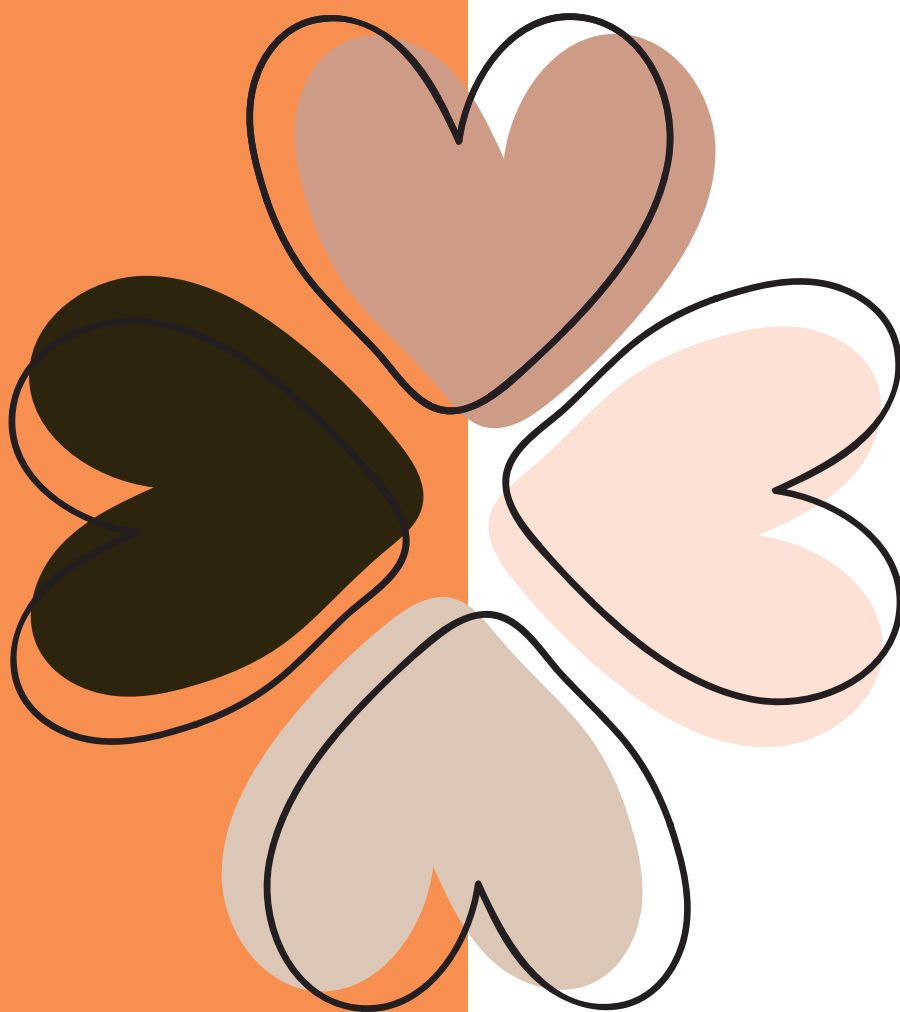


RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA AS A FAMILY



INTRODUCTION

Moving to a new country can be scary. It's possible that you and your family also encountered frightening situations in your home country or on your way to the United States. The current policy of separating families at the US border may have made the experience of migration more painful.

Immigrant Families Together recognizes that this may be a difficult time for your family, and is here to support you. We have written this guide along with social workers, psychologists, and other development specialists to help you and your children make sense of the feelings and behaviours you might be experiencing at this time. We hope to give you some suggestions to aid your recovery and regain a sense of peace in your lives.



WHAT IS TRAUMA?

In order to begin healing, it can be helpful to understand trauma and how it affects us. The immigration and asylum process often involves situations that can feel overwhelming and out of one's control. For example, having suffered or witnessed different types of violence, or through experiencing frightening, emotionally painful events. It is possible for trauma to occur when we experience an extreme threat to our wellbeing, and our brains cause our bodies to go into "fight, flight, or freeze". These are normal reactions to experiences that are too intense for us, and are meant to help protect us in an emergency situation. If the threat is unresolved or we are not able to get reassurance, our brains continue to send our bodies distress signals. When this continues over a prolonged period of time, it can affect our ability to cope with daily life and manage our emotions.

For both adults and children, the reaction to trauma depends on many factors and is unique to each person. With children particularly, factors such as age and developmental stage are important to consider. Often the behaviors that occur in response to trauma are a child's way of making sense of what has happened. Difficult behaviors can arise from fear and anxiety, a sense of powerlessness, and difficulty identifying and expressing emotions.

It can be even more challenging when children experience prolonged separation from a parent or caregiver through detainment, deportation, or other means. The younger a child is and the longer the separation occurs, the more of an affect this can have on their ability to emotionally bond with a parent or caregiver when reunited. In this case, recovering from trauma often takes more time and may require assistance from a professional. Patience is an important part of healing, and there are many effective ways to rebuild feelings of safety, connection and trust between you and your children.

Common reactions to trauma can include:

Both adults and children:

- Clingy behavior OR pushing loved ones away
- Reliving the traumatic event, intrusive memories of the traumatic event
- Fear of things related to the traumatic event (images, gestures, sounds, food, faces, etc.)
- Development of new fears
- Nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of sadness and withdrawal
- Feelings of anger and irritability
- Feelings of nervousness and anxiety
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Difficulty in remembering facts, details, or events
- Difficulty concentrating, feeling disoriented
- Decline in school or work performance
- Difficulty in having positive feelings such as joy or love
- Physical complaints (headache, stomachache)
- Distrust of people
- Hiding food
- Startling easily (jumpy, strong reaction to sudden noises)
- Self-Harming behavior (hurting oneself physically such as cutting or burning skin)
- Drug and alcohol abuse

Children may have some additional signs:

- Acting out through play
- Re-enacting traumatic events through play
- Tantrums (younger children)
- Separation anxiety (fear of being apart from parent/caregiver, particularly in young children)
- Reverting to previous stages of development such as: bedwetting, difficulty with language

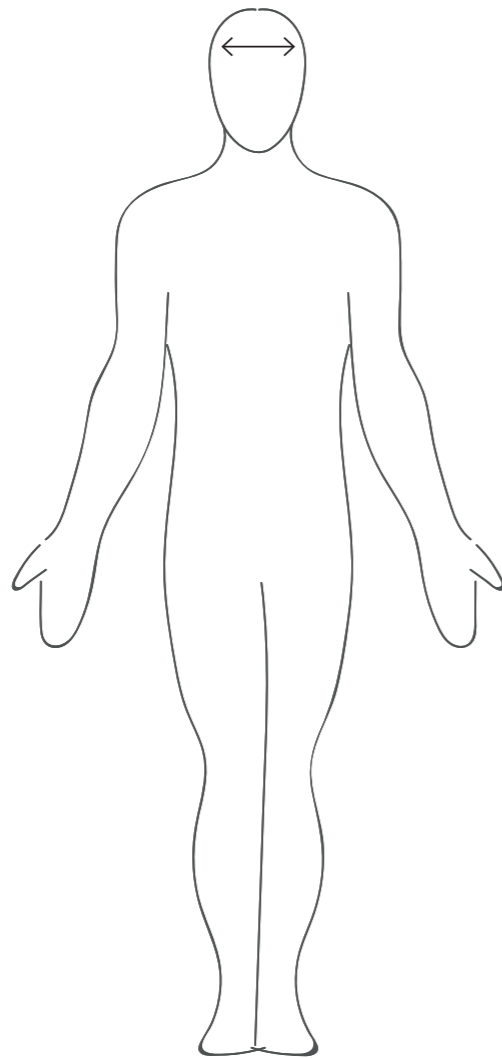


Jorge is a 10 year old boy who witnessed gun violence before coming to the United States. He now picks up objects regularly and pretends to shoot people. His parents realize that since children communicate through play, he may be saying something about what he saw in the past.

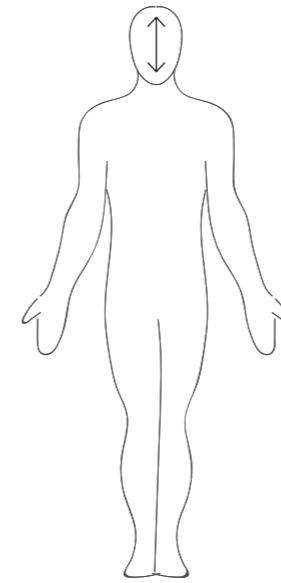
They found a therapist who can guide Jorge in naming and communicating what he might be feeling, and give his parents additional support in helping Jorge heal.

BODY MAP

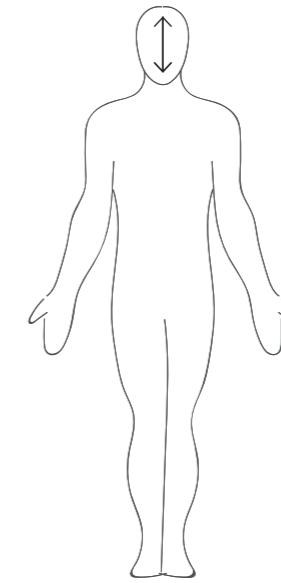
Overwhelming experiences can cause both physical and emotional reactions. When our brains react to trauma or are reminded of stressful events, flight, fight and freeze signals are sent to our bodies. These can be felt in a variety of ways: These can be felt in a variety of ways:



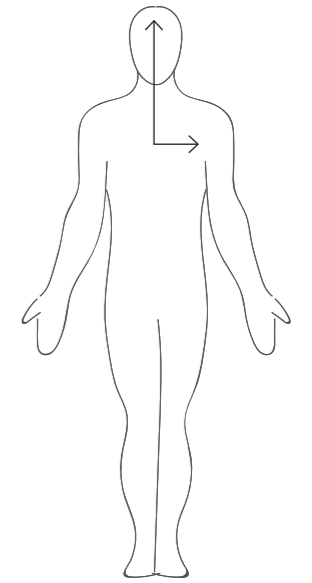
**Racing thoughts
and or feeling dizzy**



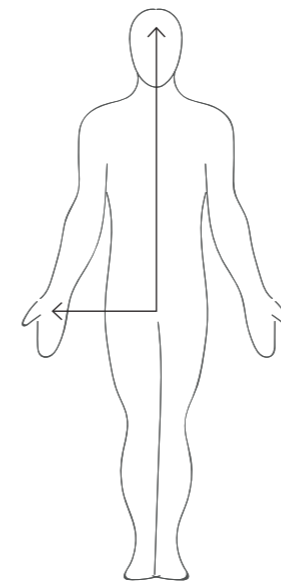
Breathing faster



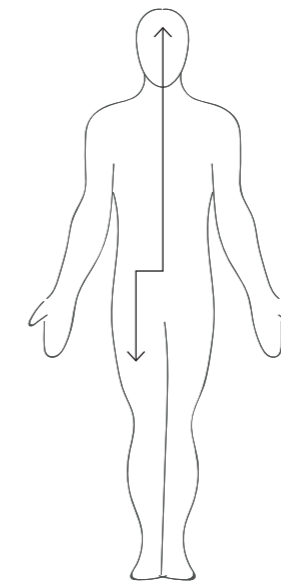
Dry mouth



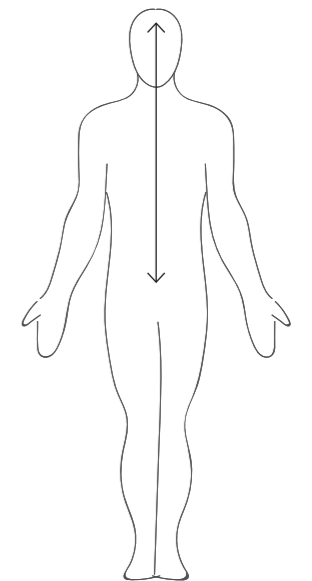
Heart beats faster



Sweaty palms



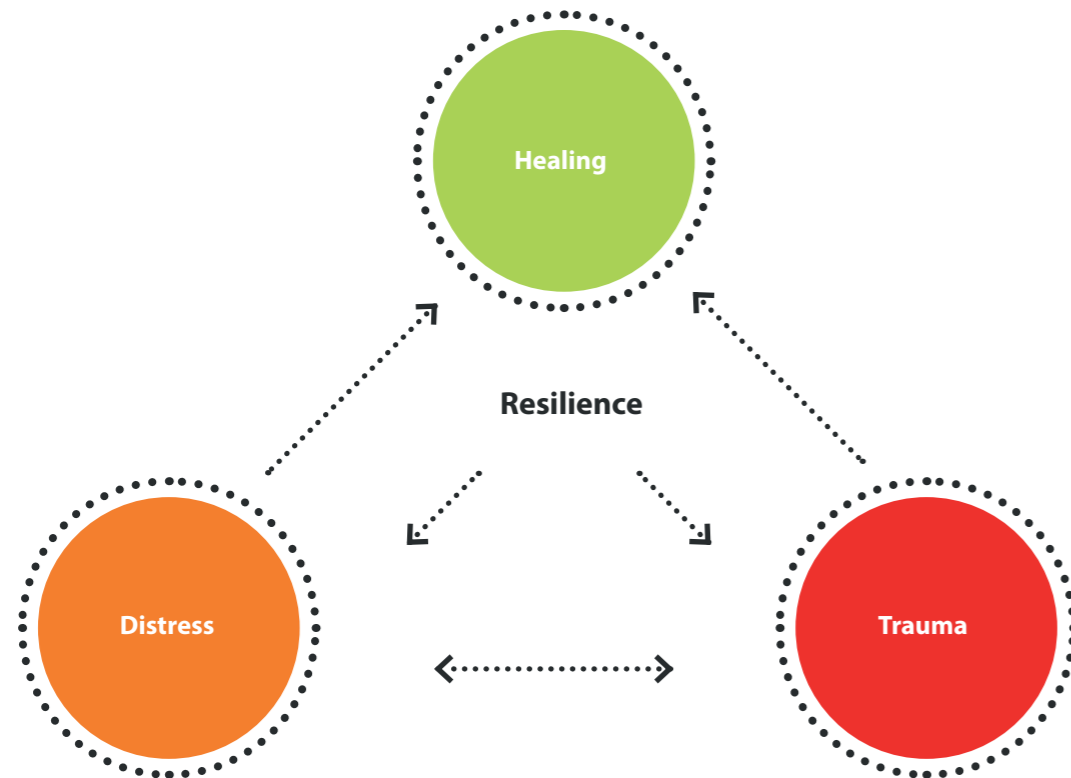
**Tense or shaky
muscles**



**Nausea/ butterflies
in stomach**

Healing Together:

Acknowledging trauma, and distress, promoting resilience



Trauma, Distress, and Resilience interact with one another to create a spectrum of responses to traumatic events. Resilience is the process of coping in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience. Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

A primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person's resilience. We can acknowledge traumatic events by understanding the signs of trauma and how trauma might impact us. Resilience helps us to find a way to get back up after being knocked down by trauma.

Unexpected	Predictable
Unwanted	Welcomed
Overwhelming	Slow and in control
Disorienting	Clear
Unsafe	Safe

Prepare children for changes to their day or living situation ahead of time. Create predictable patterns that they know to expect.

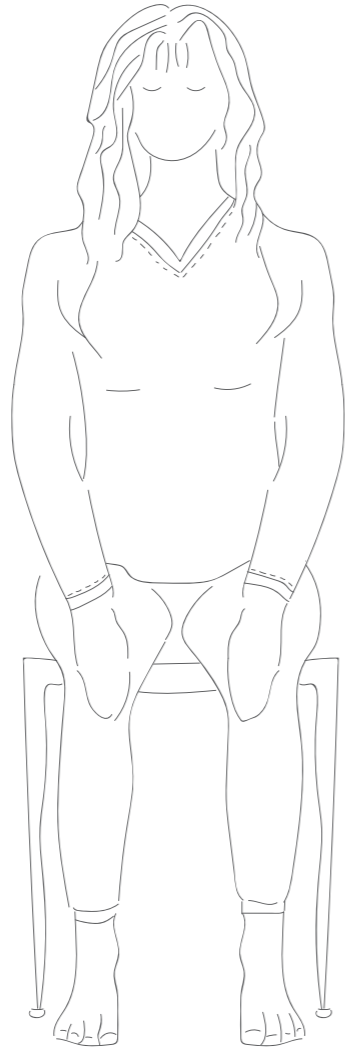
Activities that are enjoyable to the child or that make them feel loved, appreciated.

Move at a slower pace, make sure they understand what is happening, and help them have a sense of control over deciding what to do and how to do it.

Be clear in the words chosen in speaking with children and clear about the intentions of words and actions.

Learn what feels safe to that particular child and teach them how to say "yes" and "no" so they can communicate what feels safe for them as well.

We can promote resilience and encourage healing by using positive relationships and protective factors in the environment to stabilise what traumatic events have destabilised.



Maria is a 36 year old mother of three who fled violence to come to the United States. When she smells cigarette smoke, some of those memories come to her and she feels her heart race and her hands shake. She knows that this is her body's automatic response to a smell that triggeres painful memories.

She has learned when these automatic responses in her body are triggered, she can "ground" herself by sitting down, feeling the ground under her feet, noticing the colors around her, and breathing deeply several times. When she does this, she is able to feel more calm.

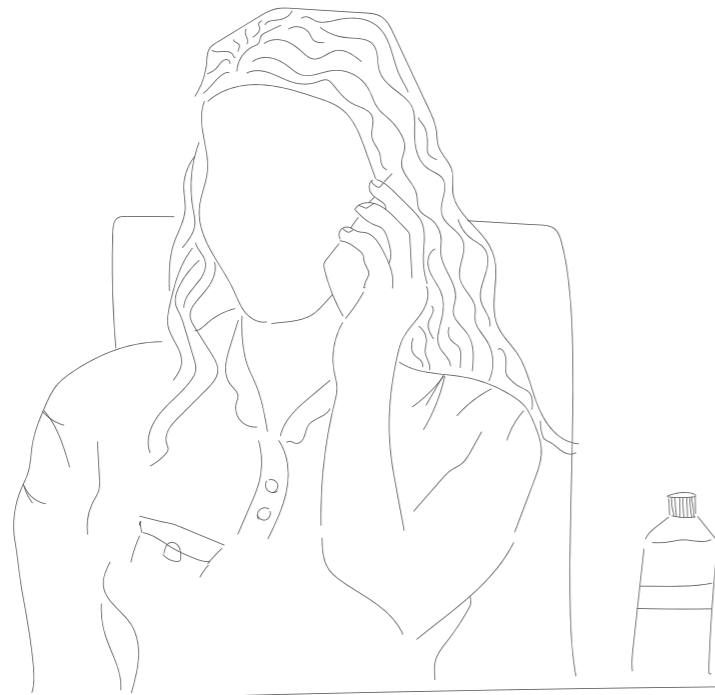
HEALING AS A FAMILY

Once parents and caregivers have an understanding of trauma and how it affects the brains and our bodies, they can begin to work on healing themselves and their children. We know that trauma can affect a child's ability to bond and form healthy relationships later in life, so it becomes important for parents to learn how to restore a foundation of trust and security. To begin this process, parents must first develop strategies to identify and manage their own feelings. It can help to keep these questions in mind:

How do I feel?

What do I need when I feel this way?

How can I meet that need?

**Adult example:**

How do I feel (emotion and bodily sensation)?

Norma, a 22 year old mother notices that she feels anxious and has a headache.

What do I need when I feel this way? Norma knows that when she feels anxious and has a headache, it helps her to take a deep breath and call a friend to talk. If her headache persists after taking several deep breathes and talking to a friend, Norma knows that she may need to rest and if necessary, take basic pain medication.

How can I meet that need? Norma has learned three breathing exercises which she practices regularly.

She also knows the numbers of two friends who she trusts and have agreed to make themselves available when she needs to talk. Norma also carries water bottle and a single dose of basic pain medication for use in emergencies or a crisis.,

Creating a secure bond with children involves consistently meeting their needs and honoring their feelings by helping them to identify and express them. After you have practiced identifying your own feelings and needs, consider asking the same 3 questions of your children:

What emotion might my child's behavior be trying to communicate?

What is my child saying they need, or what do I think they may need when they feel this way?

How can I meet that need?



Child example:

What emotion might my child's behavior be trying to communicate? Norma's daughter Sofia is 6 years old. When Sofia feels scared, she often gets a stomach ache.

What is my child saying they need or what do I think they may need when they feel this way?

Norma waits for a time when Sofia is feeling better and thinking more clearly, then asks Sofia what helps her when she has a stomachache. Sofia said that she likes to lie down and have Norma sing to her and rub her back.

How can I meet that need?

Sofia knows to tell her mom if she is scared and getting a stomach ache so they can make sure she can lie down and Norma can sing and rub her back.

PROMOTE WELLBEING

When we are struggling with difficult emotions such as anxiety, anger, or sadness, it can prevent us from thinking clearly or responding to our children with patience and compassion. The first step towards healing is to recognize our emotions, identify how our emotions may be affecting us, and to reflect on how our emotions may be impacting our children. When we feel anxious, our children may feel anxious. When we feel calm, our children will feel calm. Once we've identified our emotions, we can work on how to manage the impact they have on us. In order to manage feeling overwhelmed, it can help to regularly engage in behaviors that enhance wellbeing. The following behaviors form a foundation for us to begin healing:



Get plenty of sleep



Eat well



Get plenty of fresh air



Talk and connect with friends



Connect with religious, cultural or spiritual communities



Go for a walk or other exercise



Find ways to relax that work for you



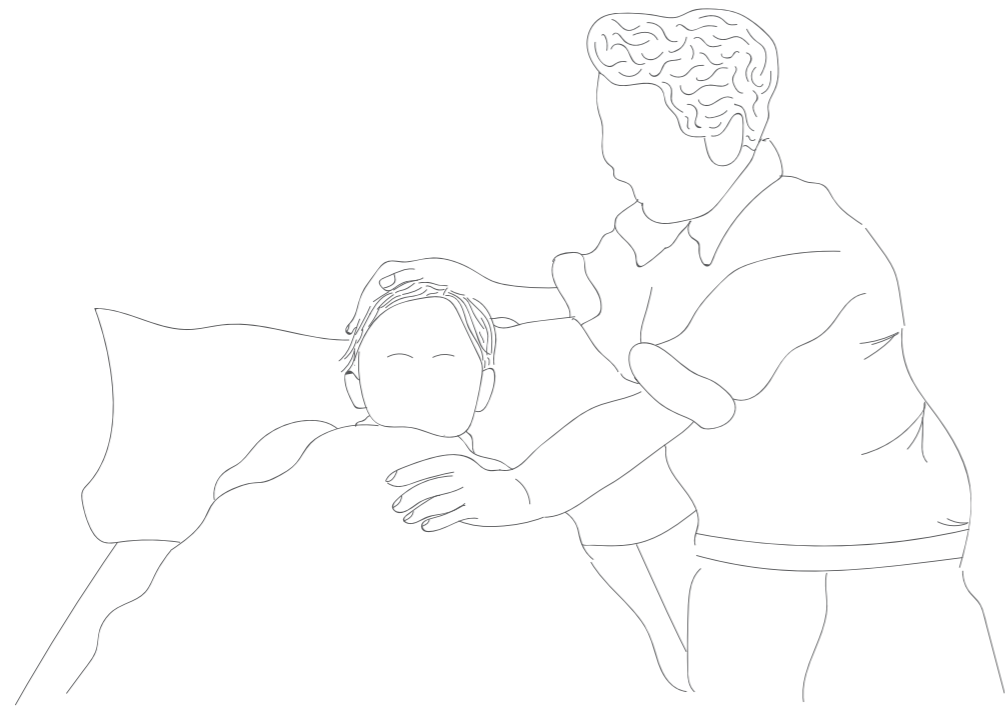
Connect with community resources



Seek therapy if needed



Revive good memories through storytelling, play, and music



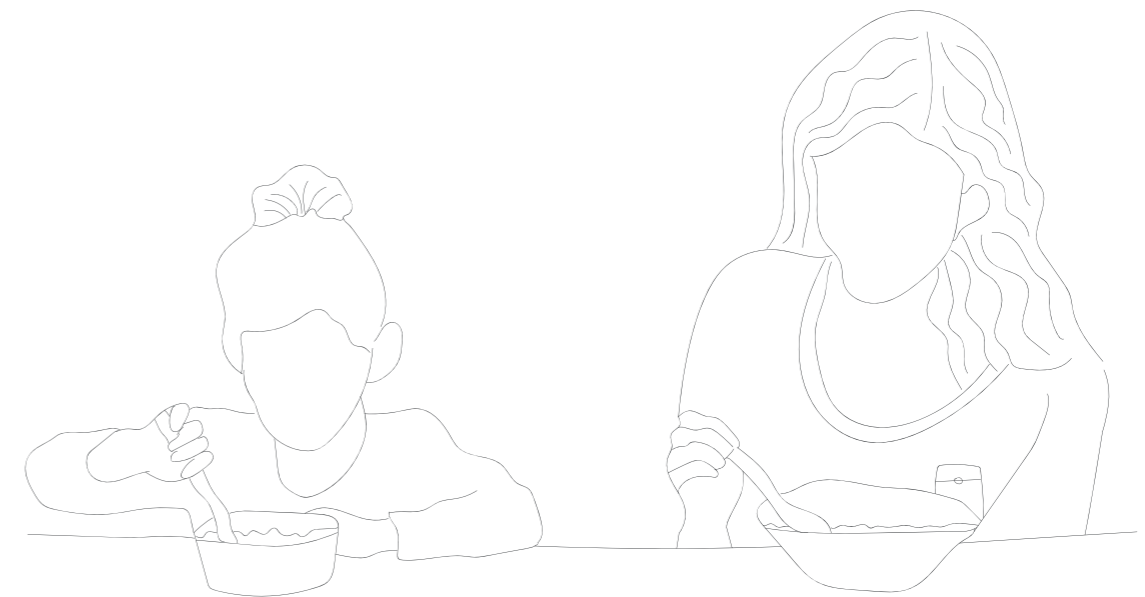
Marta is a 28 year old mother with three small children. They have all experienced difficult and scary situations before coming to the United States. Sometimes the noise and disruptions that the children cause in their small apartment are overwhelming for Marta.

This can cause Marta to become frustrated. Once Marta recognized this, she made arrangements to start their bedtime routine earlier so she can have some time to feel calm at night. This also gives the children more time to sleep.

Marta schedules regular time to play with her children. She has created a "playtime suggestion box" which she uses to ask her children to think of games they want to play so everyone can enjoy their time together.

CREATE A CALMING ENVIRONMENT

Once we establish regular practices and routines that promote well being. This can provide the foundation for healing. Then, we can think more clearly about how to build on this foundation in our environment and interactions with others. When we experience a traumatic event and its effects, it feels unexpected, unwanted, overwhelming, disorienting, and unsafe. In order to help ourselves and our children recover, our reactions and behaviors need to be the opposite of what we experienced during the traumatic event. Here are some suggestions for creating a calm, predictable environment to help the healing process:



Carolina, a 24 year old mother, was reunited with her 5 year old son Santiago after being separated for several weeks. Santiago at first seemed angry and withdrawn.

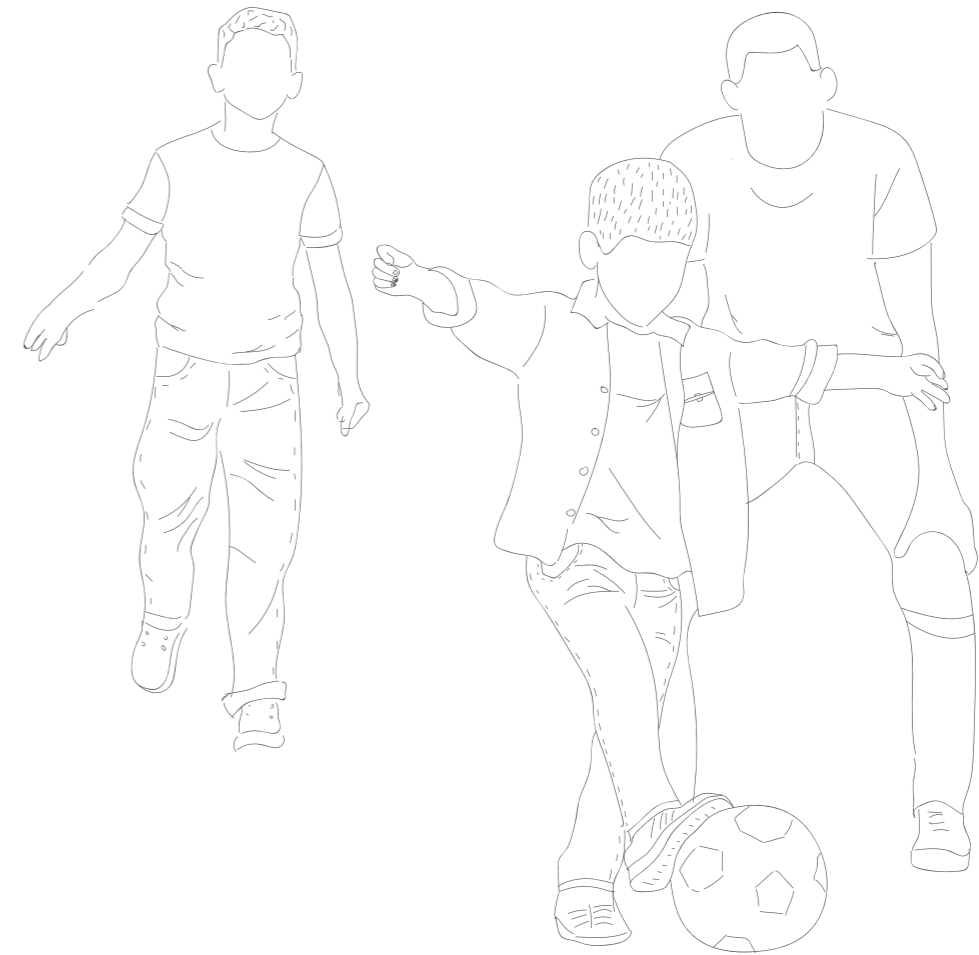
Carolina realized he needed time to adjust and a consistent routine with her to reassure him that she would be there for him. After spending several weeks creating consistent schedules and showing him affectionate care, he was able to feel calmer.

CREATE ROUTINE & STRUCTURE

When we have established what a calming environment will look like for us and our children, we can begin establishing routines and structure to reinforce a sense of well-being within our families. When children know what is going to happen next, they feel safer and more in control. Routines built around having fun or spending time together can strengthen family relationships.

Some ideas include:

- daily routines for work and school mornings
- bath time, naps, bedtime, mealtimes, greetings and goodbyes
- weekly routines for housework such as laundry and cleaning
- daily or weekly routines for outings such as shopping or park trips



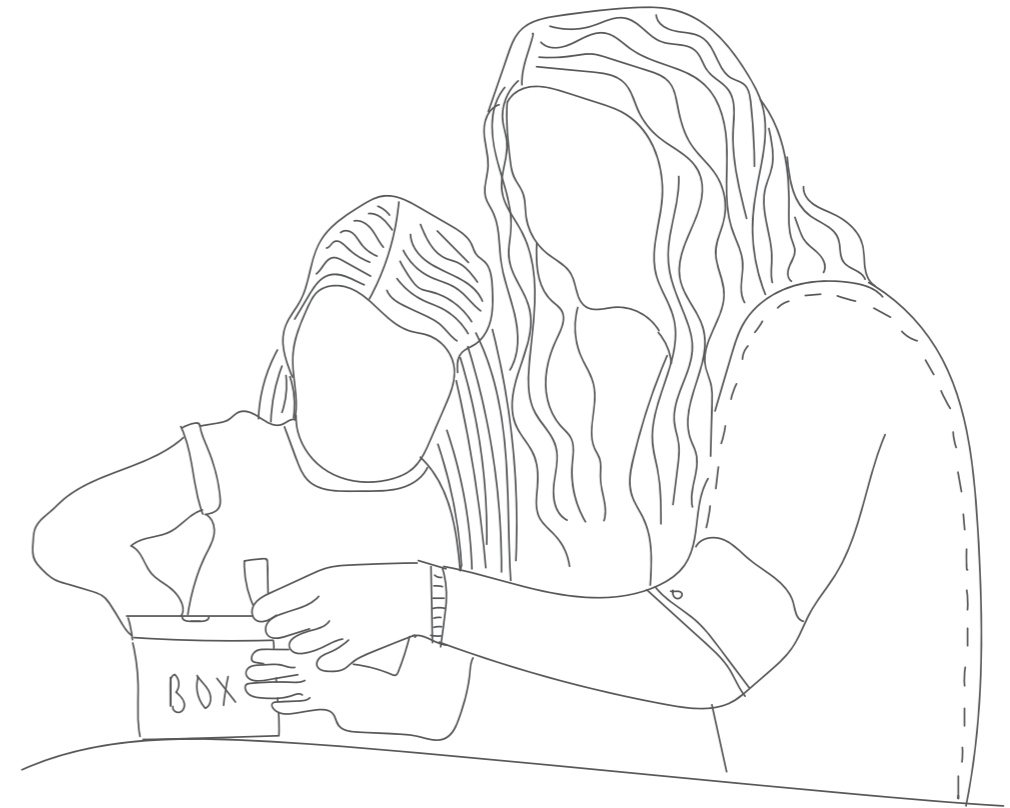
Jorge is a 30 year old father of two boys. All of them are having difficulty sleeping and are having distressing responses to some of their difficult memories. Jorge added an extra lock to their apartment door to help him feel safer and makes time to eat lunch with friends once a week.

This helps him feel calmer so he can focus on supporting his boys as well. Jorge helps his 8 and 12 year old sons by having a consistent daily routine. In addition, he lets them know as soon as he can if things will change, allows the boys to have control over choosing play activities, and regularly reminding his boys how much he loves them.

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CHILD

How we express ourselves through words and actions with children is an important part of creating a healing environment. Communication ties together all of the elements needed for healing. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind to best support your children when interacting with them:

- Speak honestly with your children about what is happening in words they can understand
- Remind children that none of what has happened is their fault
- Help children identify and label their feelings. Ask questions such as: "I wonder if you feel really frustrated about that?" OR "I wonder if you're sad that it's time to leave the park?"
- Reassure them that their feelings are normal and understandable
- Try setting aside specific time with children to talk about their worries. This can create a sense of calm as children will know their fears and concerns are being heard by parents and caregivers
- Remember that affection is a form of communication, and your children may want or need extra hugs and attention than usual. This is normal and expected.
- Spend time with your children doing activities that they enjoy, like playing games and singing songs
- Consider sharing happy memories with one another or tell stories about your country or culture



Maricarmen is a 27 year old mom who has an 8 year old daughter, Nina. Nina is often very quiet and withdrawn, spending a lot of time coloring in her room. Maricarmen sets aside time twice a week to sit with Nina and and colour. While they are colouring together, Maricarmen checks in with Nina to chat about what's happening at school, what's new and anything else Nina wants to talk about.

Maricarmen makes sure to praise Nina for any progress or success she has had and encourages her to share her hopes, dreams and worries. Sometimes they just colour, other times they make pictures. Maricarmen lets Nina decide what to do with what they have created. Sometimes Nina hangs them up, other times Nina throws them out and other times Nina puts her and Maricarmen's creations in a special box which they have decorated together.

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

During and after trauma, feeling a strong bond between parent and child is vital to healing. When faced with challenging behavior from your children, it is helpful to respond with patience and caring rather than reacting with anger or punishment. If a child is unable to express their emotions due to being fearful of the parent's reaction to their behavior, they may have trouble learning how to express and manage their feelings appropriately. Reacting negatively to a child's behavior may also make them feel disconnected from the parent and have difficulty feeling safe. Often children act out or misbehave due to an unmet need or feeling unsafe. The first step to dealing with challenges is to determine what the child might need what will make the child feel safe, The parent can then decide how they can best fill this need.

Setting clear expectations and limits also helps children feel safe and secure. Respond to your child's behavior the same way every time. When you are consistent, the behaviors you like will happen more often and problem behaviors are less likely to happen. Consider creating family rules together, and placing them somewhere easy to see inside the home. Family rules can include clear statements about the positive behaviors you expect at home.. Remember to promote well-being and positive coping skills by communicating in ways that are nurturing, predictable, welcoming, clear, and safe.

HELPFUL RESPONSES TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

When difficult behaviors arise, parents can respond by:



Maintaining consistency with limits, explaining limits



Develop confidence by offering 2 safe choices whenever possible



Understanding the need the behavior is expressing



Helping children identify what they are feeling



Model the behavior as adults that we wish to see in our children



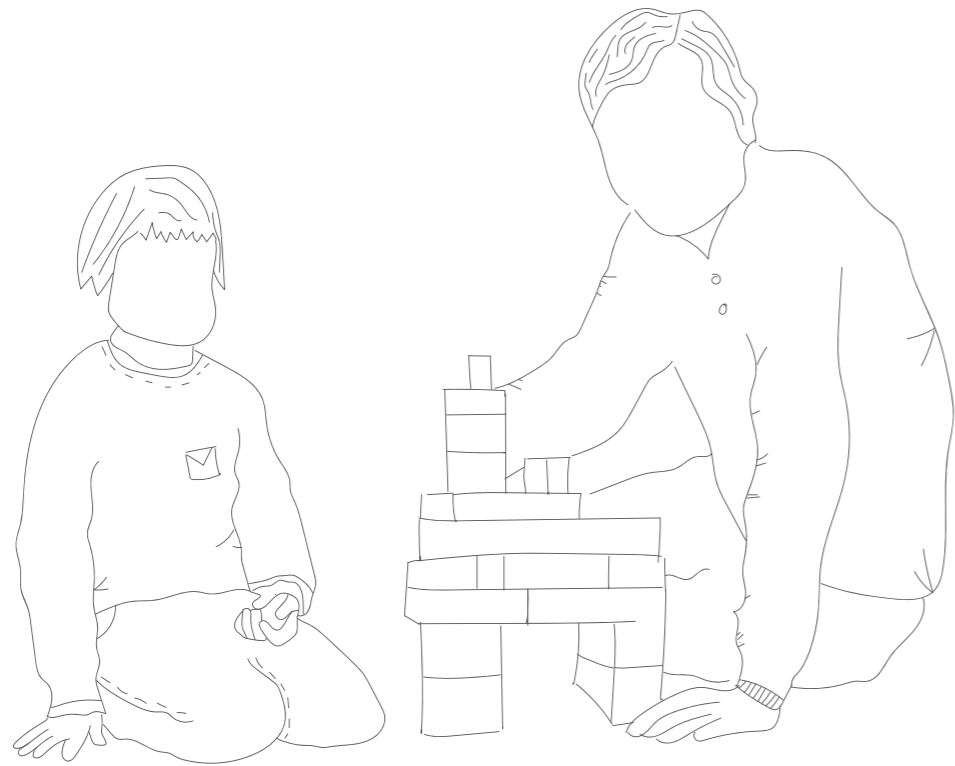
Remind children that you care about them



Talk about mistakes, use them as opportunities to make better decisions



Establish/Maintain quality time with your child (play, read, create art together)



Ignacio is a 34 year old father with an 11 year old son, Enrique. Ignacio spends much of his time working two jobs. When he is home, Enrique often is loud, breaks things, and makes messes. Although Ignacio is frustrated and tired, he knows that Enrique is expressing a need to be heard, for his father's attention and affection, and a need to be creative. Ignacio calmly acknowledged to Enrique that perhaps it might be frustrating being left alone so much. Ignacio explained that working two jobs is the only way he knows how to make sure they can have what they need. Ignacio reassured Enrique that he loved him and working two jobs was a hard decision.

This helped Enrique to identify and express his feelings to his father. Ignacio acknowledged that he recognised how talented and creative Enrique is through the work that he sees him do on his building projects. Ignacio expressed his sadness when Enrique breaks things when he knows he is so capable of creating new and beautiful things. Ignacio encouraged Enrique to use his words and creativity rather than breaking things. Ignacio made a deal with Enrique.

Ignacio would work on scheduling specific times when he's home from work for the two of them to work in a building project together. Ignacio explained that Enrique's part of the deal would be to try working more quietly, clean up after himself and to be careful not to break things. Ignacio made sure to consistently schedule "building" time with Enrique and praised Enrique each time he cleaned up and worked quietly. Enrique noticed that things weren't getting broken as much and over time. Over time, Enrique's challenging behaviour decreased and Ignacio's and Enrique's relationship improved.

SEEKING ADDITIONAL HELP

There may come a time when difficult emotions or behaviors become too much for you, or your children, to handle alone. It then becomes important to seek additional help. At this point, you might wish to consult a therapist or other professional to help you and your child cope. In the United States there are a variety of mental health and social services for families who have had similar experiences. Some therapists or professionals work with children, others with adults, and others meet with families together to offer a variety of material and counselling support.

How do you know if additional help is needed? Here are some guidelines:

- 1). You or your child feel hopeless, depressed, and alone consistently
- 2). You or your child has considered harming themselves or others (people or animals).
- 3). You or your child experience a level of anxiety, depression, mood swings or anger that interferes with your daily activities
- 4). Aside from the trauma of separation, you suspect your child may have experienced additional medical, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse while in detention
- 5). You are in a relationship where you are being emotionally or physically abused
- 6). You have been actively hurting your child, or feeling the urge to hurt your child including any of the following: spanking, hitting, yelling, or neglecting their needs
- 7). Aside from the trauma of separation, you suspect your child may have experienced additional medical, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse while in detention
- 8). You or your child has engaged in self-harm, which involves hurting oneself in a physical manner on purpose with methods such as cutting or burning. Often this is a sign that either emotions have become too big to contain and they want to feel control, or that a sense of numbness has taken over and the person needs to "feel" something

* Please reach out for professional help right away in the case of self-harm, or harm to others. It is helpful to remember that these feelings are most likely a result of trauma, and it will be important to respond with kindness rather than fear or panic.

It can sometimes be difficult to know who to contact, so we have included some helpful phone numbers under "Resources" below.

RESOURCES

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

National Suicide Prevention Hotline (Español): 1-888-628-9454

National Suicide Prevention Hotline (English): 1-800-273-8255

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

RAICES (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services): 1-800-409-2893

Catholic Charities USA: 703-549-1390

<https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/find-help/>

In addition, you may need help with any of the following:

- Housing, Food, Clothing
- Medical Care
- Legal Services
- Mental Health Services
- Transportation Assistance
- Connecting to Local and National Organizations
- Connecting to School Resources

Having access to all of the above can reduce your level of stress and restore a sense of control over your life. If you would like one of our volunteers to assist you in locating resources and service providers, please contact Immigrant Families Together via WhatsApp: 917-539-6396.

COMFORT KITS

Immigrant Families Together is offering Comfort Kits free of charge to any immigrant family in need. Each kit will include items for both children and adults, chosen from a list of carefully selected items created by social workers and family therapists to provide support and healing. Examples include art supplies, dolls, journals, books, parenting flashcards and more. Kits will also include a printed list of resources for immigrant families, as well as workbooks for both adults and children that will help you to work through trauma you may have experienced. Our comfort kits will arrive in boxes, ready to open and use. If you would like to receive a kit, please contact IFT through WhatsApp: 919-539-6396. Please include how many children are in your family, along with their ages.

For more information visit our websites immigrantfamilies.together.com and wearelumos.org.



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