



TRAUMATIC SEPARATION AND REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT CHILDREN: TIPS FOR CURRENT CAREGIVERS

The relationship with a parent is critical to a child’s sense of self, safety, and trust. Separations from parents and siblings—especially under sudden, chaotic, or unpredictable circumstances such as those related to war, refugee, immigration, or detention experiences—may lead children to develop depression, anxiety, or separation-related traumatic stress symptoms. The tips listed here will help address the needs of children who have experienced traumatic separation.

I want you to know that:	You can help me when you:
I might be feeling frightened, confused, and tired. I had a long journey where I might have been exposed to difficult and scary things.	Speak to me in a calm voice, in my own language. Be patient, follow my lead, and help me by taking care of my immediate needs.
I don’t understand why my family has been separated. At times, I may even blame myself for being separated from my parents, and I may feel anxious, sad, or depressed.	Help me understand that the separation was not because of anything that I did or did not do. Find out what I know about why the separation happened and correct inaccurate information.
I’m worried about what will happen to me, about my own safety and the safety of my family.	Help me find out what is going on with my family members. Help me have ongoing contact with them, ideally in person, but if not, by phone or video conferencing.
I may have had traumatic experiences before I was separated from my family, like gang, domestic, or sexual violence, in addition to war, refugee, immigration, and detention experiences. I might not trust authority figures because of my past experiences.	Understand that my parents wanted me to feel safe, but because I am not with them I may feel very unsafe now. Keep in mind that many things may remind me of being separated from my family and of my past traumas as well.
I may have scary thoughts or nightmares about being separated from my family, or my current safety, or my past traumatic experiences. Or I may try hard to not think about my family or being separated from them because it hurts too much.	Reassure me that I am safe here. Ask what will help me feel safe (e.g., helping me contact my parent or other family members, keeping me with my siblings if they are here, talking to me in my own language, letting me keep my clothes or other objects that remind me of my family and are comforting).
As an infant or toddler, I may show distress through problems with eating or sleeping, not being able to soothe myself, or appearing withdrawn or unresponsive when you try to comfort me.	Comfort me when I cry. Know that it often helps to hug me, rock me to sleep, sing softly to me, or read me stories. If I don’t want to be hugged, please know that it still may help me if you are near.
As a school-aged child, I might miss my parent and cry for them, or I might withdraw and not speak at all. I might act like I’m a younger child, like having toileting accidents, being very clingy, or using baby talk.	Tell me you understand how much it hurts to be away from my parent. Sit quietly with me if I am quiet and withdrawn, and understand that I may be scared and sad. Instead of scolding me for showing younger behaviors, tell me you understand that it is a difficult time. Allow me to have things that comfort me, like stuffed animals, favorite foods, and blankets. Ask me if it’s okay to hug me.



I want you to know that:	You can help me when you:
As a school-aged child or teen, my behaviors—like being unable to stay still, having trouble paying attention, being irritable, or fighting—may be reactions to being separated from my family or to past traumas.	Recognize that these are often traumatic separation symptoms and not just bad behavior that needs punishment. Encourage me to do calming or fun activities like games, sports, drawing, and listening to music, if possible. Understand that I might not want to do some activities or talk about my feelings if I am not ready.
My stomachaches, headaches, trouble eating or sleeping, and other physical problems may be symptoms of traumatic separation.	Help me understand that, when scary things happen, I can have big feelings about them. Talk to me about the connection between upsetting feelings and my body reactions. Help me calm my body through things like slow breathing and muscle relaxation.
I may be irritable, angry, or get into fights.	Understand that I may feel angry and helpless about what has happened to my family. Help me find words to express my feelings. Acknowledge that I have lots of reasons to be angry, and that words are better than behaviors that may make me feel bad.
Even though I appreciate your care, my own family is still very important to me, and staying connected to my family, culture, race, ethnicity and history is important.	Help me stay connected with my family and culture, even if I seem to be connecting well to you. Don't talk about my family in negative ways, even if I seem mad at them for the separation. Ask me about the foods I like and the traditions that matter to me.
I may be scared by what I see in the media about what is happening to families like mine.	Limit my access to media viewing about current events, and be available to answer my questions. But understand that I am desperate to have genuine information about what is happening, and do your best to keep me informed.

Children who experience traumatic separation can recover with culturally sensitive and developmentally and linguistically appropriate trauma services, including evidence-based trauma treatment. For more information about Traumatic Separation, go to www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief.

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