



## Traumatic Separation in Immigrant Children: Strategies for New Caregivers



1. Provide security and comfort, by speaking with a calm voice in the children's own language, following their lead.
2. Take care of immediate needs.
3. Help the child understand what happened, find out what is happening to the child's parents, ask the child about what they know of the separation (if the child has verbal language and if developmentally appropriate) and provide reassurance that what happened is not their fault and tell them you understand that what is happening is very hurtful and confusing.
4. If possible, try to contact the child's parents and provide ongoing contact between them (via Skype, phone, WhatsApp.)
5. Understand that children may have unpredictable reactions, regressive behaviors, or other difficult behaviors due to traumatic events; try to encourage calm situations and activities that help with body-based and affect regulation and allowing the child to have choices.
6. Reassure them that they are safe now and ask them (if the child has verbal language and if developmentally appropriate) what would make them feel safer.
7. Comfort the child when needed and assess the level of physical proximity that feels safe for the child; you can try singing or talking, and then see whether the child allows you to hug or rock the child; also look and offer other objects that can be comforting, such as stuffed animals, or blankets.
8. Include activities and objects that help the child have a sense of familiarity because they resonate with his/her/their socio-cultural context (e.g. rebozos, developmentally and socio-culturally responsive music, pictures, books, etc.).
9. Try to allow the child to express what she/he/they is/are feeling, reassure her/him/them that these big feelings are okay when scary things happen, and that it's normal to feel physically uncomfortable. It might be useful to use books for young children (please see list of resources in the accompanying handouts).
10. Organize a developmentally appropriate narrative of what the child might be feeling and of what happened that helps connecting affect with behavior and to begin making meaning of the separation experience in the child's native language when possible (e.g. "You are feeling very sad/angry/scared because you and mommy/daddy are not together; she/he/they were taken away and that was very, very scary"; "You are biting/hitting/crying because you are missing them/upset/confused about what happened to you and mommy/daddy.").
11. Help the children to remain hopeful by avoiding talking negatively about their parents (e.g. comments about the parents or family not interested in reunification; being neglectful, etc.) and by providing developmentally appropriate and truthful information but without making false promises (e.g. "Many, many people are trying to help you and your daddy/mommy to be together again").
12. Be mindful that behind each child there is a mother/a father/a family that might be experiencing intense emotional pain and stress as a result of the separation and that you might not have all of the information about the family, their history, and the relationship with the child prior to the separation. Try to hold a lens of benevolence toward the child's family and their possible motivations and circumstances.
13. Keep in mind that the children in your care may carry stories of loss and trauma, as well as individual, family, and community resilience and strength.
14. Remember that young children are best understood and helped to recover in the context of supportive and predictable relationships.

References:

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