

Dear foster caregivers of immigrant infants and young children,

You have a daunting task. You are charged with helping a young, frightened child make sense of the incomprehensible...the sudden loss of a parent(s). We offer a perspective on what the child in your care might need, in hopes that you will be able to help them cope with the trauma of separation that they are enduring. We offer this perspective with the full awareness that you have already likely been a parent, and have empathy and compassion for the profound sadness and fear the child in your care is likely enduring. We hope a few simple strategies will help you feel confident in assisting the child entrusted to you.

From birth, children's brains are wired to develop their strongest bonds with their primary caregivers. Over 60 years of research has demonstrated that threats of or actual loss of that caregiver, especially after 6 months of age, creates a toxic stress response in young children that is likely to negatively impact their mental and physical health for the rest of their lives. When a young child is separated from the person who they have come to rely on to know their moods, their needs, and their routines, it is disruptive and alarming to them. Young children show their distress and fear in a variety of ways, some which are familiar to adults, some not. They may be excessively clingy, may cry readily, resist your attempts to comfort them, throw temper tantrums at the slightest provocation and not eat or sleep well (or may eat or sleep too much). Young children placed with strangers often lose recently acquired skills, such as toileting and communication. As an adult, it may be confusing for you to attempt to meet the needs of a young child, only to be rendered helpless or ineffective. This may be very different than parenting your own children. We encourage you to hang in there...to allow yourself to imagine the world from their eyes, and think about what you might need if you were in their shoes.

Imagine that you have taken a long, tiring walk with your partner. By the end of the end of the walk – which you did not ask to take – you are hungry, weary and irritable. The only motivation for this long, exhausting walk, is that your partner has asked you to accompany them and told you that it is for the best...that you will be happier and safe at the end of this walk. But at the end of the walk is a uniformed person who creates a look of fear on your partner's face. Before you have a chance to comprehend what is happening, you are escorted away from your partner, with no explanation of why, or when you will see them again. You have no idea where you are, since you trusted your partner to guide you, and even worse, the stranger either does not speak your language, is silent about what is happening, or tells you that you must not make a fuss or you will never see your partner again. What would you be feeling? What would you need? Who would you need? What would alleviate your distress and fear?

You may find this depiction overly dramatic, but from a child's perspective, the sudden loss of a known caregiver *is* traumatic. We hope the tips below will give you words and ideas to help the child who now very much needs your kind strength to help them manage their fear.

What You Can Do:

Provide S.A.F.E. Communication

Safety — emphasize your role in keeping the child safe until they are with their parent again.

For babies, being a reliable source of soothing and comfort, through holding, rocking, singing and staying with them — even when they are inconsolable — lets them know that they are safe. For older infants and young children, let them know that their mamá/papá loves them but is unable to care for them right now. Help them to understand that you will take care of them, you will feed them, rock and soothe them when they have scary dreams, and that you know how frightening this is. Touch and physical affection is culturally appropriate in Hispanic culture, so try to move at the child's pace to offer it. In additions, you might say simple things like:

“This is really scary and I am here to keep you safe”

“Sé que esta situación puede darte mucho miedo, pero quiero que sepas que yo te voy a cuidar”

“I care about you and I will keep you safe”

“Me importas y yo te voy a cuidar”

“You really want your mom and dad ... I know you miss them. I am here to protect you”

“Quieres a tus papis y sé que los extrañas mucho. Yo te voy a proteger”

“I don't speak Spanish and I want to understand what you are feeling and needing”

“No hablo español y quiero entender lo estás sintiendo y necesitando”

Acceptance — know that you can be the best caregiver and yet you are not who the child wants...they want and need their parent. Their rejection of you is not personal and is no reflection on your skills or competence as a caregiver.

Similarly, these children are doing their best to cope and adapt to their new circumstances. Accepting their grief and confusion may be difficult and frustrating at times, but it is what they need from you right now.

Feelings — Put into words their feelings of fear, anger, sadness and confusion. *You will not make a child feel worse by acknowledging their negative feelings.* When we can share our feelings with another, they often lessen... it is a bit like chewing on a piece of food until it is small enough to swallow...when feelings are acknowledged they don't get stuck in our throat or body. Tell them repeatedly that what is happening is not their fault and that there are many adults working hard to fix what has happened. Reinforce that their mama and papa love them and would be with them if they could.

Expression — Help your child put into words their story...help them tell a story (or tell them the attached story) of when they lost their parent and what is happening now. When you know what will happen next, keep them informed. When children have a story about their experience, it helps them cope. You can also play games like peek-a-boo and hide-n-seek to help them manage the sudden loss and uncertainty about the future.

Young children that do not have the language skills to communicate their emotions verbally will often use play to express their feelings and make meaning of their experiences. If possible, provide toys and drawing or painting supplies to help them process what has happened to them in a healthy way, instead of keeping it all inside. Observing how children play can also help you understand more of what is going on in their minds even with a language barrier.

Music can be another point of connection for you and your foster child. If you have access to the Internet, finding Spanish language lullabies or child-friendly songs may induce feelings of familiarity and comfort. If Spanish songs are unavailable, any type of music can be soothing at times when words cannot.

Some suggestions for artists that the children may know that can be found on YouTube:

Soft and soothing:

1. <https://youtu.be/5gCcYP7rvil>
2. <https://youtu.be/jjpO218vDZM>

More upbeat but favorites of kids from Mexico:

1. Cri-Cri (search Cri-Cri canciones infantiles)
2. Tatiana (search Tatiana canciones infantiles)

Communication - The current task may feel even more daunting because of a language gap between you and your child, which likely feels frustrating for both of you. You can help your foster child to feel safe even if spoken language is not shared. Just being with the child in a calm and present way is very powerful. Hugs and physical comfort, offered at the child's pace, can be soothing. Play can be a way to join together and is a universal language. Simple body gestures can also help facilitate communication around basic needs. Also consider just speaking or singing softly and soothingly in English when you're with your foster child, letting them hear kindness in your voice.

If you have access to a phone app like Google Translate, that can be helpful. In addition, here are some translations for words to communicate basic needs:

To inquire if the child is hungry you might say the word for **food**, “**comida**” and gesture as if you were putting food in your mouth with your hands.

“**Bebida**” means “**a drink**” and could be said to inquire whether the child is thirsty. Likewise, simulate drinking with your hands to facilitate understanding.

Bathroom is “**baño**”. You might take the child to the bathroom and say “**baño**”.

“**Dormir**” is **to sleep**. Putting your palms together and resting your head on the back of one of them may be a hand gesture that your child understands.

Young children can recover from prolonged separation and loss by helping them to feel SAFE. With your patience, compassion and supportive presence, you are helping a child cope until their parent returns, and you can help them be ready to receive their parent and regain a sense of trust in their world. We are thinking about you, and so hope that you feel the care and concern of others as you help these young children in such a time of toxic stress and trauma.

We are thinking of you,

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