Family is the Heart and Soul of Our Lives

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEPORTATION

APPLESEED
This booklet is part of a larger Manual titled “Protecting Assets and Child Custody in the Face of Deportation,” released by Appleseed in 2017. The Manual is a one-of-a-kind resource designed for immigrants and those who work with them: the attorneys, nurses, social workers, financial services professionals, medical professionals, and religious workers who are stepping up in challenging times. Appleseed’s Manual helps families develop plans in advance to deal with critical financial and family issues in the event of detention, deportation, and other family emergencies. The Manual contains detailed information on issues ranging from school safety, child custody, psychological issues for children, special considerations for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, and financial services and products including credit cards, debit cards, mortgages and rental payments, taxes, veterans benefits, and much more. For more info and to read the full Manual (in English or Spanish), please visit www.AppleseedNetwork.org/DeportationManual.

This booklet, "Family is the Heart and Soul of Our Lives: Talking to Children About Deportation," is based on content from Chapter 4 of the full Manual. It provides a guide to parents to help them prepare for and lead conversations with their children about the possibility of detention or deportation. It provides info about emotional reactions they might have or their children might have and what kind of behaviors they might see from their children depending on their age. We hope that this will be helpful in guiding parents through this painful process.

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- Amigas de la Comunidad, Alexandria, Virginia
- Angela Calderon, LPC, School-Based Clinician, Health Solutions, Pueblo, CO
- Tomas Casado-Frankel, M.A., LMFT, The William Alanson White Institute Center for Public Mental Health
- Rachael D. Goodman, Ph.D., LPC, Associate Professor, Counseling and Development Program, George Mason University
- Krishna J. Leyva, MSW, Family and Community Engagement Manager, Alexandria City Public Schools
- Maria Nardone, Ph.D., The William Alanson White Institute Center for Public Mental Health
- Selma d. Yznaga, Associate Professor, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Family is the heart and soul of our lives where our children develop a sense of security and belonging. Of course, it would be traumatic if a family were to be separated by deportation. That is why it is extremely stressful to even consider the possibility and why we avoid talking about deportation.

In the past, many immigrants have managed stress by avoiding conversations about deportation. Some people may have chosen not to speak about their immigration status for protection and to feel safer. Others may have not spoken about deportation because it brings up memories that are too painful. It is hard to be close to painful feelings. Talking about one’s immigration status can be emotionally painful. It may make a person feel afraid of deportation and the people they will lose if they have to leave. It may also bring to mind the difficult journey they made to come to the U.S., all they sacrificed, as well as the life and people they left behind.

However, even though it is difficult, it is important to talk to our loved ones about our worries and fears. Keeping fears to ourselves makes us feel burdened and alone. In the presence of loved ones we can feel support. Children may have questions which parents can address. It is better if children are asked what is worrying them, so parents can give support and children don’t worry in silence.

When we do talk to our children it is best to do it when we are feeling calm rather than stressed. Our bodies and brain tell us when we are stressed. Here are some of the signs you might notice when you are stressed:

- Difficulty thinking
- Difficulty planning
- Difficulty remembering
- Irritability
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Sweaty palms
- Dry mouth
- Tightness in our muscles
- Butterflies in stomach or upset stomach
- Insomnia, nightmares
- Poor appetite or over eating
Children of different ages will have different worries and reactions. Young children may not be able to put their worries into words. Parents need to watch their young children's behavior for signs of stress.

Some behaviors to look for in **young** children:

- Sleep or naptime problems
- Fussiness or temper tantrums
- Sadness or loss in drawings or pretend play
- Separation problems
- Clinginess

In **older** children parents might see that their children are:

- Withdrawn
- Distractible
- Angry
- Sad

Maybe you might see:

- Grades drop in school
- Not interested in playing with friends
- Refusing to go to school
- Skipping classes
- Stomach aches, headaches, etc.
- Sleep problems and nightmares
- Becoming afraid when it gets dark

All of these behaviors are examples of how children show that they are stressed and overwhelmed. When parents can talk to their children about their stress, it will help them be calm and their behavior will improve.
Teenagers may feel the burden of increasing responsibilities. They may feel not yet ready to be the “head of the household” or to even be on their own without their parents. They will feel afraid. Sometimes when people feel afraid or overwhelmed it is expressed as anger. It may be too difficult for them to feel sad and afraid. Instead, parents may see their teenagers being angry or acting out, getting into trouble at school and at home. Anger can help people feel strong and empowered. It is important to recognize that when teenagers are angry the root is often fear.

Parents should also look for changes in their teenager. Are there big changes in how their teenager behaved at home or performed at school? Are they no longer interested in activities that they used to enjoy? These changes may be a sign that the teenager is stressed, and something needs to be addressed.

How to Have 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 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 happen to them. It is important for parents to listen. First parents must be calm themselves to be open to what their child is feeling. It is natural to be sad and at times afraid. Having space to express feelings can help children cope. Ignoring or bottling up feelings may seem helpful in the short run, but in the long run, keeping feelings in may lead to outbursts or more negative behaviors. Having a safe outlet for feelings is very important.

1. A guiding principal for all conversations is to listen sensitively and thoughtfully to your child’s questions and concerns.

2. When having a conversation with your child, it is important to have a quiet space, without interruptions and with enough time, so you don’t feel pressured or rushed. Pick a time when your children are rested, fed and free of distractions. Putting away phones and turning off computers and TVs are a good start. Depending upon the ages of the children, it might be helpful to have all family members present.

3. 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.
4. 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. Parents may not have the answers to all questions. It is best to be honest. “I do not know yet but will find out.”

5. Having regular family meetings can be helpful so the conversation can continue. Frequent meetings can give your child the opportunity to ask questions over time and to continue to have support from you for their fears.

6. 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. Parents can let their child know that they will offer comfort when they see their child is stressed. This will also help parents feel that they are in touch with their children and able to help them 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 help parents and children feel connected. 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 that the parent receives and then shares 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 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. In the face of great change and uncertainty people often feel helpless and hopeless. Making as much as you can known and predictable will help adults and children feel calm, safe and secure.

Children, who will be accompanying you, 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 stigma. 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.
Checklist: Talking to Your Children About Deportation

- Learn to recognize signs of stress
- Practice 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