SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN TIMES OF IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

A GUIDE FOR CARE PROVIDERS

A facilitation guide for those providing care and support to families experiencing distress due to increased immigration enforcement

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OVERVIEW

Purpose: In the context of increased immigration enforcement, many families are under immense stress and pressure to protect themselves. This guide is developed for mental health providers, as well as other providers (pediatricians, educators, community health workers) who provide care and support to families. The following sections incorporate empowerment and advocacy strategies and help providers demonstrate to families that they do not have to navigate these challenges alone.

Family Check-In

Purpose: Help caregivers identify symptoms of stress in themselves and their children.

Rationale: Symptoms of stress can vary widely and may not be readily identified. As caregivers work hard to support their families, they may have limited resources to reflect on their own emotions.

Facilitation Tips: When a caregiver's stress is high, they may have difficulty noticing and attending to their children's stress. Changes in child behavior may be mislabeled as "behavior problems" or defiance instead of a reaction to stress.

Social Support

Purpose: Help families identify strengths and gaps in their social support systems.

Rationale: Social support is important in times of stress and can be a protective factor against immigration stress.

Facilitation Tips: Normalize that most families have more support in some areas than others. Be prepared to connect families with resources in areas where gaps exist (e.g., mental health resources [emotional], reputable websites [information]).

Conversations

Purpose: Help families discuss increased immigration enforcement with children.

Rationale: Kids often pick up on family stress and understand more than adults realize. Talking to kids about difficult topics in developmentally-appropriate ways, while shielding them from unnecessary details and media, can reduce confusion and anxiety.

Facilitation Tips: First explore barriers to open family discussion about immigration enforcement. Are caregivers too overwhelmed? Unsure how to open the discussion?

Family Preparedness Planning

Purpose: Help families to prepare and empower families in the process.

Rationale: Documenting a plan can help families focus on what is within their control. In addition, recommendations for preparedness planning are constantly evolving. You can support families by staying up-to-date on important considerations.

Facilitation Tips: Families are doing all they can to protect their loved ones and plan for various situations. Remember that many have already created formal or informal plans.

Family/Cultural Strengths and Values

Purpose: Support families in reflecting on their strengths and values.

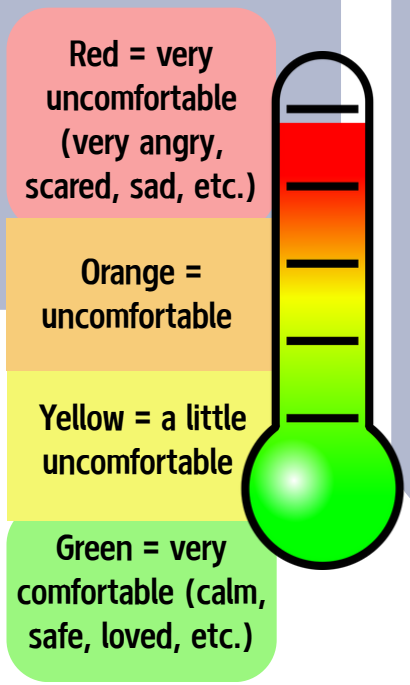
Rationale: Focusing on family/cultural strengths and values can help families feel empowered and connected in the face of adversity.

Facilitation Tips: Identifying family strengths and values could be done in the context of a family discussion. Most families value many things, but what are the family's 5-8 primary guiding values?

FAMILY CHECK-IN

Self Check-In: How are YOU doing?

Remember: Taking care of yourself helps you be present for your child.



How is YOUR CHILD doing?

Have you noticed changes in:

- Sleep
- Eating
- Play/activities
- Behavior
- Mood
- Concentration
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Other

Remember: Challenging behaviors are often a sign of stress.

Tip: Use the feelings thermometer to check in with your child about how they are feeling.

It is okay if you and/or your child are not in the GREEN zone.
Being in the YELLOW, ORANGE, or RED zone can be natural in times of stress.
Here are some things that you can try to return closer to the GREEN zone:

MINDFULNESS & GROUNDING

- Deep Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- 5-4-3-2-1
- Prayer
- Guided Imagery
- Other?

COREGULATION EXERCISES

We sometimes pick up on the stress of those around us. Coregulation strategies can help you self-regulate AND support your child's regulation. Some ideas:

- Move Together (e.g., go on a walk)
- Breathe Together
- Calm the Environment (e.g., dim lights, lower voices)
- Get Close (e.g., hug, sit close together)
- Name Your Support ("I'm here with you.")

SOCIAL SUPPORT

My Social Support Tree

Who can I turn to for...?

My Child's Social Support Tree

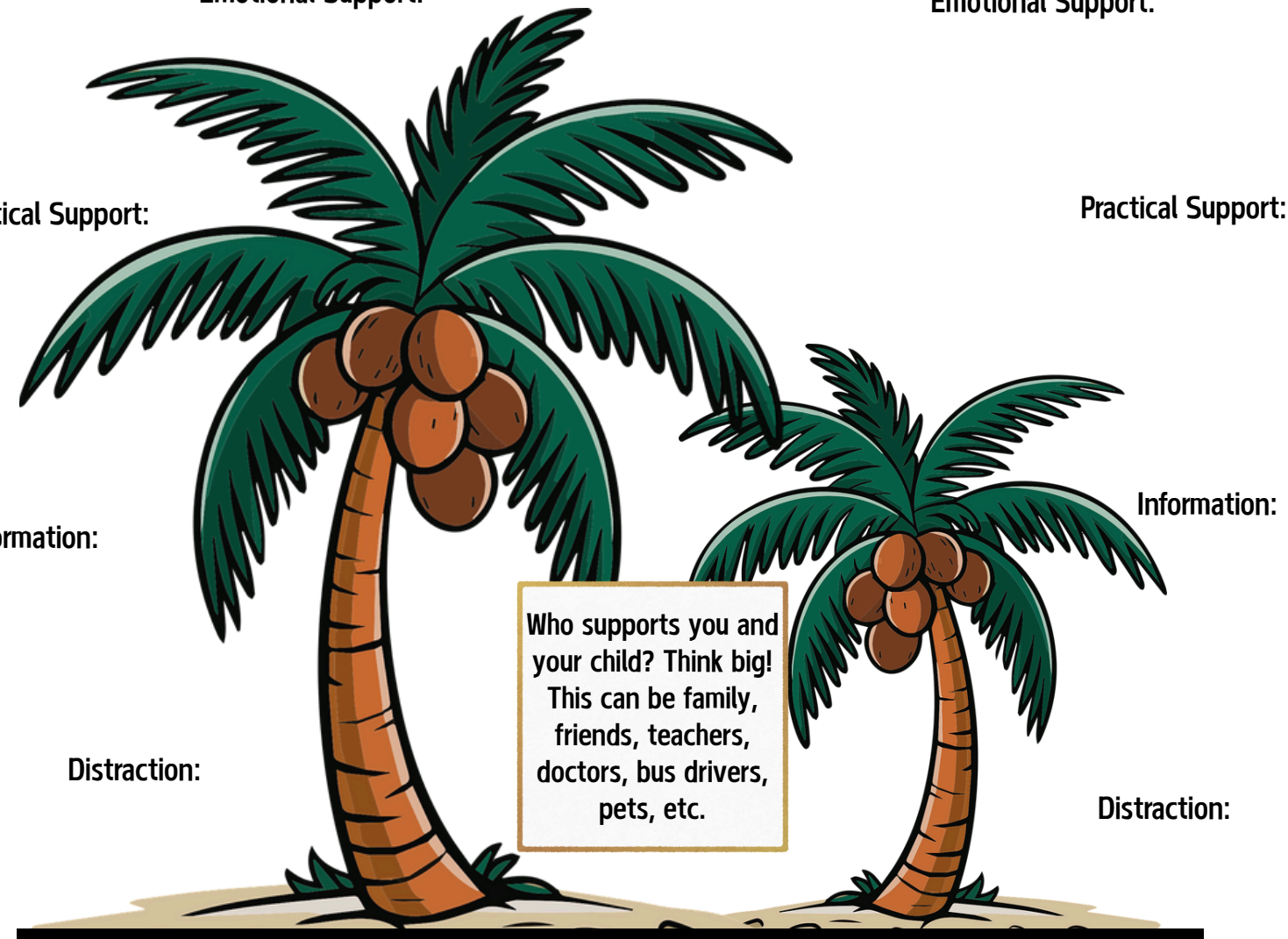
Who can MY CHILD turn to for...?

Emotional Support:

Emotional Support:

Practical Support:

Practical Support:



Information:

Information:

Who supports you and your child? Think big! This can be family, friends, teachers, doctors, bus drivers, pets, etc.

Distraction:

Distraction:

In what areas is your family well-supported? In what areas could your family use more support?	**Practical Support:** people who can help with transportation, caregiving, finances, meals, housing, chores, etc. **Emotional Support:** people who listen, validate, comfort, pray, let you cry, etc. **Distraction:** people who can laugh with you, watch a movie with you, etc. **Information:** people who can direct you to reliable resources or provide updates on legal considerations, health, etc.

CONVERSATIONS

It's okay to talk to kids about hard things!

How old is your child?	Think ahead: how might you explain what is going on in words your child can understand? This will look different for very young children (2-3 years) compared to teenagers.
Encourage questions	Your child might have questions about what is going on. Encourage your child to ask questions, and do not avoid them. If you do not know the answer, that is okay! *Example:* "I am also confused about why this is happening, but I am working with Mom to do everything I can to keep us safe."

Plan ahead for conversations.

Where will you have the conversation?

Example: I will bring up the conversation at dinner when my child is calm and we have time to discuss.

What is happening?

Example: The government makes rules that are not always fair. You might hear people talking about I.C.E.

What might your child be feeling? Validate!

Example: You might be feeling confused or scared. That is okay!

What protective steps are you taking?

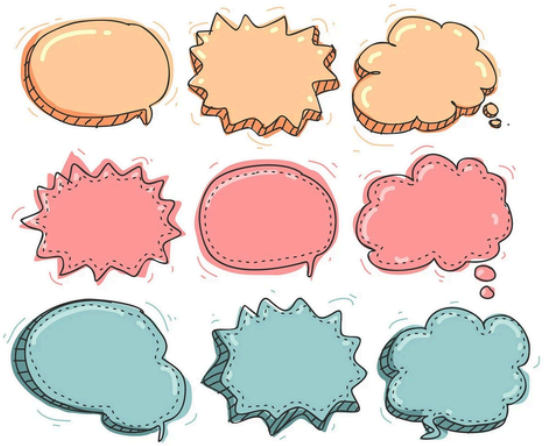
Example: We are making a plan, so if anything happens, we know what to do.

What are messages you do NOT want your child exposed to?

What messages is your child exposed to?	Children often understand more than we think they can or "take in" more than we expect them to. Consider what messages your child might be hearing at school, on the news, in family conversations, or when with friends. Are these messages reliable and helpful? Or unreliable, confusing, and scary?
What messages do they need - or not need - to hear?	Talking about hard things does not mean kids need to know everything. Have harder "adult" conversations where children are out of earshot. Consider limiting media exposure on immigration enforcement when possible.

EXAMPLES

Below are some example situations and conversations. Read through each example and reflect on the questions that follow. Keep in mind:



1) These conversations are not perfect, and there could be different ways to approach these scenarios.

2) Conversations may not always go as smoothly as caregivers hope – this is normal! These examples can help caregivers think ahead about how they would approach similar conversations with their children.

Example 1: Elías asks a question about I.C.E.

Rosa picks up her 3-year-old son Elías from daycare and while on the bus ride home, he asks, “Mami, who is I.C.E.?” Rosa and her husband Pablo recently discussed if they should to talk to their children, and they decided the conversation would be best if done together at dinnertime. Rosa smiles as she hands her son his juice and responds, “That is a good question, mijo. Let’s talk about it at dinner.”

Later, Rosa, Pablo, and their two sons sit down for dinner. Rosa says, “Elías, remember what you asked me on the bus today? You asked who is I.C.E.” Mateo, their 5-year-old interjects, “I know about I.C.E.! They take people away.” Rosa notices a feeling of sadness upon hearing Mateo’s comment.

Pablo puts his arm around Mateo as Rosa responds, “There are people who make rules about who can stay in this country and who cannot. I.C.E. arrests people they think should not live here, but this does not mean these people are doing anything bad.” Elías exclaims, “I don’t want you to go, Mami!” Before Rosa can respond, Mateo says, “They take Mexicans!” Rosa feels anxious and caught off-guard.

Pablo responds, “Sometimes, Mateo. And that can be scary. Your mom and I are making a plan to help you feel safe.” Rosa adds, “Your dad and I want to be here with you, and we are doing everything we can. Remember that you learned Tía María’s number. You will call her because she knows what to do if anything happens.” Pablo adds, “No matter what happens, we are a family and we love each other. We have faith in God who helps our family in hard times.” Elías shouts that he is done and asks for dessert – Rosa and Pablo laugh. Rosa tells them she will make buñuelos (their favorite).

EXAMPLES

Example 2: Alicia notices a change in her daughter's behavior.

Alicia has noticed that her 8-year-old daughter Esme has been clingy, extra tired in the morning, and reluctant about going to school. Alicia received an email from the school about protective measures related to I.C.E., but she does not know what Esme has heard about it. One night as they hug at bedtime, Esme clings to her mom and says that she is scared. Alicia sits down on the bed and says, "It is okay, I'm here. Tell me why you feel scared?" Esme's eyes well up with tears, and she responds, "I don't know, I'm just scared." Alicia responds, "Sometimes we do not know what we are scared of. You seemed worried before school today–are you scared at school?" Esme nods.

Alicia pauses–she wonders if talking about I.C.E. make Esme more anxious? She decides it is bring up the topic than to avoid it. She takes a breath and says, "Esme, your school sent a message about I.C.E. Do you think about I.C.E.?" Esme leans on her mother's arm and starts to cry, but doesn't respond. Alicia puts her arm around Esme, "I am here. You can tell me anything." Esme calms a bit and says, "I heard noises outside our classroom. David said it was I.C.E. We had to stay in at recess." Alicia responds, "Thank you for telling me about what happened at school. That sounds like it was scary."

Esme nods and asks, "What if I.C.E. is outside our house? What if they take you?" Alicia remains calm and explains that she has a plan to keep them safe and that the school has a plan to keep kids safe. Alicia reminds Esme that she loves her and that Tío Manny and Tía Carmen, who live upstairs, are part of their plan.

Alicia starts to sing one of Esme's favorite songs–Esme giggles as she starts to sing too. Alicia hugs Esme and says, "Singing helps when we feel scared." Esme asks if they can listen to the song, and Alicia plays it on her phone as they lay in the bed together. As Esme hums along, she rubs her eyes like she does when she is sleepy. Alicia says, "Okay, now it's time for bed. We can listen again tomorrow before school."

Example 3: Samuel and his children witness I.C.E. activity.

Samuel is in the car with his 16-year-old daughter Isabel and 10-year-old son Gabriel. Samuel has talked with Isabel about I.C.E. and their rights, but not yet with Gabriel. They notice commotion in the distance and they hear whistles–short bursts. Samuel knows this means I.C.E. is present. He is nervous but tries to stay calm. As they get closer, they see a group of people around two men wearing face masks and vests. The whistle sounds are long bursts now, and someone is recording the commotion on their cell phone. Isabel says, "Papa, stop–we need to see what's happening!" Samuel turns right towards home and keeps driving. Isabel looks angry. Gabriel looks confused and asks what is going on. Samuel's heart races on the way home.

Later at home, Samuel sits next to his daughter on the couch and says, "I know you were angry when I didn't stop the car." Isabel quietly scrolls on her cell phone. Samuel doesn't want to push the issue, but as he starts to get up, Isabel says, "I was angry but also scared." He sits back down and says, "Me too, mija. It was my job to get us home safely."

After talking with Isabel, Samuel calls for Gabriel, and he flops down on the couch. Samuel says, "I want to talk to you about what happened on the way home." He shows Gabriel a video that Fr. Jose sent that explains I.C.E. to kids. Gabriel asks a question, but Samuel does not know what to say. He decides to replay the video and pauses it a few times to rephrase things in simpler words. This seems to help. They transition to playing a video game together, which Samuel knows is one of Gabriel's favorite activities.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Questions

- Have you had a similar interaction with your child(ren)? Could you see yourself in this situation?
- How do you think the caregiver felt during each conversation? How would you feel?
- How do you think the child felt at the beginning and end of each conversation?
- What did you like about how each caregiver responded?
- Do you think you would respond in a similar way? Why or why not?
- What would you do differently than the caregiver in each example?
- In what ways did the caregivers emphasize protective factors? Family strengths and values?
- What coping skills or co-regulating practices did the parents practice? What activities might be helpful for your child(ren)?

Some Notes

- These are hard conversations, and they might not go perfectly. That is okay! It is still better to talk about it than avoid the topic altogether.
- Using your children's language can be validating and support their understanding. For example, if a young child refers to I.C.E. as "the scary guys," use this term as well.
- Even if children do not understand the details of what is happening, they pick up on stress and fear around them. Show children that it is okay to talk about these feelings. Talking about steps you are taking as a family can be just as important as explaining what is happening.
- Younger children may ask the same questions multiple times. This is normal. Consider this an opportunity to address anything that you wish you had expressed differently, clarify confusion, and reassure your children that the adults are doing what they can to keep them safe.
- Children may ask questions that you do not know the answer to. It is okay to say, "I do not know, but let's find out together." With older children and teens, this could be an opportunity to help them navigate messages in the media or find community resources.
- It is important not to overpromise or dismiss your child's concerns. Aim for "optimistic realism" that acknowledges there are things we cannot control, while focusing on what we can do. (https://www.chla.org/blog/advice-experts/talking-kids-about-immigration-enforcement-their-communities)

FAMILY PREPAREDNESS PLANNING

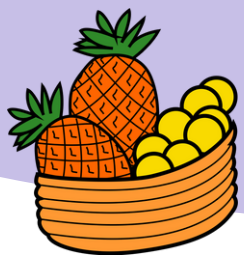
Scan QR code for a fillable and printable version of a step-by-step Family Preparedness Plan from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC).

https://www.ilrc.org/resources/step-step-family-preparedness-plan

Additional Considerations

- [ ] If applicable, carry documentation showing that you have resided in the United States for at least two years.
- [ ] Keep an accessible record (e.g., a screenshot or printed copy) of upcoming immigration appointments.
- [ ] Take inventory of your assets, including financial accounts, property, and other valuables. Ensure that 1-2 trusted individuals have the information or legal authority (e.g., durable financial power of attorney) needed to manage and safeguard each asset if necessary.

- [ ] Bank and credit union accounts
- [ ] Cash
- [ ] Vehicles (car title, insurance, etc.)
- [ ] Home or property (deed, lease, etc.)
- [ ] Business assets (accounts, etc.)
- [ ] Digital assets (payment apps, etc.)
- [ ] Valuables (jewelry, electronics, etc.)
- [ ] Insurance policies
- [ ] Work equipment or tools
- [ ] Etc.



FAMILY/CULTURAL STRENGTHS AND VALUES

Family Strengths and Values Inventory

Circle 5-8 strengths and values that you prioritize in your family.

Love
Community
Responsibility
Resistance
Perseverance
Faith
Humor
Adaptability
Kindness
Learning
_____
Honesty
Authenticity
_____
Hope
Connectedness
Courage
Determination
Work Ethic

Our Family Values:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.

How do you express and communicate these values with your children?

Which 2-3 values are you expressing the most right now?

Which value has been the most difficult to express right now?

What is one step you can take this week to support this value?

STAY INFORMED!

As a provider, one key way that you can support families affected by increased immigration enforcement is by staying informed about changes in immigration enforcement, the ways that these changes affect families, and where you can find trusted resources.

Thankfully, there is a lot of information out there!
This is a good thing, but it can also be overwhelming.

Set aside some time to check out websites for organizations that provide helpful information. We provide a few suggestions below to get you started. Choose a few to bookmark on your browser so that you can more quickly find resources to help you navigate these stressful times. Some of these organizations may have listservs that you can join, social media pages that you can follow, or lists of resources and events:

NATIONAL

National Immigrant Justice Center: https://immigrantjustice.org/

Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.: https://www.cliniclegal.org/

Immigrant Legal Resource Center: https://www.ilrc.org/

National Immigration Law Center: https://www.nilc.org/

United We Dream: https://unitedwedream.org/

Informed Immigrant: https://www.informedimmigrant.com/

ILLINOIS*

Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR): https://www.icirr.org/

Latino Policy Forum: https://latinopolicyforum.org/

Welcome to Illinois: https://welcometoil.org/

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights: https://www.theyoungcenter.org/

Coalition for Immigrant Mental Health: https://www.ourcimh.org/

**Look for state and city resources near you!*

Additional reading:

Barajas-Gonzalez, R. G., Ayón, C., & Torres, F. (2018). Applying a community violence framework to understand the impact of immigration enforcement threat on Latino children. *Social Policy Report, 31*(3), 1-24.

Cadenas, G. A., Domenech Rodríguez, M. M., Garcini, L. M., Mendoza, J. G., Suro, B., Mercado, A., Rojas Perez, O. F., Venta, A., Galvan, T., Moreno, O., & Paris, M. (2025). Antiracist activism for immigrant rights and healthy coping: Initial evidence for a community-based framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 75(3–4), 224–236.

Chavez-Dueñas, N. Y., Adames, H. Y., Perez-Chavez, J. G., & Salas, S. P. (2019). Healing ethno-racial trauma in Latinx immigrant communities: Cultivating hope, resistance, and action. *American Psychologist, 74*, 49–62.

Hodges, H. R., Banegas, J. M., Doyle, C. M., Lingras, K. A., & Abdi, S. M. (2025). When children are afraid of a parent's deportation (English, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin). Available here: https://macmh.org/resource/immigrant-family-resources/

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