

Dear Colleague,

You are working to reunite families who have been through so much. The pain they have endured is tremendous, and the task you have helping them to reunite is immense. The children, especially young children, do not understand what has happened to them and as such, may show anger and other indicators of their trauma as they reunite with their parents. The following information may help you in supporting these families as they begin to heal. **Here is some language you can share with parents as you help them and their children cope:**

Since their birth, you have been everything to your child. They have depended on you to help them feel safe and taken care of. When your young child was separated from you, it was scary to them. Young children show their distress and fear in a variety of ways. Here are some ways your child might show you how upset they have been. They may:

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| <i>*be more clingy</i> | <i>*cry easily and for no “real” reason</i> |
| <i>*push you away when you try to help them</i> | <i>*throw temper tantrums easily</i> |
| <i>*become aggressive with you and others</i> | <i>*bite, pinch, and hit when frustrated</i> |
| <i>*not eat well or eat too much</i> | <i>*not sleep well or sleep too much</i> |
| <i>*“shut down” and seem lost in their own world</i> | <i>*have lost skills, such as toileting and talking</i> |

You did not create this situation, and this is not your fault, but your young child does not know that: you are so powerful in their eyes that they may assume that you chose to leave them, or that they did something wrong to make you leave. You will often, unfortunately, become the target of their anger. Here are some ways that you can help your child regain his/her trust in you that their world is safe again.

Safety – keep stating your role in keeping your child safe. Let them know that you understand that they did not feel safe while they were away from you but remind them that you are here now and don’t plan on leaving again. Here are some simple phrases that might help you communicate this to your child:

- *“It was really scary when I was gone and now I’m here with you”*
- *“I will always work my hardest to find you”*

For babies, soothing and comfort, through holding, rocking, singing, and staying with them lets them know that they are safe. Even if they don’t stop crying continuing to do these things helps them to know that they are safe. For older infants and young children, let them know that you love them and that you understand they were very frightened when they didn’t know where you were. 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 all has been. Keeping routines, as much as possible, such as morning and bedtime songs and rituals will give your child a sense of order and may help them begin to feel the world is predictable again.

Acceptance – know that even when you are trying to reassure your child they might be angry at you. Their anger at you is not personal. When we have been very frightened, we tend to take out our anger on the people we love most. It might be uncomfortable, sad, confusing, and make you angry when you feel that your child is angry at you. You are probably feeling angry and powerless too when you think of these past experiences. We hope you can find ways to stay patient with yourself and your child as you begin to cope with all that you have been through. There is no shame in needing support for yourself, as well. Be mindful that you have also gone through something terrifying, and things that once felt easy might feel difficult.

Feelings – Put their feelings of fear, anger, sadness, and confusion into words. You will not make a child feel worse by saying 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 has happened is not their fault and that you were thinking about them all the time that you were apart. You might say things like:

- “It was very scary when you could not find me”
- “It is okay to be angry with me”
- “What happened was not your fault”

Expression – Help your child put their story into words ...help them tell a story (or read to them the attached story) of when they lost you and what happened. It helps children to cope when they have a story to help them understand their experience. You can also play games like peek-a-boo and hide-n-seek to help them manage the sudden loss of you and begin to know that you really are back. In this way you are showing them that you are there to protect them. They may need to tell you their story over and over again. That is normal. Each time they tell it and you reassure him/her that you understand they were scared, and that you found them, it will help reduce their fear.

Young children will often use play to express their feelings when they do not have words to communicate their emotions verbally. Let them draw or tell stories to help them tell you what has happened to them. This helps them to cope with what has happened instead of keeping it all inside. Seeing how children play, and what they draw, can also help you understand more of what is going on in their minds. Music can be another point of reconnection for you and your child. Singing some of your favorite songs to them or with them might help them remember happier times.

Communication - Just being with your child in a calm way is very powerful. Extra hugs and physical comfort can be soothing, and your child may need a lot of it right now, even though at times they may reject it because they are too angry and confused about not knowing how to find you. Don't let their anger stop you from providing comfort. Also consider just speaking or singing softly and soothingly. Letting your child know that you are big and strong enough to hear how sad, confused, and frightened they have been can be so, so reassuring. Now is not the time to punish “bad” behavior but to help children put their angry, confused feelings into words.

Young children can recover from being separated from their parents by helping them to feel SAFE again. That will be challenging for many parents who are themselves traumatized. Being that calm person when they have been traumatized is so much to ask of them. We hope this information helps you help them in this important time of reunification. They will need your kind, calm presence. We know this won't be easy for you either. Please feel free to reach out to Separatedchildren2018@gmail.com if we can provide additional support and resource.

We are thinking of you,

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