

## HOW CHILDREN REACT TO TRAUMA

Children's reactions to trauma depend on their age, how much they can understand, whether their development was going well before or whether they have special developmental needs, how many trauma experiences they may have already have been through, and how much support they might have had to feel protected and safe again. These reactions can be very confusing to parents. Remember that they are not doing these things to be bad or disrespectful. They are doing them because their minds and bodies are reacting to trauma in ways they can't control or talk about.

### Some children may:



Have nightmares or trouble sleeping



Fear things that remind them of the separation (sights, sounds, foods, faces, uniforms, etc.)



Be unusually quiet or withdrawn



Startle easily or overreact to things that wouldn't usually bother them.



Be moody or cranky or have lots of tantrums. Fear may come out as aggression



Cling to you OR push you away, even though they desire to be near you

## RESOURCES FOR SUPPORT

### Name of organization

Address and phone number of organization

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## Understanding TRAUMA



## What to expect when you are reunited with your child

## WHO WE ARE

This pamphlet was prepared by mental health professionals to help you, your child and your family recover from the forced separation you have been through. It is created to let you know what to expect as a parent, how to understand reactions from your child that may be confusing or difficult, and how to find help as you and your child readjust to being together again.

## TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

### At home and at the border

You and your child have been through so much already to get to the US border. Some of the experiences you had in your home country, and some of the experiences you had along the way, were probably extremely frightening, that is, *traumatic*, for you and your child. This trauma would have been compounded many times over by your experiences at the border, especially if you were separated from each other. You have gone through a dangerous journey in order to make a better life for yourself, but especially for your children, and now your children have been taken from you.

Because children are so different from grownups, the reactions of your children to trauma will likely be different from yours.

## HEALING

### Things you can do to help you and your child when you're reunited



Give your child as much love and affection as you and they can handle. If it makes them uncomfortable, be patient, and wait until they are ready



Talk with your child honestly about what is happening in words they can understand. Let them know you are doing everything you can to make sure things will be okay



Let children know it IS NOT THEIR FAULT and that sometimes adults need to cry too. Children often work through difficult feelings in play or art so give them the opportunity to do so if possible



Try to keep to a schedule and routine, even if you are not in a home setting. When children know what is going to happen next, they feel safer and more in control



Help them hold onto good memories of your family, your country and your culture by telling stories, playing games, or singing songs that you have enjoyed in the past



Reach out to other available adults for support, to talk and connect. Rest and take care of your body and mind as much as you can. Religion or spiritual traditions may also be a source of comfort

## GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP

In the United States there are systems of mental health and social services for people who have experienced trauma like you and your children. There are therapists who work with children, others who work with adults, and some who work with children and parents together (even infants and toddlers). These services are open to anyone who is having more trouble coping than they can bear, though you may need help to know how to access them.

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*“Look for the helpers. You can always find people who are helping” – Fred Rogers*

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We know that you may have been treated unkindly or unfairly by government agents at the border. You may have even been treated very badly, which can make things feel even more stressful for you. Fred Rogers, an important American who knew a lot about children, used to say: “Look for the helpers. You can always find people who are helping.” There are many people in the United States who want to help, and if you don’t find them at first, keep looking. They will be there.