

3. Managing the Psychological Aspects of Deportation and Child Custody

Family is the building block of a healthy society and the environment where children develop their sense of security and belonging. Many immigrants, perhaps like yourself, come to the U.S. to give their children a better life and future than the one possible in their homeland. Deportation can shatter your family's hard earned sense of security and stability in the U.S. This is most likely a tremendously difficult time for you as an individual, and as a parent, as well as for your child, because it disrupts whatever sense of safety you have managed to build.

When safety and security are lost, it can generate significant amounts of stress, which can be particularly toxic for children, and their developing brains and bodies. This is especially significant, and detrimental, when it involves separation from primary caretakers (i.e. parents). Children need a safe and secure environment to thrive physically, emotionally, socially and academically. Stress, especially when it is chronic and in the early years, has a negative impact on a child's healthy development, and its consequences can last a lifetime. Having conversations to address your child's worry, in the case of deportation, can help alleviate their stress, and potentially ameliorate its negative impact.

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Each Chapter is intended to provide generalized information on a particular topic. In many cases, laws may differ from state to state. Therefore, this information is not intended to replace state-specific legal assistance. Nothing in this manual is intended to create an attorney-client or fiduciary relationship.

Why Talking about Deportation is So Stressful

Stressful events interfere with our ability to think. As human beings, we have an automatic response to moments when we feel scared or under threat. When we are very stressed, our natural tendency is to take flight, fight, freeze or faint. In many situations, when there is an immediate threat, this is very helpful for survival. In other situations, like the threat of deportation, when stress is not momentary but can last for long periods, it is important to find ways to reduce stress. Because the topic of deportation is very stressful, and elicits intense fear, it will take an active effort to think and plan, in order to reduce some of its negative impact.

In the past, many immigrants have managed the fear and stress of potential deportation by avoiding conversations about the topic altogether. Some people may have chosen not to speak about their immigration status at all, in order to feel safer and protected from being targeted. Others have not spoken about deportation because it brings up memories that are too painful. Talking about one's immigration status can be emotionally challenging, but it may be beneficial if done with trusted friends or colleagues. Nonetheless, it may stir up fears of deportation and fears of losing the connection with loved ones, if forced to leave. It may also bring to mind the difficult journey to come to the U.S., all that was sacrificed, as well as the life and people left behind, or who might now be left behind. Conversations about immigration status or deportation may also be particularly overwhelming if the initial reason for migrating was to flee physical (or emotional) violence. It is hard to be close to painful feelings.

Why it is Important to Talk About Deportation

Despite our natural tendency to do the opposite, having conversations about our fears, in emotionally sensitive ways, can actually reduce stress. When we are stressed, having the support and love of those around us can help us feel better. In talking to each other we feel connected and this can help reduce stress. Children are very sensitive to what goes on around them. Think of them as emotional sponges that can soak up tensions. Even if emotionally charged topics like the fear of deportation are not discussed, many children are perceptive enough to pick up on the tension and fear and will be affected. It can be beneficial to help children find ways to talk about their feelings so they will feel less burdened. If families can talk about deportation together, children and parents can feel less alone, if faced with the process.

Ways of Monitoring Stress to Allow for Conversations

Our brain and body tell us when we are stressed. Here are some of the ways you might notice you are stressed:

- Difficulty thinking
- Difficulty planning
- Difficulty remembering
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Sweaty palms
- Dry mouth
- Muscular tension
- Butterflies in stomach or upset stomach

It is important to listen to one's body to be able to manage one's stress before taking on difficult conversations. It can be helpful to try to recognize one's own feelings before and during conversations with your children. Listening to our body's response can be a way of knowing about difficult feelings, or at least offer some clues about feelings that are less accessible. When you are stressed, it might be helpful to practice deep breathing, take a slow walk, listen to comforting music or share your feelings with another supporting adult, as a means to find your way back to a calmer state. It is important that as parent(s) a part of your focus is on your own emotional wellbeing, so you can take care of your children, and remain attentive to their needs. A child needs the comfort of their parent(s) or primary caretakers, but your feelings and emotional wellbeing is important too. If you have ever been on an airplane you may remember that in case of an emergency, adults should put the oxygen mask on themselves first so they can take care of their children. When parents are able to manage their own stress successfully, they are then better able to listen and be open to their children's worries.

Children of Different Ages Will Have Different Reactions and Concerns

Young children may not be able to put their questions or feelings into words. However, silence and behavior are forms of communication. A baseline principle that might be helpful to keep in mind as you think and talk about this in your families is that there is no such thing as non-communication. We are always communicating whether in words, behavior or silence. Have you ever heard the phrase, “silence is a powerful statement?” Even not saying something verbally can be making a powerful point. Along these same lines, babies, children and adults are communicating all the time. We just need to learn how to be sensitive to the message. But the important message here is that there might actually be a message that warrants attention.

Some Behaviors to Look for In Young Children

- **Increased restlessness at bedtime or naptime:** Bedtime for children can be a time when many fears creep into their thoughts. They can also come up in the form of nightmares. For young children, nightmares of monsters, loss and separation, can be a way of expressing what they can't quite come to terms with, or what they are afraid of. Toddlers for example, might be very unnerved with a bad dream, and need the comfort of a parent or trusted caretaker to fall back asleep, because the lines between dreams and reality are still a little blurry. Do you remember what it felt like to wake up in the middle of a bad dream? It is likely you realized quickly where you were, and that it was a dream, and then hopefully you fell back asleep. Children struggle with this, because they still need their parent(s) for comfort and reality testing.
- **Fussiness or tantrums:** Children at very young ages can become fussy and have more tantrums. It can be their way of telling you of their distress, that they are nervous too, and that they need you to help them calm down.
- **Themes of sadness and loss** in drawings and pretend play.

Some Behaviors to Look for In Older Children at Home and at School

Children might be:

- Withdrawn;
- Distractible;
- Angry; or
- Sad.

You may find that they are:

- Demonstrating poor school performance, or seeming less motivated in general;
- Less social and having more conflicts with peers;
- Refusing to go to school, resulting in absenteeism;
- Conveying physical complaints: stomach aches, headaches etc; or
- Having sleep problems and nightmares.

All of these behaviors are examples of ways that children communicate that they are stressed and perhaps overwhelmed. When parents can address their children's stress, it can help them be calm and their behavior can improve.

What to Look for In Teenagers

Teenagers may feel the burden of increasing responsibilities. They may feel not yet ready or able to take on parental roles and responsibilities. Sometimes when people feel afraid or overwhelmed it is expressed as anger. It may be too difficult for them to feel sad and afraid. Anger can help people feel strong and empowered. It is important to recognize that when teenagers are angry the root is often fear, or sadness.

Parents should also look for changes in their teenager. Are there big changes in how their teenager behaved at home or performed at school? These changes may be a sign that the teenager is stressed and something needs to be addressed.

Strategies for Having Conversations with Children About Deportation

Stress about deportation affects everyone. Even if your family is not facing the threat of deportation, you may be living in a community where others are. Your children may be affected by what is happening to other children around them, many of whom may be their friends. Children may be sad about friends who have left, afraid of losing more friends, and afraid that what is happening to their friends might also happen to them. It is important for you as a parent to listen and be open to what your child is feeling. It is natural to be sad and afraid at times. Having space to express feelings can help your children cope. Ignoring or bottling up feelings may seem useful in the short run, but in the long run, keeping feelings in may lead to outbursts or more negative behaviors. It is important to try to resist the tendency to bottle up feelings, and instead strive to find a safe outlet for them, like putting them into words.

Here are a few tips to help make these conversations less stressful:

- **Listen attentively.** A guiding principle for all conversations is to listen sensitively and thoughtfully to your child's questions and concerns. Don't dismiss their worry, listen to it.
- **Seek an appropriate setting.** When having a conversation it is important to have a quiet space, without interruptions and with adequate time, so you don't feel pressured or rushed. Depending upon the ages of your children, it might be helpful to have all family members present.
- **Be prepared.** Before beginning a conversation, have a plan in mind for what would happen if your family faced deportation. It is comforting to children to feel that their parents are in control and have a plan to take care of them.
- **Keep it simple.** If your children have questions, it is best to answer simply. Provide enough information to address their concerns, but not too much that they would be overwhelmed. This may involve a big effort on your part, if you are feeling very overwhelmed, which is also within reason. This may also be a difficult time for you.

- **Make a stress meter.** As a way to gauge your family's stress, it might be helpful for each member to make a stress meter where green is calm, yellow is slightly stressed and red is very stressed. Older children might prefer a scale of 1-10. Think of it like a speedometer on a car that goes from soft soothing colors to strong colors or 1-10. The meter could be hung on the child's bedroom door or above the bed. You can let your child know that you will comfort them when you see the sign that they are stressed. This can help you as parent(s) by building a simple bridge that keeps you connected to your child's experience. It may equally help them signal to you when they need your presence to feel better.

How to Cope with Deportation by Helping Your Children Feel Safe

Regardless if your plan is for your children to remain in the U.S. or go with you to your native country, the goal is to keep relationships alive. How can we bridge the gaps that physical separation creates? Throughout our lives human beings need to have the continuity of relationships to help us feel secure. Deportation can shatter the physical closeness of a family.

Here are a few strategies that can bring you closer and help your family feel connected if you are deported and your children remain in the U.S.:

- Older children should know what the plan for the family's care will be if you are deported and they remain in the U.S. It is important to tell them the basics. Where will they live? Will they go to the same school? How will they reach their parents? Who will be taking care of them? It is important to maintain a sense of predictability in times of great fear and stress. Having a plan makes your children feel cared for. If you know what will happen and have a plan, it reduces stress and makes it less overwhelming.
- Audio messages can be a way for a child to feel that they are not alone by hearing a parent's voice whenever they need to. The message should be uplifting and soothing. Think of a message that is meant to be comforting when your child or adolescent is distressed. For example, parents can sing a lullaby for a younger child, read a story, tell a joke or give an inspiring message to a teenager.

- Telephone and video conference. If possible, it is important to have regular and frequent times to talk.
- Create a photo book or scrapbook of times shared together.
- Encourage the child to write letters, draw pictures or send photos to the parent who can share with the child on live video showing that they received it. This might be a very tangible way for the child to feel that he or she is reaching parents across the border.
- If finances permit, the children might visit their parents for vacations or summers.

If your child is accompanying you to your country of origin, you will need strategies for helping you and your child cope with the huge transition and loss of life in the U.S.

It is possible that you will not know the details of where you will be living. However, it is important to convey as much information as you can about your country to your child. It would be helpful to convey even general information about your homeland and culture. Making as much as you can known and predictable will help children feel calm, safe and secure.

If your children will be accompanying you, they will be leaving behind their home, their school, their friends and their country. They might need to learn a new language. There will be huge changes ahead. Your goal is to help them manage the change and to help them cope with the losses they are suffering. These will be challenging times and it is important to listen with eyes and ears. You can help them with strategies for keeping in touch with their friends in the U.S.. Families who are deported often feel stigmatized. Families and children may have challenges being accepted in their new home by other children and local residents. If your entire family leaves the U.S., the strategies mentioned above for listening and having conversations will help you maintain connections and face challenges together.

Mental Health Resources

Immediate Help

National Hotlines and Crisis Support

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call or Text 988. Also available in Spanish.
- National Alliance on Mental Health: Call 1-800-950-6264 or Text NAMI to 741741
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- LGBT National Hotline: 1-888-843-4564
- The Trevor Lifeline: 1-800-565-8860. Also available in Spanish.
- Trans Lifeline: 1-888-843-4564
- BIPOC Blackline: Call or Text 1-800-604-5841
- National DV Hotline: Call 1-800-799-7233 or Text LOVEIS to 22522
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673
- National Child Abuse Hotline: Call or Text 1-800-422-4453
- The Eldercare Locator: 1-800-677-1116

Other Mental Health Resources

- [Immigrants Rising Undocu-Immigrant Mental Health Toolkit](#)
- [United We Dream UndocuHealth Toolkit](#)
- [Coping with DACA and Immigration-Related Stress](#)
- [American Academy of Pediatrics Immigrant Child Health Toolkit](#)
- [Together for Wellness Digital Toolkit](#)
- [Our House Grief Support Resources for Every Griever](#)
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline: Abuse in Immigrant Communities](#)

More resources, including mental health therapist directories and free national support groups, available at: [Mental Health Resources for Undocumented People](#)

Checklist: Managing The Psychological Aspects Of Deportation And Child Custody

- Learn to recognize signs of stress
- Practices strategies for managing stress
- Be aware of the needs of children of different age groups
- Recognize signs of stress in your children
- Know strategies for helping children reduce stress
- Listen sensitively and thoughtfully to your child's questions and concerns
- Create a safe space for the conversations to occur
- Have a safe outlet for feelings
- Answer questions simply
- Know your plan if deportation affects your family
- Share your plan with your children
- Learn strategies to maintain connection with your children after deportation
- Listening and having conversations will help your child manage loss and change if they leave the U.S. with you