance, truancy or dropping out.

## PARENTS REACTIONS RELATED TO IMMIGRATION

Parents may have conflicting emotions about their migration and potential family separation. Separation often produces grief, guilt, and loneliness for the parents. This can result in physical symptoms, isolation, sadness, depression, and anxiety. These may intensify if a child is having difficulty. Parents fearful of deportation may isolate themselves and stay home. They may be reluctant to join community activities, to reach out for services,

or apply for entitled benefits. This fear of detection limits families from participating in enriching activities, social connections, and resources. It also can create a vicious circle of staying inside and exposing family to increased media coverage that perpetuates the stress and anxiety.

## PARENTING TRAPS

Being a parent is one of the hardest jobs and even harder in stressful situations. When parents are under stress, they are less likely to be calm and consistent. Parents fall into a variety of traps.

- ♥ **The negative parent trap.** Parents increased stress due to immigration issues can affect their parenting. This typically involves parents reacting to their child's misbehavior with criticism, threats and/or yelling. Parents fall into the trap of only focusing on their child's negative behavior and ignoring the desirable behavior. Children learn that by misbehaving, they get attention so the misbehavior will continue.
- ♥ **The perfect child trap.** Immigration issues have spurred which makes parents feel inadequate and at times anxious. These feelings can lead parents to have unrealistic expectations for their child. A child might be expected to behave well and play quietly inside the house all day because parents are afraid to go out in public spaces for recreation. The expectation of a perfect child can make parenting very challenging.
- ♥ **Escalation traps.** When under stress, parents tend to be less patient and can learn that by escalating their voice they are more likely to get what they want. In a similar way, children can learn that by escalating, and if problem behavior gets worse, they are more likely to get what they want.

- ♥ **Accidental reward trap.** Accidental rewards or hidden payoffs for misbehavior are more likely to continue if it gets children what they want. Accidental rewards include social attention (such as talking, a wink or a smile), material rewards (such as toys to keep quiet at home), activities (such as getting to stay home and play video games instead of playing outside), or food treats (such as cookies, ice-cream or candy to stay quiet and not draw attention).

## COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Children need information and questions answered at a developmental level that they can understand. Parents know their children best. Use your knowledge about your children's personalities, stages of development, and your family's beliefs when having conversations with your children.

- ♥ **Ask questions.** Listen to what your child is asking. Find out what they already know and where they are hearing about the issue. Use incidental teaching to help them find their own answers and how you can help them figure it out. Avoid providing too much information. Answer in simple ways and with compassion.
- ♥ **Help children identify their feelings.** Create common language in talking about fears of separation and immigration. Simply explain words for them when they ask such as deportation, immigrants or illegal.
- ♥ **Be patient.** Choose a time to have conversations when you can give your children your full attention. Young children ask the same questions over and over again as their way of learning and making sense of their world.



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- ♥ **For teens, use a problem-solving approach.** Dialog about what might happen and how they might respond. As an example, help them plan so that they know what to do if they are stopped or questioned.
- ♥ **Be honest with your children.** Assure them that they will be taken care of if, for some reason, you are unable to care for them. Do not lie or make promises that you are not sure you can keep.
- ♥ **Use assertive discipline.** Be consistent, state clear expectations, give calm instructions, and respond quickly. Avoid threats and fear tactics such as “ICE is going to come and take you away if you...”
- ♥ **Name and validate their possible feelings.** Not all children, especially the very young, have the words to express their feelings. Encourage your child to express feelings by drawing. Let your child know that it is OK to have those feelings when thinking about being apart from family members.

## MANAGING EMOTIONS

Children need support and guidance in managing their emotions. They are reassured and can feel safe and secure when their caregivers are calm and healthy.

- ♥ Maintain usual routines such as meal time, homework, and bed times.
- ♥ Send children to school regularly. If parents are feeling vulnerable around the school, is there another adult who can get children to school?
- ♥ Assure children that you are making plans for their safety.
- ♥ Create strong social networks. Get to know the parents of your

children’s friends. Make sure that you are socializing and helping your children establish relationships with the adults who might care for them in the event that separation occurs. It is not necessary to have conversations about why you are doing this.

- ♥ Limit adult discussions about immigration and media such as television news and radio to times when children are not around. These are usually at a level difficult for children to understand.

## STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING PARENT’S STRESS DUE TO IMMIGRATION ISSUES

Children are attuned to parents and caregivers emotional states. Set a good example of how to manage stress. Practice self care.

- ♥ Stay informed about current immigration issues from credible sources. Fear and anxiety can significantly be reduced by staying informed about legal rights and by attending community informational workshops.
- ♥ Become familiar with your local resource center to get reliable information about immigration issues and get legal immigration assistance if needed.
- ♥ Create a family preparedness plan. Maintain legal documents, birth, medical, and school records and give a copy to a trusted adult including the adults designated to care for your children in case of separation. See resource section for more information.
- ♥ Know your rights. Always carry an emergency card stating your rights and with contact information.

## KEY STEPS

- ♥ When faced with the fear of separation due to immigration, it is common for children as well as their parents to experience a range of emotions and behaviors.
- ♥ Routines help children feel safe and secure. Maintain consistent and predictable routines.
- ♥ Have an open conversation at the child’s level of understanding. Listen to your children and what they are asking, not giving them more information than necessary. Encourage them to answer their own questions.
- ♥ Avoid parent traps. Focus on positive behavior. Have realistic expectations.
- ♥ Limit adult discussion and media exposure about immigration to when children are not around.
- ♥ Create a Family Plan and assure children that you are making plans to provide a safe environment.
- ♥ Become well informed about immigration issues from reliable resources
- ♥ Practice coping skills for yourself and with your children.
- ♥ Take care of yourself. Children do better when their parents are healthy and calm.



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## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

*“No human being is illegal.”*

*Human beings can be beautiful or more beautiful, they can be fat or skinny, they can be right or wrong, but Illegal, How can a human being be illegal?*

Elie Wiesel<sup>3</sup>

While we understand that the use of the word “illegal” is not a term used

to label a person or a legal status, this is not necessarily what we hear in the media when referring to undocumented members of the community.

Everyone, whether born in the United States, documented, or undocumented, has rights in this country. More than 5 million children in the US have an undocumented parent and most of these children (79%) are US citizens. <sup>4</sup>

America is a nation of immigrants. That diversity is the backbone of our arts, industry, and culture. American citizenship speaks to our character as a welcoming country that bestows upon us all of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the US constitution. The fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees birthright citizenship.

## REFERENCES

1. American Academy of Pediatrics Statement on Protecting Immigrant Children, 1/25/2017
2. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>
3. Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize-winning Holocaust survivor and refugee
4. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/iii-births-and-children/>

## RESOURCES

**California Human Development:** <https://californiahumandevlopment.org/immigration-citizenship/>

3315 Airway Dr., Santa Rosa, CA 95403; (707) 523-1155

Legal pathways to immigration and citizenship. Provides subsidies to make the process affordable. By providing people with legal immigration pathways, they in turn find better work and higher education—taking a bite out of poverty and building stronger communities.

**County of Sonoma:** <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/CAO/Immigration-Initiative/Resources/>

575 Administration Drive, Suite 104A; Santa Rosa, CA 95403; (707) 565-2431

Committed to a tradition of creating an inclusive, safe and welcoming space for everyone who walks through our doors. We don't report to ICE. Your eligibility for services has not changed, you and your family can continue to receive services.

**Catholic Charities:** <http://www.srcharities.org/get-help/immigration-services>

987 Airway Court Santa Rosa, CA; (707) 528-8712or

Our immigration department helps 2,000 people each year with legal pathways to work authorization, permanent residency and citizenship.

**La Luz Sonoma:** <http://www.laluzcenter.org/resources>

17560 Greger Street Sonoma, CA 95476; (707) 938-5131

La Luz works in partnership with various agencies within Sonoma County to support families with challenges around immigration.

**Legal Aid of Sonoma County:** <http://legalaidsc.org>

144 South E St. Suite 100 Santa Rosa, CA 95404; (707) 521-6934

Legal aid, offers on going workshops to support the community for child custody should parents face deportation.

**North Bay Rapid Response Network, Sonoma and Napa Counties:** <http://northbayop.org/rapidresponse/>

[northbayop.org/rapidresponse/](http://northbayop.org/rapidresponse/)

P.O. Box 503 Graton, CA 95444; (707) 800-4555

Creates a response to fear and anxiety in our community as a result of the increase in immigration enforcement. Teams will respond to calls made to our Sonoma County based hotline that will operate 24 hours a day.

**VIDAS:** <http://vidaslegal.org>

576 B Street, Suite 1C, Santa Rosa, CA 95401; (707) 523-1740

Providing Low-Cost, Immigration Law Services, Advocacy, and Community Education

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