

Guidance for Immigrant and Refugee Families: Parenting in a New Country

No matter where you live or where you are from, life's stresses and the challenges of parenting can often feel overwhelming. All families face challenges in life—and every family needs help sometimes. Moving your family from your country of origin to the United States can bring opportunities to build a new life for you and your children. But parenting while adapting to a new culture, language, and social system can be particularly stressful.

This factsheet discusses topics and challenges you may encounter as an immigrant or refugee family that could affect your child or family's well-being. It describes some of the challenges of raising children in a new country, how the immigrant or refugee experience might affect your family dynamics and well-being, and how your family's strengths (called "protective factors") can help during difficult times.

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PARENTING CHALLENGES FOR IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES

Starting a new life in another country means lots of changes for you and your family. Many of these changes may benefit and strengthen your family. In fact, they may be the reasons why you left your home country—for example, more job or education opportunities or a safer environment for you and your family. But some of these changes can also cause a lot of stress that can affect your family and how you parent your children.

Any family's difficulties and stresses can sometimes lead to situations that put the health and well-being of a child at risk. For immigrant and refugee families, the challenges of adjusting to life in a new country are often added on top of the regular stresses of raising children.

DIFFERENCES IN PARENTING STYLES

Parents are responsible for the health and well-being of their children. But what that means in the United States can be different than what you may have been used to in your country of origin. Different cultures and countries can have very different beliefs about what it means to raise and care for children in safe and healthy ways and who is responsible for raising and caring for a child.

In the United States, there are laws that define parents' legal responsibilities toward their children. There are also laws that define what is considered abuse or neglect to protect children from harm or maltreatment. These laws and definitions can vary according to the State in which you reside. But most States recognize four major types of maltreatment: **physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.**

Physical Abuse

A nonaccidental physical injury to a child. It can include punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand or other object), burning, or otherwise causing physical harm. Physical discipline, like spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.

Neglect

Not providing a child's basic needs, like food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, and medical care. It can also include other forms of endangering a child's welfare (like not regularly sending a child to school or not providing adequate supervision). **Note: Not having enough money to meet basic needs is not considered abuse or neglect.** But a child welfare agency might become involved if a family's failure to use available information and resources to care for their child puts the child's health or safety at risk.

Sexual Abuse

Includes activities by a parent or other caregiver (or by another adult with the parent's knowledge or lack of protection) such as fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, and exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Emotional Abuse

A pattern of behavior that damages a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. It is also sometimes called "psychological abuse." This may include extreme levels of criticism, threats, or rejection.

You can learn more about what is considered abuse or neglect in the United States by reading Child Welfare Information Gateway's publication [What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms](#). To read summaries of maltreatment laws for all States and U.S. territories, see Information Gateway's publication [Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect](#).

Like all families in the United States, immigrant and refugee families should make sure that their parenting strategies meet the best interests of their children and fall within the legal definitions of parents' responsibilities. Here are some examples:

- All States have laws requiring children of certain ages to attend public school (or some other State-approved education program). The age requirements can vary by State, and all children, regardless of gender, have the same requirement.
- Certain methods of disciplining a child that may be acceptable or common in other countries or cultures may not be acceptable in the United States.
- Leaving young children without supervision, especially in situations that could place a child in danger, could be considered neglect. So, for example, when deciding whether to leave a child home alone, you may want to consider several things like your child's physical, developmental, and emotional well-being; their willingness to stay home alone; and laws and policies in your State regarding this issue. (You can find more information on this topic in Information Gateway's publication [Leaving Your Child Home Alone](#).)

Every parent can feel overwhelmed by the everyday stresses of raising a family. But immigrant and refugee families may also be dealing with the challenges of settling into a new country, helping their children adjust to a new life, and accepting the ways their family may be changing.

This can make it harder for immigrant and refugee parents to make safe choices for their family or find the help they need. It may also make it harder to find healthy ways to deal with feelings like anger, depression, fear, or worry. See the section "Protective Factors: Your Family's Strengths" to read about how building on your family's strengths can help your family deal with life's difficulties and grow stronger together.

CHANGES IN FAMILY DYNAMICS

Resettlement can bring big changes to a family's dynamic, including the makeup of the family group and household, the way family members relate to each other, or the expectations for each family member. For example, some family members that were expected to stay home and care for the family might need to find work outside of the home or attend school regularly.

Children often adapt to a new culture and language more quickly than their parents. They may want to speak in English rather than their home language or dress and act in ways that are different and perhaps not as acceptable in their culture of origin. Children and youth may start to push back against the norms of their home culture. All these changes can cause a lot of conflict in families, and it can seem like your entire family structure has changed.

While your family may need to adapt to some parenting strategies in the United States, you may also wish to continue honoring family and cultural traditions from your country of origin. Wanting to preserve your family's culture, language, and traditions and pass those down to your children is understandable and important. They are a part of who you are and a part of who your children are. They can also be a source of strength and support for your child (and yourself) and help your child develop a strong sense of identity.

It can be hard for families to find a balance between honoring their culture and adapting to a new one. Parents can help ease this transition by allowing for open communication among all family members. Talk to and teach your children about your home culture and language. But be willing to listen to and learn from your children's experiences and how they are adapting to their new life. Give them room to grow in their own experiences. Understand that they will have different life experiences than your own, growing up in a different country and culture.

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

[USAHello](#), a free online information center for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, has information in many languages to help immigrant and refugee families understand more about [life in the United States](#). On its website, you can learn more about [culture in the United States](#), [family roles](#) and how they can change after immigration, [parenting in the United States](#), and more.

You can also visit the [Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services \(BRYCS\)](#) website, which includes a [Refugee Portal](#) for parents and families that are new to the United States. It has resources on topics like parenting, education and literacy, health and wellness, the U.S. legal system, and understanding your new community in the United States.

The following resources deal specifically with the challenges of raising children in a new country, including issues like cultural identity, discipline, expectations for school and education, parenting techniques, and child and family safety:

- [Raising Teens in a New Country: A Guide for the Whole Family](#) (available in multiple languages)
- [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#) (available in multiple languages)
- [Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development](#) (available in multiple languages)



Learn More: Language in the Home

According to the Office of Head Start within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [raising your children to be bilingual can offer them many benefits](#), such as having better self-control and problem-solving skills, an easier time learning additional languages, and a stronger connection to their culture of ancestry. Teaching your child your home [language is a gift](#) that will help them during their whole life.

The American Academy of Pediatrics addresses some of the [myths](#) about raising a bilingual child. For example, having a young child learn two languages at once will not confuse the child or cause delays in the development of their language skills. The Office of Head Start recommends that parents who are not fluent in English [speak to their child in the parents' dominant language](#), which will help the child develop strong language skills from the start.

As children grow or adapt to life in a new country, they may start to prefer to speak in their dominant language (likely English, the language they may use most often outside of the home). The Office of Head Start encourages parents to talk to their children about [the importance of preserving both languages](#), both for the many benefits of bilingualism and to promote good communication between parents and their children throughout their lives.

The following resources offer more information about the importance of language in the home and raising bilingual children:

- [7 Myths and Facts About Bilingual Children Learning Language](#) (American Academy of Pediatrics)
- ["How to Raise Bilingual Kids With the Help of Entertainment and Tech"](#) (Common Sense Media)
- [The Importance of Home Language Series](#) and [Families Support Their Children Who Are Dual Language Learners](#) (Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center)
- [Talking Is Teaching](#)
- [¡Colorín colorado!](#) (from WETA, including the articles ["Raising Bilingual Kids"](#) and ["But What If I Don't Know English?"](#))

STRESS RELATED TO THE IMMIGRATION OR REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

The experience of immigrating and of learning to live in a new country can cause a lot of stress for parents and families. Immigrant and refugee families may come to the United States to escape dangerous situations, such as war, persecution, the effects of natural disasters, or family or community violence. These [traumatic experiences](#) can affect your mental health and that of your family. For example, you may develop feelings of anxiety, anger, or sadness. Some people may also experience [posttraumatic stress disorder \(also known as PTSD\)](#), which can cause you to feel stress and fear even after you are in a safe environment.

Even if you did not come from a traumatic situation, there are many aspects of the immigrant or refugee experience that can affect your well-being and make it harder to parent your children in safe and effective ways. For example, you may have had to leave behind friends, family, and other social connections that were your support systems. You may not know how to access services in your new community—like medical, food, or housing assistance—that can help you keep your family safe and healthy. Or you may not feel comfortable accessing services in English and are having a hard time finding services in your preferred language.

For families with an uncertain immigration status (for example, family members who are undocumented), the additional fear of immigration proceedings, detention, deportation, or family separation can be a constant source of stress. You may not feel safe looking for services to help you and your family if you are afraid of coming to the attention of immigration enforcement.

Taking care of your own mental health is an important part of being a supportive parent. After all, if you are struggling or not feeling well yourself, it can be a lot harder to support and take care of others—especially children, who need your consistent care and support. Getting help is not shameful or a sign of weakness. It shows that you are strong enough to fight for your and your family's well-being.

You may be able to access mental health services in a variety of ways, depending on things like your immigration status and where you reside. Consider asking trusted community members, community centers, faith-based organizations, or your immigration legal representative, if you have one, about services that may be available to you. You can also visit the HealthCare.gov website for information on [health coverage for immigrants](#).



Learn More: Finding Mental Health Services

Even if you are undocumented or do not have insurance, you may be able to access other forms of mental health or counseling services through resources like community health centers or faith-based organizations. The following resources could be good places to start looking.

Find a referral through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' [National Helpline](#).

These services can help you find affordable or free health care in your community, including referrals to mental health services, whether or not you have insurance and regardless of your immigration status:

- [Free Clinic Directory](#)
- [Health Center Program](#)
- [National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics](#)

Mental Health for Immigrants: Taking Care of Yourself & Loved Ones, on the [Informed Immigrant](#) website, has tips and resources to help immigrants learn about mental health and find services, regardless of their immigration status.

Refugees who have experienced violence, trauma, natural disasters, or other traumatic experiences may have [specific mental health needs](#). Here are some good places for those with refugee status to start looking for mental health services:

- Contact information for your [State's refugee health coordinator](#) and an interactive [map of refugee resettlement resources and contacts](#) (Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [Resources for Torture Survivors](#) (Center for Victims of Torture)
- [Domestic Healing Centers](#) (HealTorture.org)
- [FindHello](#) (free app available in multiple languages from USAHello containing information about physical and mental health care, legal help, resettlement services, jobs, English classes, and more)

YOUR CHILD'S WELL-BEING AFTER IMMIGRATION

Even though children often adapt to life in a new country more quickly than their parents, they can still have a hard time during and after such a big life change. Regardless of your family's reasons or circumstances for coming to a new country, the immigration experience can affect [your children's mental health](#) in many ways. Immigration can also affect children in ways that are different than how it may affect adults.

Many times, children do not have much say in a family's decision to leave their country. They are pulled away from the life they know and must leave behind their friends, other family members, and school. Sometimes, they may have been separated from their parents or caregivers. For example, a parent may have resettled in the new country first before being reunited with the rest of the family. Or children may arrive first and resettle in the new country by themselves before being reunited with parents—sometimes after many long years. These experiences can lead to feelings of anxiety, loss of control over their own lives, and even depression.

Trying to fit into a new community, learning a new language, and dealing with negative experiences like racism can also affect a child's well-being. It's important to be sensitive to the difficulties your child may face due to resettlement. This may be especially true for children who had a difficult journey to resettlement; children who experienced violence, natural disasters, or other traumatic experiences in their home country; or children who were separated from their parents or families because of immigration or deportation.

Not every child who has come from difficult circumstances will have symptoms of trauma. All children are different and may experience and cope with traumatic events in different ways. According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), signs of trauma in children can vary from child to child and depending on their age. **General signs of trauma that can occur at any age include the following** (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.):

- Stomachaches or headaches
- Crying, fear, or anxiety
- Sadness or hopelessness
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Difficulty managing emotions or behaviors

Very young children may do things like wet their beds, suck their thumbs, or have temper tantrums or aggressive behavior. Older children and teenagers may feel angry or sad, have trouble at school or with their peers, or be afraid of being separated from parents or bad things happening (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Here are a few things you can do to help your child:



Talk to your child and ask them regularly about how they are doing (at home, in a new neighborhood, at school), how they are feeling, and what they are struggling with. Be patient with them if they aren't ready to talk. Let them know that you are always there to support them when they are ready to share with you.



Talk to your child's teachers and other caring adults in their life about what they may be seeing. Other adults that know and care about your child—like teachers, coaches, friends' parents, other family members—may be able to offer insight from another perspective.



Learn about bullying and how to get help for your child. [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) has information from government agencies on how to prevent bullying and cyberbullying. [Bullying & Discrimination Resources for Newcomer Youth](#), from BRYCS, has resources for children, parents, and other community members about bullying issues and how to prevent bullying.



Look for mental health services if your child is struggling or showing signs of trauma. Mental health professionals can help your child understand their feelings and learn ways to cope. They could also help you understand what your child is going through and how to help them. The mental health services available to your child can depend on factors like whether you have insurance, where you live, and your child's immigration status. **You could start by finding out if your child's school offers student counseling or if they could refer you to other services in your community.**



Learn More: Child Trauma

Below are more resources that can help you understand what your child might be feeling and how to help them heal from trauma.

For parents and caregivers:

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#) (available in English and Spanish from Information Gateway)
- [Understanding Trauma: What to Expect When You Are Reunited With Your Child](#) (available in English and Spanish from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
- ZERO to THREE's information to help children with disaster-related trauma:
 - [Shelter From the Storm: A Parent Guide](#) (available in English and Spanish)
 - [Shelter From the Storm: Tips for Parents and Caregivers of Babies and Toddlers](#) (available in English and Spanish)

For parents and caregivers to share with children:

- *Cecilia and the Long Walk*, a children's story and coloring book by Julie Ribaudó, Sara Stein, and Paige Safyer (available for free download in [English](#) and [Spanish](#), or via audio recording in [English](#) and [Spanish](#))
- [Once I Was Very Very Scared](#), an illustrated children's story by Chandra Ghosh Ippen (available for free download in multiple languages)

PROTECTIVE FACTORS: YOUR FAMILY'S STRENGTHS

All families have certain strengths, called [protective factors](#), that they can rely on when life gets hard. Like an umbrella, protective factors can help shield your family and keep them safe and healthy during stressful or difficult times. Parents who build up protective factors in their daily lives may find it easier to access resources, supports, or coping strategies to help them parent effectively, even under stress.

You already have some of these protective factors within you. Parents and families that leave their home countries to resettle in a new country often have amazing reserves of strength and determination. Resettling in new country requires a willingness to work toward a better future for yourself and your family. It can mean reaching out to create new social connections and communities of support. These qualities can help your family stay strong and united as you make your way together in your new home.

But a big life change like living in a new country can also make it harder to hold onto and build on your family's strengths. You may need some extra support from your family or community.



The following sections describe **six key protective factors** that can help provide support and stability when your family needs it most. Think about how each protective factor is represented in your life and what kind of help you might need to make each factor stronger for yourself and your family.

It may be helpful to talk to your family members or other trusted adults and community members about your family's protective factors and the kinds of help you might need. If your family is involved with the child welfare system and working with a child protective services caseworker, consider talking to your caseworker about the areas where you might need extra support and how they can help you find that support. Find more information for immigrant and refugee families involved with the child welfare system in [Guidance for Immigrant and Refugee Families: The Child Welfare System](#).



The resources at the end of this factsheet can help you learn more about protective factors and answer some of the questions you will see in the following sections.

NURTURING AND ATTACHMENT

When parents and children feel compassion and warmth for each other, parents are better able to provide positive parenting and support the healthy physical, social, and emotional development of their children.

All children, from babies to teenagers, need to know they are loved and supported. It's how they learn to bond with and trust people—from their parents and caregivers to their future relationships with others. But there are different ways of expressing love and support. These ways can vary not only from person to person but also between cultures and generations. Some people may express love verbally—for example by saying "I love you" or "Good job!" Others might do things like make someone a special meal or fix a family member's broken toy.



ASK YOURSELF: *How are love and support expressed in your family? How do you make sure your children understand that you love and support them?*

KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Parents who understand how children typically grow and develop can provide an environment where children can live up to their potential.

As a parent, you have a unique knowledge of your child and their wants and needs. But it's important to remember that no parent can know everything there is to know about raising children. A big life change like immigrating to another country can affect your family in ways that can make it hard to figure out the best ways to parent your child. Your child's behaviors and needs may change in ways you don't understand, or you may have a hard time adapting your parenting style to a new culture.



ASK YOURSELF: *Where do you go when you have questions about parenting? Are there trusted and knowledgeable people in your life that you can turn to for support or if you have parenting questions? (For example, family members, teachers, friends, books, family doctor)*

PARENTAL RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to cope with and recover from life's challenges, whether they are smaller everyday stresses or a bigger life crisis. Resilient parents have a positive attitude, are creative problem solvers, effectively address challenges, and less often direct anger and frustration toward their children.

Parents who are settling into a new community have a lot of additional stress on top of the usual challenges of raising children. An important part of building your resilience is taking care of yourself so you have the strength and energy to take care of your family. It also means asking for help when you need it—whether it's help finding services like child care or health care or finding a trusted person to talk to when you are worried.



ASK YOURSELF: *What are some things you can do to take care of yourself and manage stress?*

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Parents with strong social connections and a community of support may find it easier to care for their children and themselves. Trusted and caring family friends can offer parents encouragement and assistance as they face the daily challenges of raising a family.

It can be hard for immigrant and refugee families to find and develop supportive social connections in their new homes. Reaching out to your community and meeting new people may feel difficult, but there are many ways to build your social connections. For example, there may be groups on social media platforms (like Facebook or [Meetup](#)) for newly arrived people from your country, or there may be cultural community centers and faith-based centers in your area that might host family-friendly events.



ASK YOURSELF: *Who do you already have in your circle of support? What groups or organizations in your family's life could help you grow your support circle? (For example, faith communities, schools, workplaces, community centers)*

CONCRETE SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Parents who can provide basic resources, such as food, clothing, housing, transportation, and access to essential services like child care and physical and mental health care, are better able to ensure the health and well-being of their children.

There is no shame in looking for help to make sure your family's needs are met. All families need help sometimes. Immigrant and refugee families may need guidance to know what kinds of resources and assistance are available and how to access them. Your family's eligibility for services could also depend on your immigration or refugee status.



ASK YOURSELF: *Are there any basic needs that your family has trouble meeting? Who could you ask for help in finding services and resources to meet these needs? (for example, trusted loved ones and community members; church, temple, mosque, or other faith-based groups; your child welfare caseworker)*

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

Parents who help their children develop the ability to positively interact with others, control their behaviors, and communicate their feelings are more likely to raise children who have positive relationships with family and friends. Helping your child develop good social and emotional skills can also strengthen your parent-child bond.

The immigration or refugee experience can affect a child's social and emotional well-being in many ways—both positive and negative. For example, learning a new culture, language, and ways of life could help teach your children to adapt to different situations and develop coping skills that can help them throughout their lives.

But it could also challenge them in ways that may negatively affect their behavior; the way they communicate; or the ways they relate to their parents, other family members, or people their own age. It's important to be aware of how your children are managing a big change like living in a new country.



ASK YOURSELF: *Does it seem like your children are having a hard time in particular areas or aspects of their life? Are you able to communicate openly and lovingly with them about any difficulties?*



Learn More: Protective Factors

Information Gateway has many resources that talk more about protective factors and how parents can develop and strengthen protective factors in their family's everyday life.

- [Protective Factors Conversation Guides](#) (available in English and Spanish): **These guides provide a place for you to write down and think about ways to strengthen the protective factors in your own life.** You can use them in your conversations with your family, loved ones, or caseworker so that together you can build on the strengths your family already has and find ways to get help in the areas you need it most.
- [Protective Factors Tip Sheets](#) (available in English and Spanish): **This series offers tips for parents and caregivers about specific parenting issues** like feeding your family, managing stress, bonding with your baby, dealing with temper tantrums, connecting with your teen, and many more.
- [Factores de protección para una familia fuerte \(Protective Factors for a Strong Family\)](#) (available in Spanish only): This factsheet gives **detailed descriptions of each of the six protective factors, advice on how parents can strengthen each factor, and resources to help parents and families** get the help they need to grow stronger together.

CONCLUSION

Resettling in a new country presents many challenges, and some can be difficult to overcome without a little help. All families need help sometimes. But immigrant and refugee families may face additional challenges and need specific kinds of help to make sure their children are safe and their family stays united.

Learning about parenting in the United States, being open to different ways of parenting, and asking for help when you need it can make your family's transition a little easier. It's most important to remember that you and your family have inner strengths that can help you grow stronger together, no matter where you live.

REFERENCE

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *Refugee trauma: Effects*. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/refugee-trauma/effects>

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