

# Talking About Immigration: What Does Your Child Understand and Need to Know?



It is difficult to know how to talk about immigration with your child. As parents, we do not automatically know what to say and what not to say. Children need adults to share just enough, not too much or too little. They need information and conversation that is appropriate to their age, and then they need time to talk about and experience things in life that are not stressful and scary.

A few facts about children and immigration...Children of all ages:

- Can feel and tell when adults are upset, afraid, and anxious and can become scared themselves.
- Need love and reassurance, routine and predictability and to know that they and their families are as safe as is possible.
- Need to know that their family has a plan in case of immigration problems. Children as young as three years old are able to understand some level of a family safety plan in case a family member is arrested or deported.
- Will often blame themselves if they do not have an accurate explanation.
- Will often make up even worse stories and believe them, if they do not know the truth.
- May have negative emotional and physical effects, including behavior problems and withdrawal, because of trauma and very stressful events. Each child has his/her own way of dealing with stress and trauma.
- Are resilient and can cope with even the worst of situations if they feel SAFE and LOVED!

How you can help:

- Remember there is no magic answer to help children understand something that even adults are struggling to understand.
- Build trust with your child and ask your child to tell you what she or he knows.
- Listen and talk *with* your child (not *at* your child).
- Use an age-appropriate way of explaining to your child about the immigration concerns for your family and community (see page two for examples).
- Create a family safety plan and share it at your child's level of understanding.
- Manage your stress so your child feels safe and can learn to manage his/her own stress.
- Foster a sense of control in your child. Remind your child of the things he/she can control in a world that is unpredictable.
- Limit news media and other negative information in the house.
- Talk about positive subjects around your child and remind them of the good in the world.
- Seek help from family, friends and/or professional providers when necessary.



Resources for creating a family safety plan:

<https://www.ilrc.org/plan-de-preparacion-familiar>

[https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/im\\_emergplan\\_020817.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/im_emergplan_020817.pdf)

# How to Talk With Your Child About Immigration Concerns

## What you can say

### Early Childhood

Young children feel adult stress levels and understand adult facial expressions, though they might not have the words to talk about their concerns. Even preschool children may have strong fears and many questions about deportation.

Once children are starting to hear people talk about immigration issues at home or at preschool/child care, have simple conversations:

*"I am here with you. Let's draw about what you are thinking and feeling."*

*"If daddy has to go back to Mexico, we will talk to him on the phone every day and work on being back together."*

*"I'm sad and worried too. Let's talk more about how you are feeling."*

*"Let's read that story together and we can talk about it as we read."*

### Elementary School

To talk with school-aged children, you can start conversations by asking what they have been hearing, sharing facts, and correcting rumors:

*"What do you know about immigration/deportation? I am here to answer any questions you have."*

*"Your mom and I have created a safety plan for our family. Let's go over it together."*

### Teenage Years

Teens can understand many things "like an adult" but might not have the emotional maturity to know how to respond. They feel overwhelmed with all the life transitions going on in adolescence.

Use conversation starters like:

*"All of us are very worried about this. Let's sit down together and create a safety plan for our family."*

*"With all this stress, it is very important to be active. What activities would you be interested in?"*

## What you can do

Continue routines and predictable schedule as much as possible. Make sure to do "fun" things with your child.

Model how to identify feelings ("I am feeling lonely right now.")

Interact with soothing songs, playful interactions, loving tones of voice, and unconditional affection.

Offer emotional language and suggestions for coping. Use coloring and drawings to help your child express their emotions, fears and hopes.

Ask open-ended questions (questions beyond a yes or no answer)- talk *with* children, not *at* them. Reading stories about families overcoming stresses can start these conversations.

If you're at high risk of deportation and your child is worried, talk to them about who would take care of them if you were deported (a simple safety plan).

Continue to do all the above at the level appropriate for your child's age and development.

Provide brief education on immigration and deportation process. Watch movies and read books about immigrant stories together and discuss them.

Share a safety plan with them. Answer their questions.

Continue to do all the above at the level appropriate for your child's age and development.

Work *with* your child to create the safety plan and make sure they know and agree about who they would live with if you were deported. Share information about their legal rights.

Explore with them healthy ways to release stress and connect with peers (for example, sports, school clubs, write a letter to person in government).

\* Age ranges depend on the individual child – children develop at different rates. The developmental level of the child's mind is more important to consider than the physical age of the child.