



Research-to-Policy  
Collaboration

# Trauma-Informed Responses to Immigration Policies and Practices

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**Immigration policies and practices affecting children and families should be trauma-informed**, encompassing culturally and developmentally appropriate strengths-based approaches. Migrant children and families experience trauma both before and during the immigration processes. Prior to immigration, many detained migrant children face trauma due to violence, famine, educational neglect, and criminalization. Policies leading to deportations, maltreatment of unaccompanied minors, detentions, and family separation compound these prior traumatic experiences, and lead to enduring adverse physiological, psychological, and physical health consequences.<sup>1,2</sup> While explicit policies of family separation have been largely overturned, institutionalized maltreatment and separation of families continues through immigration policies/practices<sup>3</sup> and the adverse effects of family separation endure.<sup>4</sup> This brief calls for an end to all policies that compound immigrant trauma, echoing Congressional calls to address the root of harm to children<sup>5</sup> and recommends use of trauma-informed, culturally-relevant lenses to inform immigration policies and post-separation support for immigrant children and families.

**Trauma-informed responses<sup>6</sup>** involve shifting the way policies and services prevent and respond to trauma, including (i) training of *all* professionals across the continuum of care, including anyone in contact with immigrant, migrant, or refugee families; (ii) regular screening, and; (iii) developmentally appropriate care (i.e., case management, psychotherapy, psychiatric medication management, if deemed necessary). Using trauma-informed lenses with immigrant children requires adherence to an edict of “no further harm.” Culturally-responsive, developmentally appropriate approaches complement trauma-informed lenses.

*“No further harm” edict for service providers across the continuum of care*

- Recovering separated children can be supported with living arrangements that are safe and supportive, have access to new and existing social and cultural support systems/relationships, and access to meaningful education and training.<sup>18</sup>
- Families benefit from the right to decide when and how to engage in temporary separation, even in ordinarily benign situations (e.g., doctor assessments, parent-teacher conferences) in order to rebuild attachment relationships.
- Families and children benefit from the right to narrate their stories on their own terms. Service system providers can honor the child/family’s right to stop or withdraw from medical or social service interventions or to engage over multiple sessions.

## Strengths-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment

- Support parents’ empowerment by offering access to and translation of Parental Rights Toolkits.<sup>7</sup>
- Support the use of culturally rooted strategies, including collectivistic values that emphasize community solidarity, prioritizing family relationships and shared decision-making.<sup>8,9</sup>
- Understand and support the ongoing developmental and familial challenges processes involved in family reunification and reorganization.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Use validated psychosocial evaluation tools appropriate for refugee and asylum-seeking children (e.g., [Refugee Services Core Stressor Assessment Tool](#)).<sup>12</sup>
- Adopt recommendations from organizations working with youth of varying immigration status such as: [The National Association of School Psychologists](#), [The Migrant Clinicians Network](#), or [The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#).

**Preventing Trauma.** Both national and local policies should minimize harm to children. As an example, in immigration processes, “detention is generally neither appropriate nor necessary for families” (Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency<sup>13</sup>). Alternatives to institutionalized traumatic policies can be cost-effective for retaining migrants for court appearances, which may involve “release and/or referral to community support programs for all families who can establish identity and community ties and who do not pose a security risk”<sup>14</sup>; some combination of electronic monitoring and reporting, community-operated family

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Many migrant children and families experience trauma prior to and during the immigration process.
- Service systems involving migrant families should be trauma- and culturally-informed. This involves:
  - Training community workers
  - Commitment to “no further harm”
  - Culturally and developmentally appropriate care
- A national toolkit for communities receiving migrant families may support effective responses to trauma.

residential facilities, case management to improve a high rate of court appearance, and using the 5-step Community Assessment and Placement Model.<sup>15</sup>

The potential threat of deportation can also be traumatic for children.<sup>16</sup> Community agencies, practitioners, and educators can help children and mixed-status families to feel safe, to feel comfortable seeking help, and to support communities in countering threats of deportation.

**Addressing Migrant Trauma in Communities.** Local communities can help children and families heal and thrive. All communities receiving migrant children can benefit from a national toolkit of resources and funding to deliver services, even after national policies contributing to trauma have been mitigated. This online comprehensive clearinghouse of migrant-centered local resources can be targeted for multiple audiences (educators, community leaders, health and social workforces, first responders, etc.) across service systems<sup>17</sup> and may include the following expansion of resources already provided by the [Department of Health and Human Services](#):

- Practical resources for all individuals in contact with children, to improve cultural competence and strengthen the ability to talk with children and families about family separation. Model toolkits and resources include those from the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)<sup>18,19,20</sup> and [Emerging Minds](#) in Australia.
- Federally-funded training for professionals engaged in public child welfare, education, and legal systems to understand immigration law and policies in order to assist children and families who have traversed this system.<sup>21</sup>
- Funding to local/state organizations and individuals will create a system of trauma-informed, culturally-competent provider; funding to community-based organizations can support their ability to become partners in training and service.
- Accessible training in Trauma-Informed Care frameworks for all service providers and practitioners<sup>22</sup>, with potential for credentialing from institutions of higher education (e.g., micro-credentials for professional growth for educators<sup>23</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Bouza, J., Camacho-Thomson, D. E., Carlo, G., Franco, X., Garcia Coll, C., Halgunseth, L., ... & White, R. (2018). The science is clear: Separating families has long-term damaging psychological and health consequences for children, families and communities. Washington, DC: Society for Research in Child Development.

<sup>2</sup> Society for Community Research and Action (2016). Policy Statement on the incarceration of undocumented migrant families. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 57, 255-263.

<sup>3</sup> [Summary in Southern Poverty Law Center \(2019\). Retrieved from https://www.splcenter.org/news/2019/09/24/family-separation-under-trump-administration-timeline.](https://www.splcenter.org/news/2019/09/24/family-separation-under-trump-administration-timeline)

<sup>4</sup> MacLean, Sarah A, Agyeman, Priscilla O, Walther, Joshua, Singer, Elizabeth K, Baranowski, Kim A, & Katz, Craig L. (2019). Characterization of the mental health of immigrant children separated from their mothers at the U.S.–Mexico border. *Psychiatry Research*, 112555.

<sup>5</sup> House Committee on Education and Labor hearing (12/4/2019), “Growing Up in Fear: How the Trump Administration’s Immigration Policies are Harming Children”

<sup>6</sup> Treatment (US), C. for S. A. (2014). *Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207195/>

<sup>7</sup> Women’s Refugee Commission, “Detained or deported: What about my children?” [https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/rights/resources/1022-detained-or-deported-parental-toolkit-english-interactive.](https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/rights/resources/1022-detained-or-deported-parental-toolkit-english-interactive)

<sup>8</sup> Vesely, C. K., Letiecq, B. L., & Goodman, R. D. (2017). Immigrant Family Resilience in Context: Using a Community-Based Approach to Build a New Conceptual Model. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 9, 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12177>.

<sup>9</sup> [Culturally Competent Practice for Immigrant Families.](#)- Center for Immigration and Child Welfare. Retrieved from <https://cimcw.org/wp-content/uploads/Cultural-Engagement-Resource-Handout.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Lu, Y., He, Q., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2020). Diverse experience of immigrant children: How do separation and reunification shape their development?. *Child Development*, 91(1), e146-e163.

<sup>11</sup> Lieberman, A. F., & Bucio, G. O. (2018). When Migration Separates Children and Parents. *Zero to Three*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Wu, J. (2018, March 19). Measures that are Appropriate for Refugee Children and Families. Retrieved November 6, 2019, from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website: [https://www.nctsn.org/resources/measures-are-appropriate-refugee-children-and-families.](https://www.nctsn.org/resources/measures-are-appropriate-refugee-children-and-families)

<sup>13</sup> Report of the ICE Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers. (2016, p. 260). <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2016/acfrc-report-final-102016.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Gros, H., & Song, Y. (2016). "No Life for a Child": A Roadmap to End Immigration Detention of Children and Family Separation. Retrieved from [https://ihp.law.utoronto.ca/utf1\\_file/count/PUBLICATIONS/Report-NoLifeForAChild.pdf](https://ihp.law.utoronto.ca/utf1_file/count/PUBLICATIONS/Report-NoLifeForAChild.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Sampson, R., & Mitchell, G. (2013). Global trends in immigration detention and alternatives to detention: practical, political and symbolic rationales. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 1, 97-121.

<sup>16</sup> American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012). Crossroads: The psychology of immigration in the new century. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/topics/immigration/immigration-report.pdf>

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<sup>18</sup> Hispanic Research Center (n.d.). Supporting Children and Parents Affected by the Trauma of Separation. Retrieved from [hispanicresearchcenter.org/research-resources/supporting-children-and-parents-affected-by-the-trauma-of-separation/](https://hispanicresearchcenter.org/research-resources/supporting-children-and-parents-affected-by-the-trauma-of-separation/)

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, S. (2018, June 25). Traumatic Separation and Refugee and Immigrant Children: Tips for Current Caregivers. Retrieved November 6, 2019, from <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/traumatic-separation-and-refugee-and-immigrant-children-tips-current-caregivers>

<sup>20</sup> American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Share My Lesson. Resources for talking and teaching about immigrant family separations (2018). Retrieved from [https://sharemylesson.com/todays-news-tomorrows-lesson/resources-talking-and-teaching-about-immigrant-family-separations.](https://sharemylesson.com/todays-news-tomorrows-lesson/resources-talking-and-teaching-about-immigrant-family-separations)

<sup>21</sup> Dettlaff, A. J. (2012). Immigrant children and families and the public child welfare system: Considerations for legal systems. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 63(1), 19-30.

<sup>22</sup> Kohli, R. K. (2011). Working to ensure safety, belonging and success for unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children. *Child Abuse Review*, 20(5), 311-323.

<sup>23</sup> Berry, B., Airhart, K. M., & Byrd, P. A. (2016). Microcredentials: Teacher learning transformed. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98(3), 34-40.