

Reconnecting Families



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This book is a collaborative effort between the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Northern Virginia and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). FCPS and USCRI welcome and embrace their diverse immigrant and refugee students and families. We appreciate the richness that this diversity brings to our classrooms and community.

The process of parents and children reunifying after years apart can be a difficult one. Parenting is a challenge even without years of separation! The intent of this book is to help children, parents, and sponsors serving a “parent role” build trusting and loving relationships. The book helps parents begin the conversation of discovery. Through activities and discussions parents and children get to know one another again.

The child left behind may harbor angry feelings, effects of traumatic experiences, and confusion upon arriving in the United States.

The parent may experience mixed emotions including guilt, joy, and apprehension. Where do we start to rebuild a family? We start at the beginning...



Mom: **I am so happy. Juan came to live with me.** When I left El Salvador I thought we would be apart for a year. Eight years Juan has lived with my sister.

I have a good job now. I remarried. I have made a home for Juan. Will I recognize him? Will he be as happy as me?

Juan: **All I want to do is go back home to my aunt.** I know I belong with my mother. I know she works hard to give me a better life. But I feel so sad. I have not seen my mother since I was four. How can she love me when she left? How can she love me when she doesn't know me?

There are many reasons people leave their home country. Juan does not remember that he and his mother did not have money for food or clothes. The village gangs forced his mother to pay bribes to leave them alone.

Juan's mother left because she had no choice. She was upset. She cried days before she left. She cried days after. She knew her sister would care for Juan. She knew the money she would send back would help feed him. Clothe him. Educate him.

Her first years in the United States were lonely. She was sad. Life was difficult. She did not have papers. The jobs she took were hard. She was always tired. She saved her money. And now, her firstborn returns to her.

Mom: **I am confused.** I don't know why Juan is sad all the time. He says he misses my sister. He acts like she died! She is fine. I still send her money. Juan should be happy to be with me. With HIS family. He has a father. He has little brothers now. He goes to a good school. All I have done I did for him.

Juan: **I don't belong here.** My mother does not understand me. I miss my aunt. I know she misses me. Will I ever see her again? I don't care about my mother's new family. My mother thinks I should be thankful. I guess I should be. I feel guilty making her angry. Making my aunt sad. I feel as though my heart has been ripped out.

Often children who arrive in the U.S. grieve for those loved ones left behind. This is normal. Grief is an all consuming emotion. Sometimes children will feel ill. There is a sadness and ache for a life that was. Be patient! Everyone needs time to heal. It takes time to accept these changes in their lives. Parents need to accept children's feelings as a way of coping. Be supportive. Be understanding. Above all be loving.

Children, understand that your feelings are normal. Life will get easier. It takes time to adjust to all the changes.



Who is going to give grandma her medication?



Between the ages of 10 to 19 children grow and change. Their bodies and minds are preparing for adulthood. This time of growth is called adolescence. It can be hard to be a teen. Bodies grow quickly. Emotions go up and down. The way teens think and learn changes. A teen new to the country has to adjust to adolescence and to a new home. A new family. A new school. A new language.

Girls enter puberty between the ages of 8 and 13. Boys between 9 and 14. Hormones trigger growth spurts. Girls grow breasts. Boys' voices deepen. Skin may get pimples. Body odor may require teens shower more often. Teens need to use deodorant. Teens become aware of their sexuality.

The teen's brain is still developing! The areas for reasoning and judgment are not yet fully formed. This is why teens sometimes make risky or bad decisions. They don't always think of consequences. They may be impulsive. Using drugs or alcohol can hurt the teenage brain. Teen brains keep growing until the mid-twenties.

A parent may find their teen pull away. Friends become very important, more so when coming to a new town. A new school. Teens want to fit in. This can be hard when they are living in a new place. With a new language. Everything is different than they are used to. During adolescence the teen is developing his identity. He may be moody. He may be self-consciousness. A "rebellious" teen is a child that you can reach a deal with. This is an important time for teens and parents to communicate. Teens need structure. They need clear and consistent guidelines. Now more than ever! Your guidance will help prepare teens for independence.



Active
Loving
Secure

Daring
Friendly
Optimistic

Awkward
Independent
Moody
Resilience

Teenager: Tell your parent how you are different now than when you were younger. What did you like to do as a young child? What do you like to do now?



Mom: **Maria, why don't you talk to me?** Maria, you are not eating. You are not smiling. Are you feeling sad? You are not alone. I am here for you. I want to listen. Tell me what I can do to help.

Maria: **Madre, leave me alone!** How can I tell you I don't like it here? My little brothers tease me. My "new" father doesn't even speak to me. Nothing is like back home.

Mom: **Thank you for trusting me enough to share your feelings Maria.** I will protect you. I love you.

Maria: **My new school is huge.** I can't find my way around. I skip lunch because I don't know how to get my food. I'm cold all the time. Even the kids who speak Spanish call me names. My ESOL teachers are nice. They seem to understand how scared I am.

Mom: **You are a smart and strong girl.** We will get through this together.

It can be difficult for parents and children to communicate. Talking with someone you haven't seen in a long time is hard work! The more you talk the easier it gets.

Children, practice describing how you feel with words. Parents, practice listening without judging and criticizing. This builds trust. Here are some helpful tips:

- Be your true self. Be honest.
- Describe how you feel. Start with the word "I." "I feel ____ when you ____ because ____ ." "I feel angry when you tell me how I should feel. Because you have no idea how I feel."

Or, "I feel frustrated when you don't listen to me. I need you to consider the consequences for your behavior."

Or, "When you shut me out I feel sad because I love you and want to be a part of your life."

- Be patient with each other. Ask questions to make sure you understand what the other person is trying to say.
- Continue to hope and love.

When Camila was 13-years old she left her grandmother in El Salvador.

She made the difficult journey to the United States. Once in the U.S. she reunited with her mother. Camila was angry. She was resentful. Bad things happened to Camila. No one was there to protect her. She didn't listen to anything her mother or stepfather told her. She knew they loved her. She felt emotionally out of control. She was confused.

One night she and her mother argued. Camila went into her bedroom. She slammed the door shut behind her. She lay in bed allowing herself to cry and feel lonely. She slipped her hand under her pillow. She felt something. It was an envelope with her name on it.

She read the letter inside. It was written by her mother. It said, *“Camila, I know it has been difficult. You are in a strange and new country. We haven't been together since you were little. Things were hard for you while I was gone. I couldn't protect you. I know you are scared. You are frustrated. You are angry. What you need to know is that I love you. No matter what. I know I left you. I had to make money to help feed you, clothe you, give you a home. I'm sorry for how you felt when I left. I'm sorry for how you feel now. I am here to help. You can talk to me, or not. You just need to know that I am here for you. You are strong. You are capable. You are loved.”*

Draw or write something you want to tell your child.

Draw or write something you want your parent to know.

Parents, when you talk to your children:

- Choose your battles.
- Listen carefully.
- Try not to judge.
- Acknowledge child's feelings, ideas, or complaints.
- Check that you understand the message by starting with, “I hear you saying...”
- Give your child choices. Allow him to make some of his own decisions. Children learn from their mistakes.
- Choose a good time to talk. When your child seems in the mood to share. Here is an example, “I was concerned about your safety last night. Let's talk about ways you can see your friends without your having to ride your bike at night.”

Kids, when you talk to your parents:

- Be firm only when the issue is real and important to you. Choose your battles.
- Choose a good time to talk to parents. When your parent is not rushing out the door, busy, or already upset.
- Use a respectful tone of voice.
- Be responsible for you own actions.
- Be a good listener.
- Try to understand your parent's feelings. Here is an example, “Mom, there's something really important I need to talk with you about. When is a good time for you to listen to me?”
- Take responsibility for your actions.

When there is something important or difficult to talk about it is important to choose the right time. Keep your body language casual, your voice even and calm. “Choosing your battles” means to make something an issue only if it has a big impact on you, your child, or your family.

What does stress feel like? It can feel different for different people. Children and adults can experience stress. You may feel agitated. You may have a hard time thinking clearly. Your heart races. Your palms sweat. Long term stress can hurt you physically. Long term stress can hurt you mentally. Help reduce the effects of stress:

- Eat healthy food.
- Exercise daily.
- Repeat positive statements to yourself. (“I am ‘fuerte.’” “I can do this.” “Calm down; it will be okay.”)
- Breathe in slowly through your nose. Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

More quick tips to relieve stress:

- Wash your hands. Concentrate on the warm soapy sensation.
- Count backwards from fifty.
- Call someone you like. Tell them you only have one minute to talk and you want to hear something nice.
- Drink a glass of water and count how many times you have to swallow to finish the glass.
- Sing or hum your favorite song.
- Play soccer with a crumpled piece of paper. Use a trash can for the goal.
- Draw a picture of something you like.
- Exercise for one minute. Stretch, dance, walk, run, skip, and bend.
- Take off your shoes and rub the bottoms of your feet.
- Play a game with your brother or sister.

Parents, ask yourself:

What helps me cope with everyday life?

Where do I get my strength?

What are my dreams? Who can help me?

What kind of parent have I been lately?

When I feel stressed, what is most helpful to me?

Are there places in the community where I can find help?

What can I do better?

Have you ever heard the word “resilient?” When a person is resilient she is able to recover quickly from a setback or misfortune. A resilient person heals without hurting themselves. You may have experienced hard times in your life. Even change requires you to be resilient. Reuniting your family takes resilience. It is normal to have mixed feelings. You might be happy about being in the U.S. with your family. You may also be scared. You may be missing your family in your home country.

It is important to take care of yourself. There are things you can do to help make you stronger. Building resilience is not that different than building muscles. Think of a person who wants to start lifting weights. She will begin with 1 pound weights. As she gets stronger she will move up to 3 pounds. Soon she finds 3 pounds too easy. She became stronger.

Build your resilience with:

- Regular exercise or sports
- Healthy eating
- Relax (listen to music, read something funny, practice deep breathing, slowly stretch your muscles)
- Meditate or pray
- Plan ahead (predict what may go wrong and prepare for it by having resources in place)
- Ask for help from your friends or family
- Seek help from community agencies, programs, and churches



Teachers, parents, and caregivers all work to educate a child. In the U.S. parents and teachers are partners. Teachers expect parents to communicate with them. Teachers invite parents to support school activities. Parents should find out what the children are learning. Parents guide their children's learning at home.

One responsibility you have is to send your child to school each day. Parents make sure the child is fed. Is dressed for the weather. Is well rested and ready to learn.

Another job a parent has is to find out what your child is learning. Have high expectations. Talk about it at home. Encourage your child to complete homework. Tell your child to always do his or her best. Keep interesting reading material in the home. Limit your child's television viewing. Offer other activities at home and in the community.

Teachers have many responsibilities. They keep you informed about your child's progress. They have high expectations for your child. Teachers can share ways for you to support your child's learning at home. Teachers can recommend learning activities for the family to do together. Schools should offer information on adult education opportunities. Look into increasing your own knowledge or skill level. Schools often offer parenting classes, English classes, and family fun events at the school. Children who observe their parents continuously learning are encouraged to learn too.

Parent:

- Have I introduced myself to my child's teacher(s)?
- Do I read everything that comes home from the school? If I can't read it, do I request a copy in my language?
- Do I request an interpreter when needed?
- Do I keep track of my child's learning progress?
- Do I talk to my child about his or her school day?
- Do I let my child know my expectations for school, for learning?
- Do I ask my child about his or her homework?
- Is there is a quiet time and space in our home, so my child can study?
- When I can, do I attend special events and parent meetings at the school?

Teenager:

- Do I attend school every day?
- Do I behave in class?
- Do I try to participate in class?
- Do I ask questions when I am confused in class?
- Do I request an interpreter when needed?
- Do I ask for help?
- Is there someone I can talk with that I trust?
- Do I complete my assignments on time?
- Do I share with my parent what I learn in school?
- Do I try my best in school?
- Do I think about what I want to be when I grow up?

Mom, Things To Do Today:

Laundry
Get children up, dressed, fed and ready for school
Make children's lunches
Leave Maria directions for cooking dinner
Job #1
Eat in car
Job #2
Check children's homework
Bathe children and put to bed
Clean kitchen
Lay out children's clothes for next day

Teenager:

The U.S. is nothing like Honduras. There are both good and bad things.
Here is my list:

Home

Walk to school
Lunch at home
Hot weather
Dangerous streets
Lots of friends
Spanish!
Tia's cooking
Teachers who hit

Here

Take bus to school
Eat in noisy cafeteria
Cold weather
No friends
I have to cook
English
Safe
Babysit
Live with mom
Nice clothes

When you first move to a new country there is a period of adjustment. You start to adopt U.S. beliefs, practices, rules, behaviors, and expectations.

It doesn't mean you lose your identity. It doesn't mean you give up things that are important to you. You will always have one foot in your home country and one foot here. You have probably realized there are many rules in the U.S.!

These are some obvious rules:

- Cross the street at a crosswalk
- Pay taxes
- You must be 21 years old to drink liquor

There are also less obvious norms:

- Arrive at meetings and appointments on time (concept of time)
- Leave some space between you and the person you are talking with (respect personal space)
- Spanking children is discouraged (child-rearing practices)
- Arrive at school on time
- Attend school daily
- Raise your hand in class
- Obtain employment authorization in order to work legally

Parent:

- The word “discipline” means “to teach.” Children learn good behaviors. Children model how they act from you.
- Children learn how to behave from the people who raise them. Your style may be different from their last caregiver. Give your children time to learn.
- Set clear rules on your child’s activities. Have reasonable consequences for misbehaviors. Stick to your decision. Be fair.
- Know who your child’s friends are. Know where they “hang out.”
- Meet the parents of your child’s friends.
- Respect your child’s feelings and attitudes. Help him develop self-esteem (feeling good about himself.)
- Be a good role model. Improve your own self esteem.
- Let your child know how important it is to attend school. Learning is a child’s job. More education means higher paying jobs in the future.
- Let your children participate in afterschool programs such as, band, sports, and clubs.
- Give your child attention and time.
- Provide positive feedback when your child does something well.

Teenager:

- Take on some responsibilities at home. Start small and build up to more.
- Respect and follow the family’s rules.
- Choose your friends carefully. Stay away from kids who get into trouble.
- Learn good study habits.
- Study every day, even if you don’t have any homework.
- Read for fun. It helps you learn English.

Answer this question, “When my child is an adult I want him or her to be _____?” All parents want their children to be safe, happy, responsible, and successful. This requires effective parenting at a very young age right through the teenage years.

Since parent and child have not been together for a long time they need to reestablish rules, boundaries, and expectations for behavior. Think of it as a family’s rules and model for love and support.

If you want positive results it requires hard work. No short cuts. The good news is your patience and hard work will be rewarded when your child grows into a stable, happy adult.

1. Read each box below.
2. Circle the things you like to do and the feelings you sometimes have.
3. Share the BINGO game with each member of your family.
4. Each person uses a different color to circle his or her responses. Who circled the same things?
5. Talk about what you have in common. What activities can you plan to do together?

I like to watch movies on TV.	I like to read.	I need to feel safe.	I enjoy playing or listening to music.	I enjoy playing or watching sports.
I enjoy arts and crafts.	I like to learn new things.	I think it is important to always tell the truth.	I think having a good education is important.	I miss many things from my country of birth.
I like to be given choices and not always told what to do.	I believe that my life has purpose.		I go to religious services.	I like to play games.
Learning English is very hard.	Sometimes I feel very sad.	I feel loved.	Sometimes I feel like I don’t belong.	I like a good joke. I enjoy laughing.
I like to attend mass.	I want to earn money.	I am hopeful for my future.	I like animals.	I love to eat food from my country.

The word “mandala” means “circle” in Sanskrit. A mandala represents wholeness. What a wonderful symbol for “family.”

Color this mandala as a family. Each member of the family expresses him or herself. The final picture is the sum of each part. A whole. Coloring is also a good stress reliever. You can locate more mandala designs on the Internet or in a book store.



Family time is a chance to step away from “parenting.” Just have fun with your children! Spend time as a family doing something fun. This helps build positive relationships in your family. This is especially important when your child is struggling or acting rebellious. Even if family time happens only once a week, it helps build a sense of belonging. It may be hard to find time, but your child will benefit from one on one time with you. This feeling “I belong here” can prevent your child from seeking out gangs or other negative influences.

Look at the list below. What would you like to do as a family?

- | | |
|--|--|
| Visit a park | Read a book together |
| Go boating on a lake | Watch a movie |
| Take a trip into the city | Cook a meal |
| Go to a farmer’s market | Do an arts and crafts project |
| Picnic | Listen or dance to music |
| Watch a sporting event at the school or in the community | Put on a show! Act out a favorite story. |
| Look at the night sky for stars and constellations | Go to the movies |
| Walk or jog around the school’s track | Go camping in a tent |
| Go “window” shopping (this is looking without necessarily buying) | Visit the beach |
| Get a free makeover at the cosmetics counter at a department store | Go sledding |
| Swim at the community center | Take photos, make a movie |
| Play “board games” such as Life, Monopoly, Candy Land, checkers, chess | Go out to eat |
| Play charades (act out book, movie, TV show titles) | Ice skating or roller skating |
| | Bowling |
| | Attend an event at your child’s school |
| | Visit the library |
| | Go fishing |

