

USCRI

Strengthening Support for Unaccompanied Children Experiencing Family Separation: Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Practices for Service Providers

USCRI Children's Services
Community Outreach & Education Team

USCRI Programs



**Note: USCRI is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)*

- Policy and Advocacy
- Humanitarian Legal Services
- Anti-trafficking Services
- Refugee Services
- International Programs
- Children's Services

Objectives



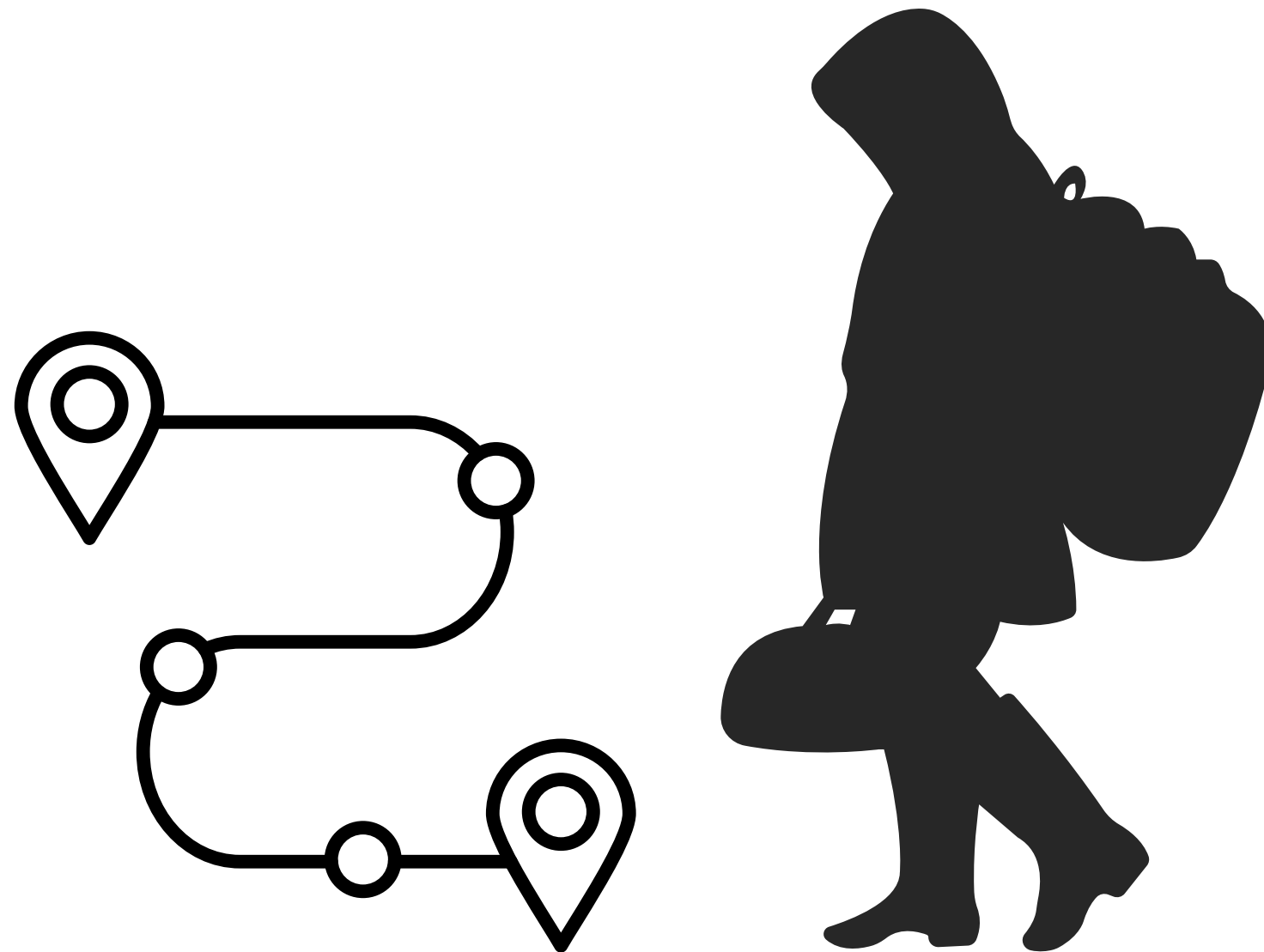
- Provide an overview of unaccompanied children and the impacts of family separation across the pre-migration, migration, and post-migration stages
- Help families navigate reunification using strengths-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches
- Identify the forms and impacts of family separation, trauma, disrupted attachment, and immigration enforcement on children, families, and communities
- Apply strategies to support unaccompanied children through emergency response, community resource connection, and resilience-building

PART I

Understanding Unaccompanied Children and Their Migration Journey

[UC Resource Center: About Unaccompanied Children](#)

Who are Unaccompanied Immigrant Children?



A child under 18 who is apprehended by the Dept. of Homeland Security either within the U.S. or upon entering the U.S. and who is:

- ✓ Without a parent or legal guardian
- ✓ Without lawful immigration status

The majority of unaccompanied children are reunited with a parent or other caregiver (sponsor) after release from government custody.

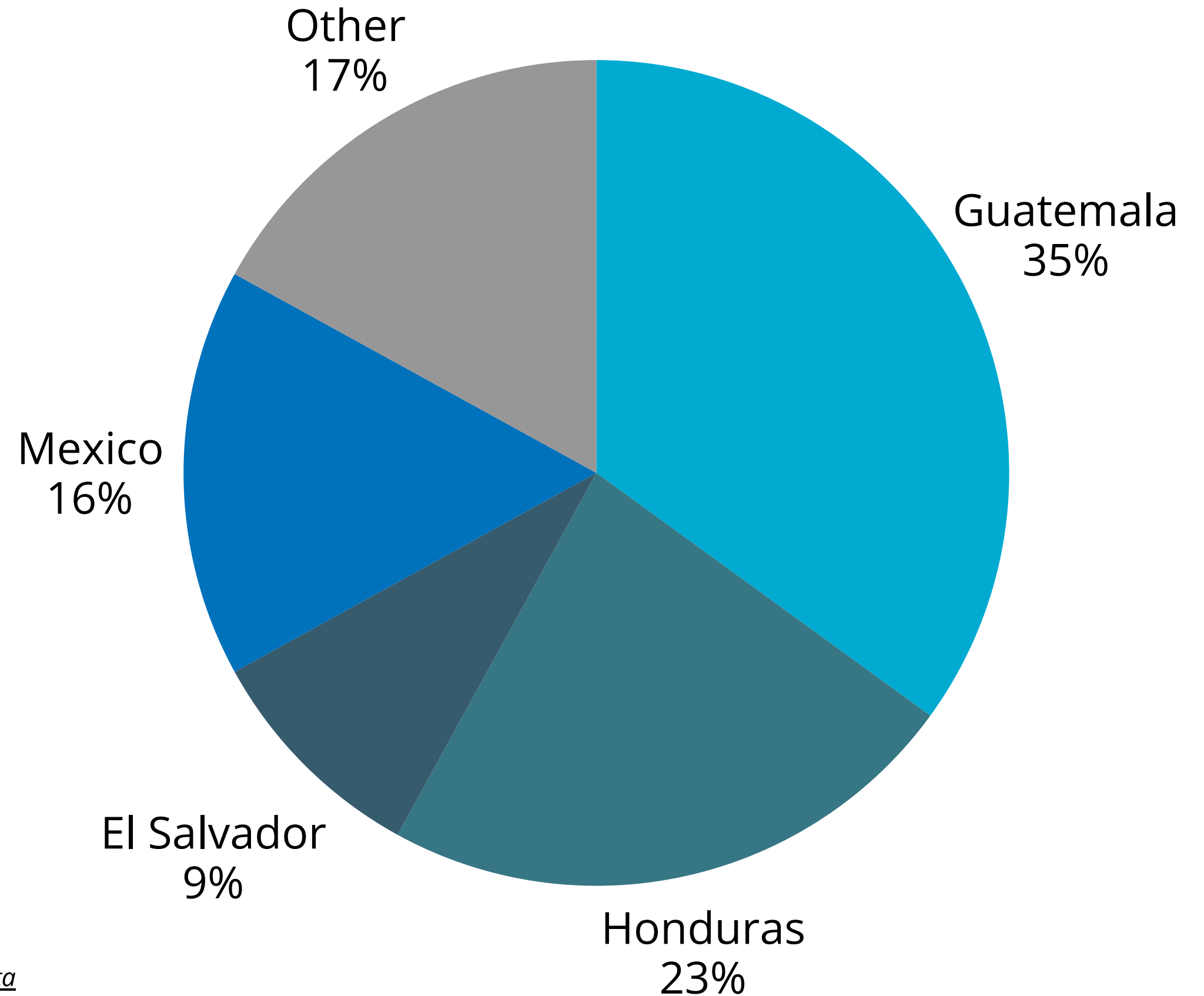
Why are children from Central America and other countries migrating alone?

- ▶▶ Forced recruitment into gangs or organized crime
- ▶▶ To reunite with parents or family members who migrated before them
- ▶▶ Lack of economic and educational opportunities
- ▶▶ Fleeing abuse and/or community violence
- ▶▶ Extreme poverty and climate change
- ▶▶ Political unrest
- ▶▶ Death or loss of a primary caretaker
- ▶▶ Seeking safety



Unaccompanied Children Placed into ORR Custody

FY 2025



Source: [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\) Fact Sheets and Data](#)

ORR Custody, Release, and Reunification



Children are placed in ORR custody within 72 hours of their apprehension by the Dept. of Homeland Security



Once in custody, the ORR case manager works with the child and their family to identify a sponsor in the U.S.



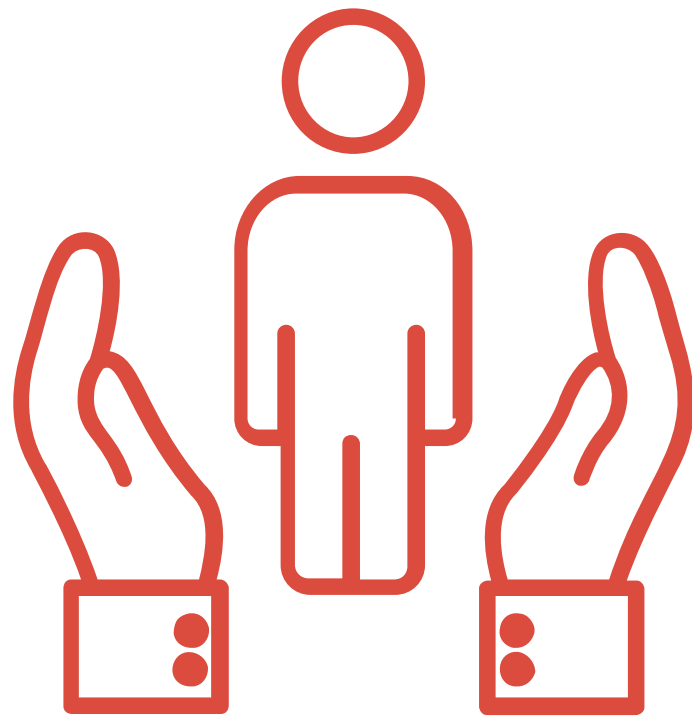
Sponsor vetting process begins, including a home study



If approved, the child is released from ORR care and reunified with their sponsor



After discharge, children qualify for ORR-funded Post Release Services (PRS) to support their transition to their new environment



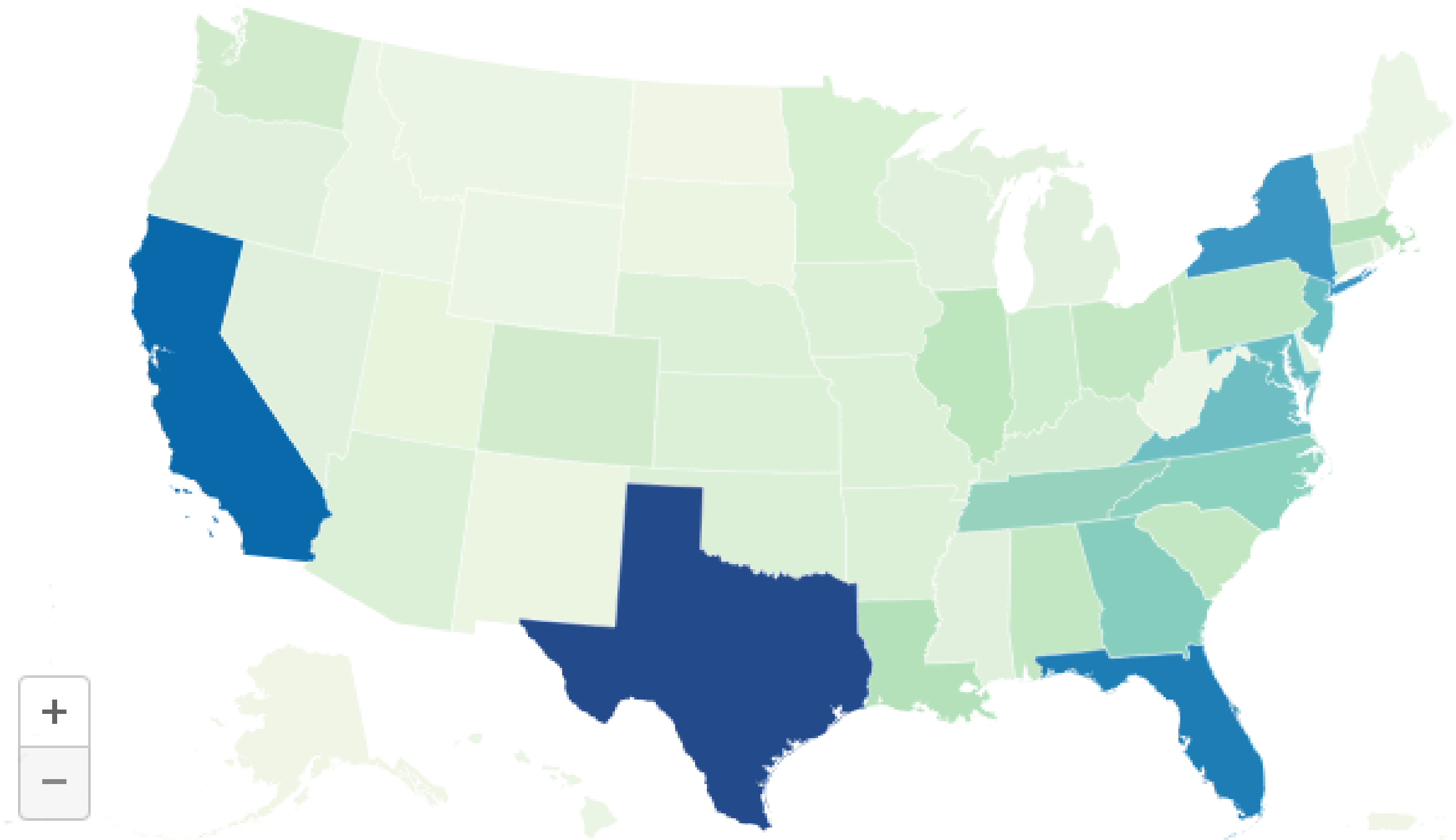
PRS are case management services provided to UCs and their sponsors after the child is released from ORR care.

The PRS worker supports in the areas of:

- Placement/Family Stability & Child Safety
- Education
- Medical Care
- Legal & Immigration
- Mental & Behavioral Health
- Integration & Independence
- Child Trafficking

Primary areas where UCs are released to sponsors

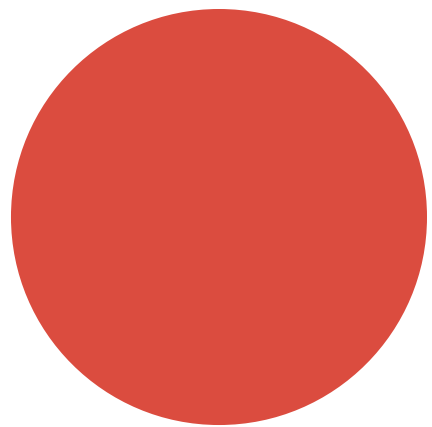
Unaccompanied Children Release Data by State FY15 - FY25*



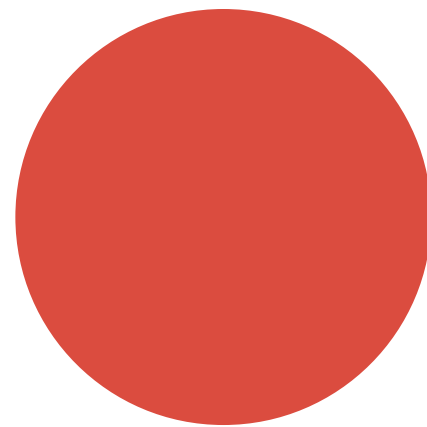
PART II

Loss and Family Separation Pre-, During, and Post-Migration

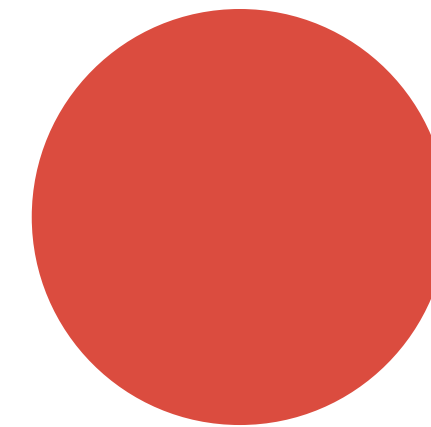
Experiences of Loss and Family Separation



**In Home
Country
(Pre-Migration)**



**During Migration
& In ORR Custody**



**Family
Reunification
(Post-Migration)**

In Home Country (Pre-Migration)

Case Example: Daniel

Daniel, a 9-year-old boy from El Salvador, was raised by his grandmother. His parents migrated to California when he was just 2 years old, fleeing threats from gangs who were attempting to extort his father who owned a local business. Despite the distance, Daniel stayed closely connected to his parents through regular phone calls. They supported him by helping with school decisions and encouraging him to be kind and hopeful. Daniel missed his parents deeply and looked forward to reuniting with them.

At home, Daniel shared warm moments with his grandmother, who often made his favorite dish, tamales. He also enjoyed playing soccer with his cousins at a nearby field.

As he got older, a local gang began targeting Daniel for recruitment. The family made the difficult decision for Daniel and his older cousin to migrate to the U.S. for safety and to reunify with Daniel's parents.



In Home Country / Pre-Migration

Considerations for UCs:

- Separation from parent(s) from an early age
- Inconsistency in caregivers
- Ruptured attachment
- Complex trauma
- Protective factors: cultural identity, community, collectivism



UCs and Transnational Families



“Transnational families are defined as familial groups with members living some or most of the time separated from each other, while nonetheless feeling a sense of collective welfare, unity and familyhood across national borders” (Bryceson 2019).

During Migration & In ORR Custody

Case Example: Daniel

Daniel began his migration journey from El Salvador with his older cousin Jorge (19) after threats from a local gang made it unsafe for them to remain in their community. The boys traveled with a coyote (smuggler) and a group of four other migrants via car, train, and at times on foot. During the journey, they went for several days with limited food after being robbed of their money and possessions.

When they reached the U.S. border after about 15 days, Daniel was separated from the group as he was identified as an unaccompanied child and transferred to an ORR shelter. Once in ORR care, the shelter case manager began working with his parents to start the sponsor application process.



During Migration and In ORR Custody



Considerations for UCs:

- Saying goodbye to loved ones
- Leaving home behind (places, people, culture, food)
- Trauma during journey
- Separation from fellow travelers
- Length of stay in ORR shelter care



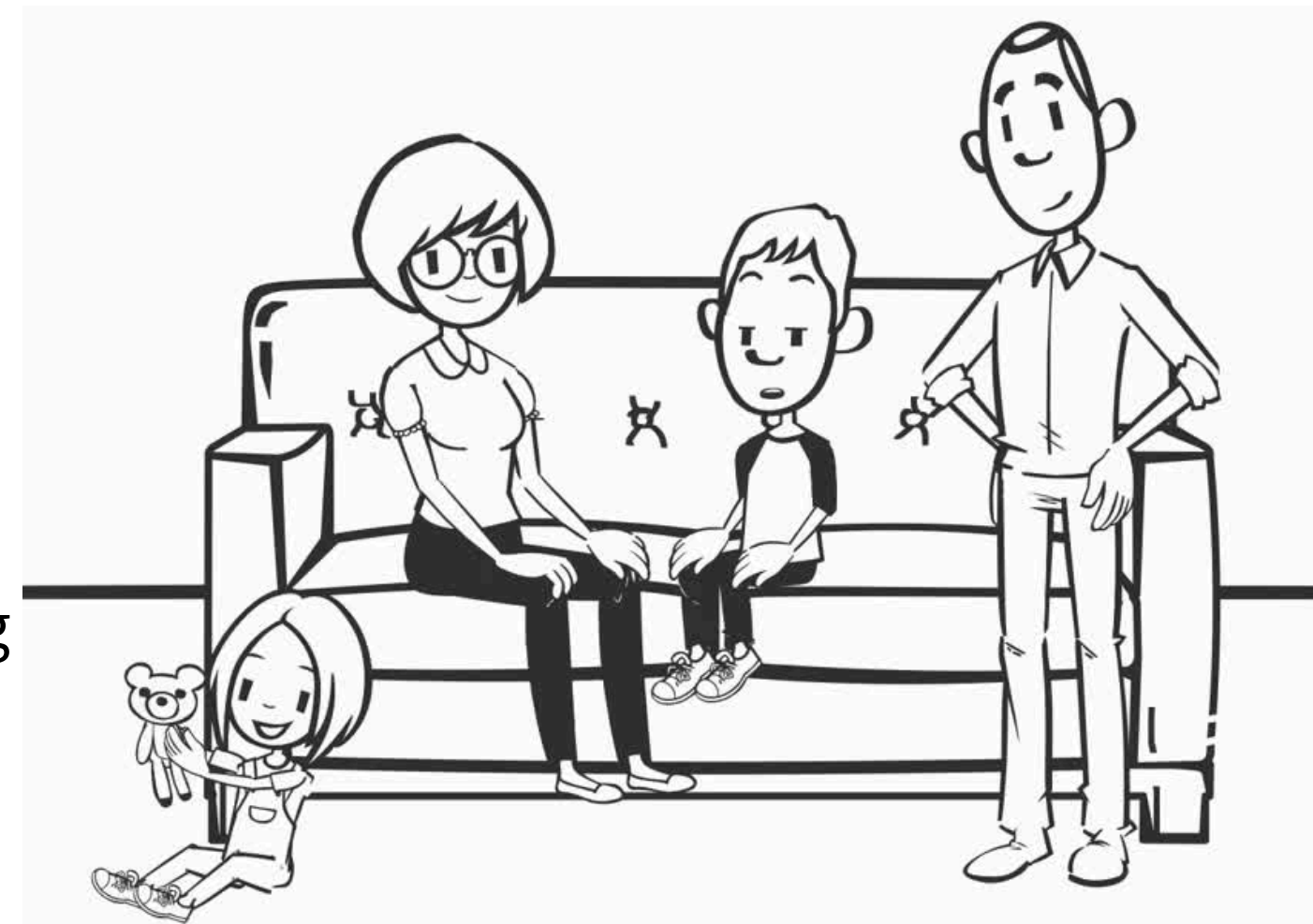
Family Reunification (Post-Migration)

Case Example: Daniel

Daniel's parents completed background checks, DNA testing, a home study, and other assessments as part of ORR's sponsor vetting process. After about three weeks in ORR care, Daniel's mother's sponsorship application was approved and he was reunited with his parents in California.

Daniel and his parents were overjoyed to be together and Daniel was thrilled to meet his little sister for the first time. As time passed, though, Daniel began to have trouble adjusting. He missed his grandmother, friends, and school in El Salvador. He disliked the feeling of being stuck at home and not being able to go out freely to play like he was used to doing in his home country. And he couldn't help but feel resentment related to the attention his parents gave to his younger sister.

Daniel's parents grew concerned about his withdrawal from the family but weren't sure how to help. Fortunately, a Post Release Services worker had reached out to the family shortly after reunification to offer support as they adjusted.



Family Reunification (Post-Migration)



Considerations for UCs:

- Honeymoon period often followed by adjustment difficulties
- Grieving what they left behind
- Expectations don't match reality
- New family members
- Lack of familiarity/trust/connection with caregiver
- Parenting practices
- Placement breakdowns/disruptions





The good news is that **children are resilient** and have innate abilities to recover from their painful past, heal the invisible wounds of trauma, and rebuild their lives. But this will not occur without the perseverance and hard work of good people who care deeply about children.



Omar Reda, MD

PART III

Supportive Strengths-Based Strategies, Trauma
Informed Care, and Culturally Responsive Approaches

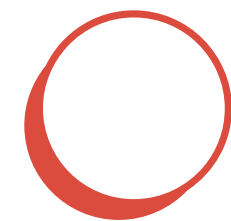


Recognizing Youth Resilience and Promoting Decision Making

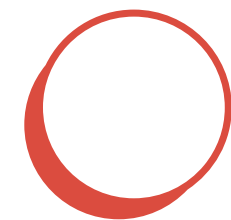


Resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and grow through challenges — shaped by internal strength and supportive relationships.

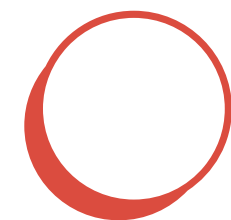
Providers can support youth by:



Promoting decision making and honoring difficult choices youth have already made



Helping youth identify new areas where they can lead their own lives and be the leaders of their own story



Creating a space for youth to share their voice

Supporting Families After Reunification

- **Validate Emotions and Experiences:** *Acknowledge mixed emotions*
- **Encourage Positive Parenting:** *Teach caregivers about nurturing discipline techniques*
- **Prepare Families for Adjustment Difficulties:** *Normalize potential shifts in behavior, emotional distancing, or school difficulties*
- **Maintain Routines and Stability:** *Promote consistent schedules and access to basic needs for a sense of security*
- **Strengthen Support Systems:** *Connect families to community resources, extended networks*
- **Provide Culturally Responsive Ongoing Support:** *Tailor services to family's values, set realistic goals with families, and offer follow-up as needed*



Cultural Considerations for Interacting with UCs and Families



Family dynamics and roles



Barrier related to language, education, and services



Cultural adjustment and expression



Trust, safety, and systems



Culturally Responsive Care



Respect silence and emotional numbing

💬 *How does your body feel when things are difficult?* 💬

Validate and reframe

💬 *"It sounds like your nerves might be connected to feeling overwhelmed or anxious - is that right?"* 💬

Honor spiritual and religious beliefs

💬 *"Are there any spiritual or faith practices that bring you comfort or strength right now?"* 💬

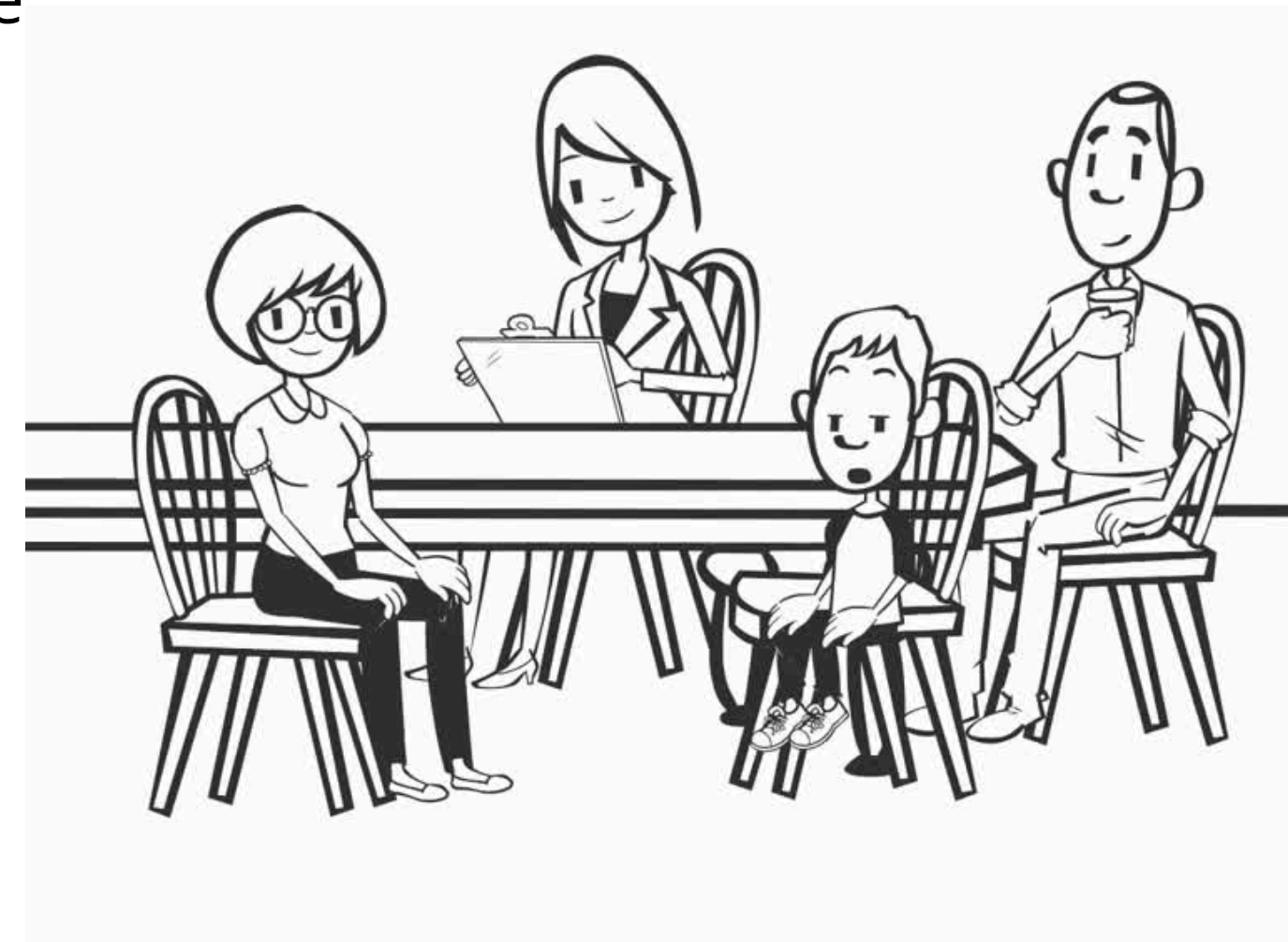
Integrate cultural healing practices

💬 *"Are there remedies or traditions that your family practices that could help you feel better?"* 💬

Case Example: Daniel

Daniel started spending more time with his sister and parents during daily family dinners. The PRS worker talked with his parents about some of Daniel's behaviors, helping them understand how he may have been impacted by their prolonged separation. She encouraged them to keep up routines and educated them on positive parenting strategies like consistent routines, calm communication, and reinforcing positive behaviors.

The PRS worker also suggested therapy to support Daniel's adjustment and emotional health. Daniel and his dad were hesitant about how others in their community might view their participation in mental health services. They were also concerned about being able to get to the appointments and whether the therapist would really understand their culture.



Facilitating Effective Conversations about Mental Health with Newcomer Youth and Families Handout



Facilitating Effective Conversations about Mental Health with Newcomer Youth and Families:

A Guide for Providers

Newcomer youth often face significant stress due to forced displacement and the challenges of resettlement, including cultural, interpersonal, academic, and socioeconomic stressors. Newcomer youth commonly experience shifting expectations and family dynamics that can create tension and conflict within families. While many may benefit from extra support, starting conversations with newcomer youth and families about mental health and well-being can be difficult. Cultural beliefs, past experiences, and stigma may make youth and caregivers hesitant to seek professional help. This guide offers practical tips to help service providers have respectful, culturally responsive conversations about mental health with newcomer youth and their caregivers.



Mental Health Across Cultures

Newcomer youth and families often hold varying cultural beliefs about mental health, including how it is understood, expressed, and treated. Concerns may be viewed through spiritual, moral, or physical lenses and are commonly expressed through physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach pain. Support may be sought through prayer, religious guidance, or traditional healing. Additionally, in many newcomer families' countries of origin, mental health treatment may be limited, or reserved for severe conditions, which can lead to unfamiliarity with services available in the United States.



Stigma may also be significant, with fears of shame, labeling, or community judgment discouraging families from seeking support. As a result, both limited understanding and stigma can create barriers to care. Service providers can help reduce these barriers by approaching conversations with cultural humility, using psychoeducation to explain mental health in accessible and culturally responsive ways, and intentionally using destigmatizing language that normalizes help seeking and frames mental health as a common and treatable part of overall well-being.

Overcoming Stigma Related to Mental Health

Overcoming stigma around mental health will take time and patience, but your approach to the topic and the language you use with newcomer youth and families can foster greater openness. The strategies and sample language below offer practical guidance on how this may sound in practice.

Focus on the youth's functioning and avoid labels and clinical terms

✓ SAY
"I've noticed you have been really tired lately and you don't seem like yourself. You seem to get frustrated easily and haven't been going to play soccer as much as you used to."

✗ INSTEAD OF "I think you have PTSD."

Normalize and validate the youth's experiences.

✓ SAY
"You have been through so much. It makes sense you would feel angry sometimes. Life in the U.S. can be very hard. I know many other teens in your situation who have felt the same way."

✗ INSTEAD OF "Don't worry. Everything will be okay."

Align with the youth's and family's goals.

✓ SAY
"I know you have a dream of going to college, but right now your lack of sleep is affecting your schoolwork. It's important to get some help, so you can accomplish your goals."

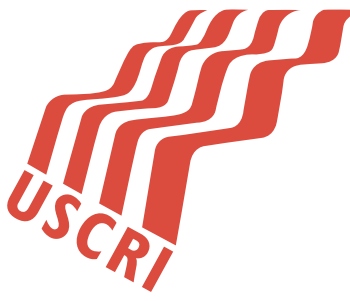
✗ INSTEAD OF "You need mental health treatment."

Provide psychoeducation about mental health, the impacts of trauma, and the purpose and benefits of counseling.

✓ SAY
"Difficulty sleeping and nightmares can be signs that our body and mind are still impacted by scary things that happened to us in the past. In the U.S., there are counselors that can help you heal from the things that happened in the past and learn new skills to stay calm and sleep better."

✗ INSTEAD OF "The doctor will give you a pill to sleep."

Barriers to Accessing Services



Transportation



**Fear of systems
involvement**



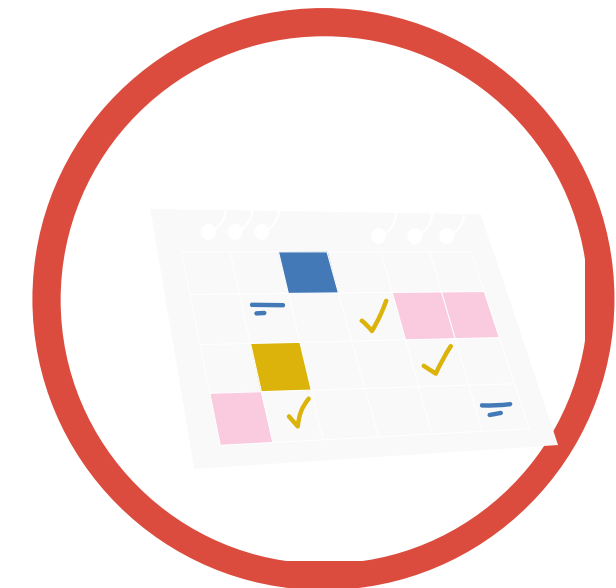
**Finances / lack of
insurance**



Stigma



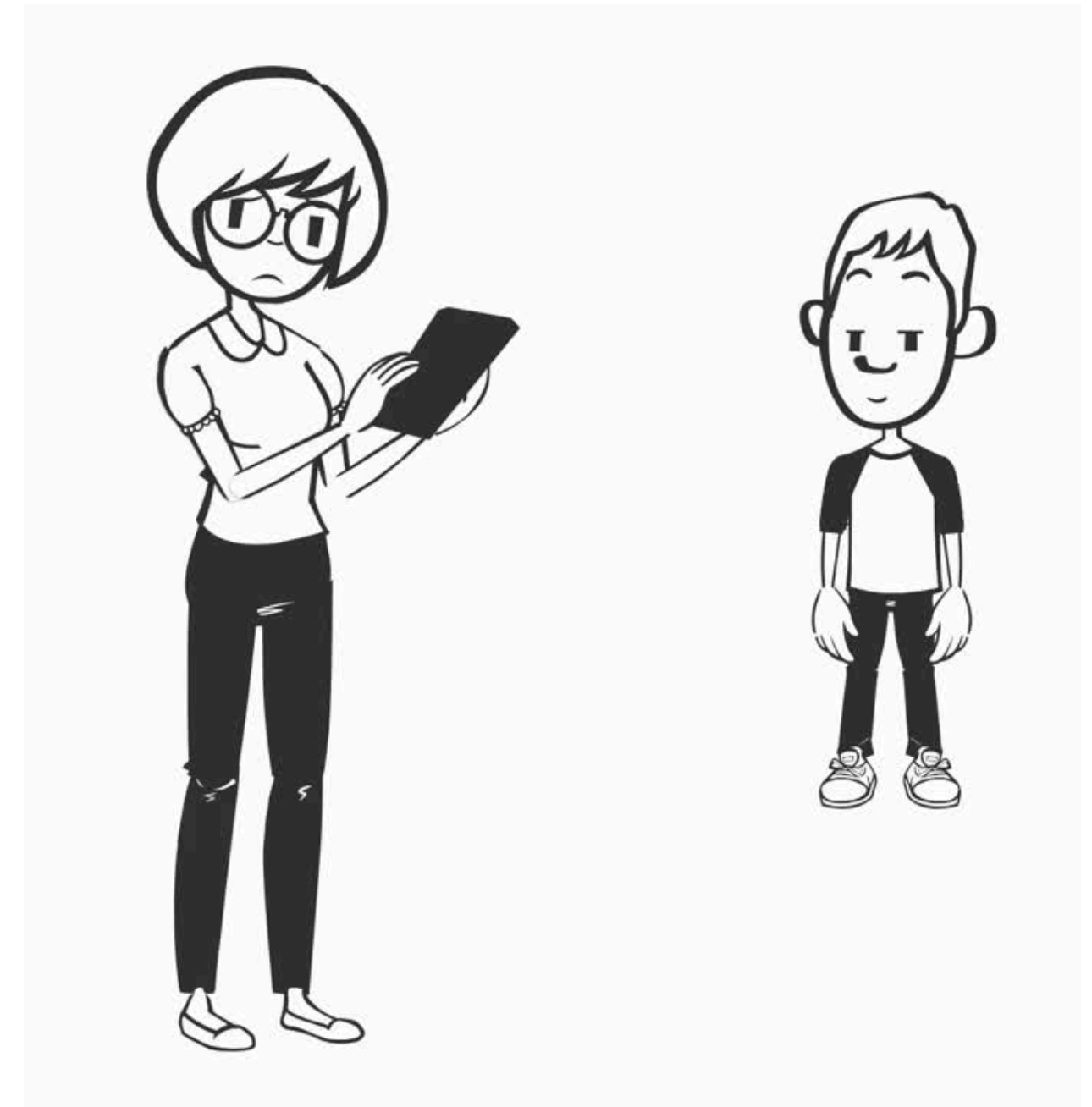
Lack of language access



Schedule

Case Example: Daniel

One day, Daniel's mother didn't hear from her husband during his lunch break and found out that Daniel's father was detained by immigration enforcement on his way home from work. Concerned and unsure what to do, they first reached out to their immigration attorney for assistance. They then contacted the PRS worker for support.



PART IV

Supporting Families Separated Due to Immigration Enforcement

Family Separation & Immigration Enforcement



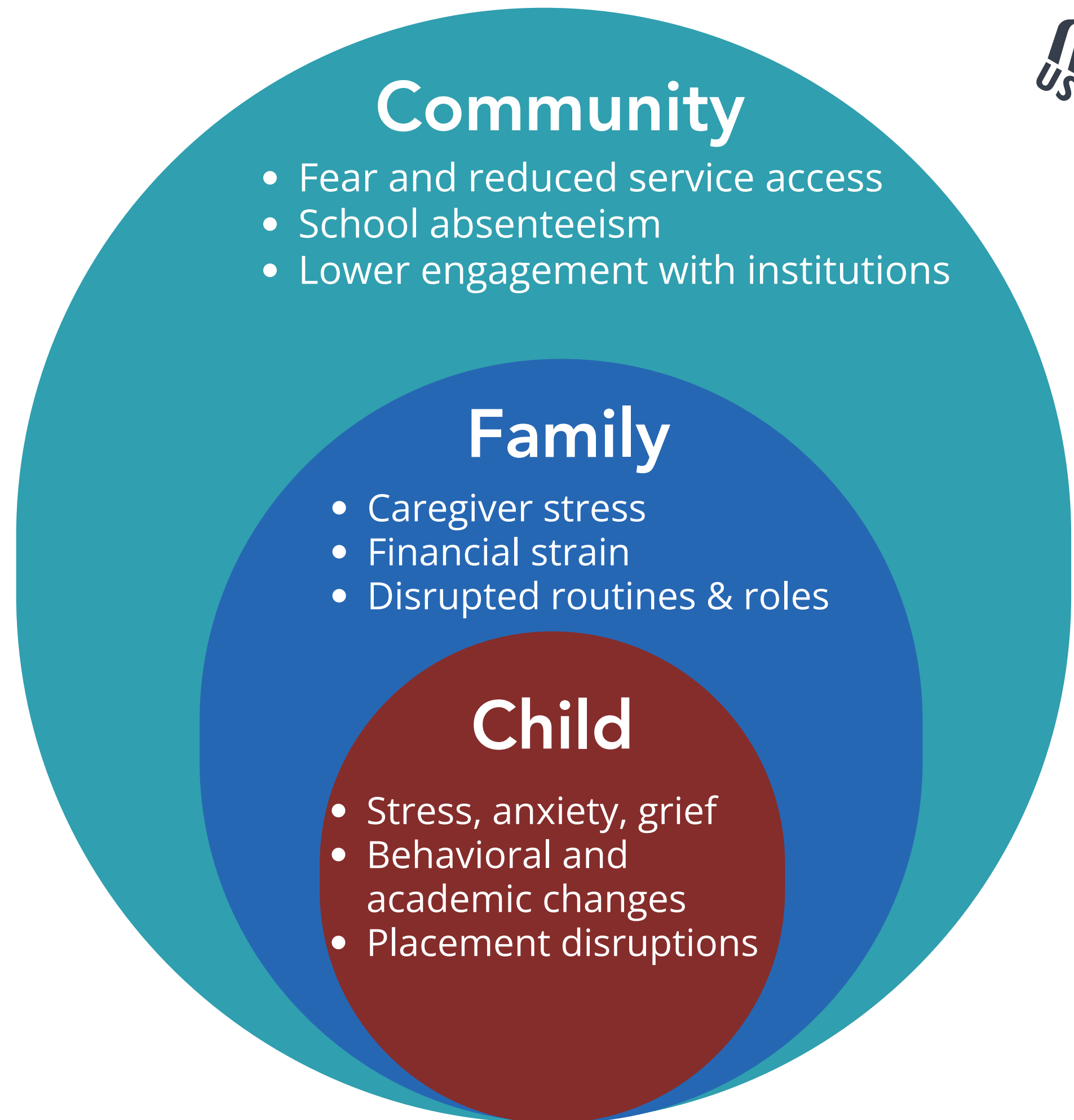
Enforcement Trends & Context

- Increased enforcement activity
- Expansion of detention capacity
- Greater collaboration between agencies

How Separation Happens in Practice

- Parent detained during enforcement action
- Parent detained and deported after proceedings
- Emergency situations with no family preparedness plan

The Ripple Effect of Immigration Enforcement



Supporting families who may be fearful of immigration enforcement

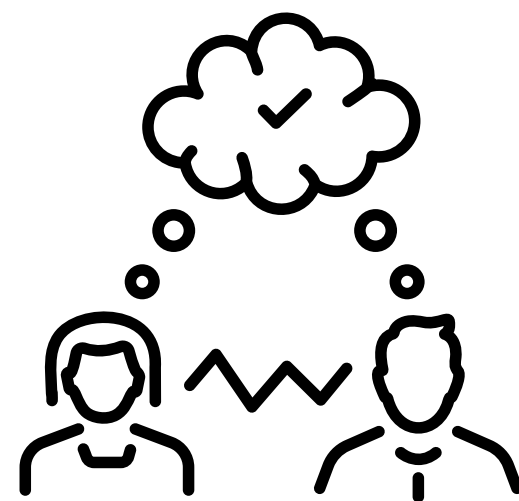


Providers can educate and empower families to:

Stay up to date on policy changes



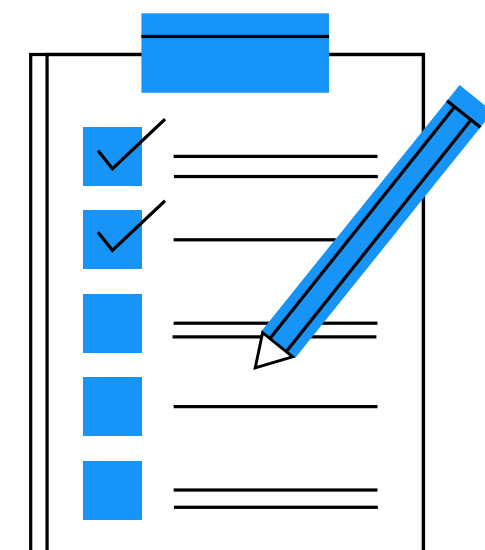
Identify legal resources and support



Use their red cards to exercise their rights



Create a family preparedness plan



Encourage families to use their red cards

You have constitutional rights:

- **DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR** if an immigration agent is knocking. If you are inside of your house, show the card through the window or slide it under the door.
- **DO NOT ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS** from an immigration agent if they try to talk to you. You have the right to remain silent.
- **DO NOT SIGN ANYTHING** without first speaking to a lawyer. You have the right to speak with a lawyer.
- If you are outside of your house, **SHOW THIS CARD TO THE AGENT**. Ask the agent if you are free to leave and if they say you can, leave calmly.



www.RedCardOrders.com

La constitution des États-Unis vous donne

- Si un agent d'immigration frappe chez vous, **N'OUVREZ PAS LA PORTE**.
- Si un agent d'immigration essaie de vous parler, **NE REPONDEZ PAS À SES QUESTIONS**. Vous avez le droit de garder le silence.
- **NE SIGNEZ RIEN** sans avoir d'abord consulté un avocat. Vous avez le droit de parler à un avocat.
- Si vous êtes à l'extérieur, demandez à l'agent d'immigration si vous pouvez partir librement, et si l'agent vous dit oui, partez calmement.
- **DONNEZ CETTE CARTE À L'AGENT**. Si vous êtes chez vous, montrez-lui la carte à la fenêtre ou glissez-la sous la porte.



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inmigración si el trata de hablar con usted. Usted tiene el derecho de mantenerse callado.

- **NO FIRME NADA** sin antes hablar con un abogado. Usted tiene el derecho de hablar con un abogado.
- Si usted está afuera de su casa, pregunte al agente si es libre para irse y si dice que sí, váyase con tranquilidad.
- **ENTREGUE ESTA TARJETA AL AGENTE**. Si usted está dentro de su casa, muestre la tarjeta por la ventana o pásela debajo de la puerta.



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kang mga karapatan sa konstitusyon:

- **HUWAG BUKSAN ANG PINTO** kung may ahente ng imigrasyon na nagtatagong. Kung nasa loob ka ng iyong bahay, ipakita ang card sa bintana o ilalim ng pinto.
- **HUWAG SAGUTIN ANG ANUMANG MGA TANONG** mula sa isang ahente ng imigrasyon kung sinusubukan nilang makipag-usap sa iyo. May karapatan kang manahimik.
- **TSIS TXHOB KOS NPE RAU DAB TSI LI** yog thaum koj tseem tsis tau nrog ib tug kws lij choj tham. Koj yeej muaj cai nrog ib tug kws lij choj hais lus.
- **HUWAG PUMIRMA NG KAHIT ANO** nang hindi muna nakikipag-usap sa isang abogado. Mayroon kang karapatan na makipag-usap sa isang abogado.
- Kung ikaw ay nasa labas ng iyong bahay, **IPAKITA ANG CARD NA ITO SA AHENTE**. Tanungin ang ahente kung ikaw ay maari ng umalis at kung sabihin nila na pwede, umalis ka nang kalmado.



www.RedCardOrders.com

Free printable PDF versions available at ilrc.org/red-cards-tarjetas-rojas

Family preparedness plan

Remind families about the importance of:

- Having a designated caregiver for school-aged children
- Keeping copies of important documents
- Memorizing their A-number
- Organizing their finances

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TEACHING, INTERPRETING,
& CHANGING LAW SINCE 1979

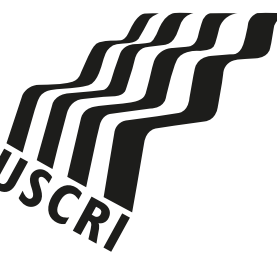
CAJA DE HERRAMIENTAS
COMUNITARIAS

INFORMACIÓN IMPORTANTE DE SU NIÑOS

Guarde esta Información para que las personas que usted designe para cuidar a sus hijos en su ausencia tengan toda la Información que necesitan.

Nombre del niño	
Fecha de nacimiento	
Número de teléfono celular del niño (si aplica)	
Escuela	
Dirección de la escuela	
Número de teléfono de la escuela	
Nombre del maestro	
Número/email del maestro (si aplica)	
Número de aula	
Programa extraescolar (si aplica)	
Número de teléfono del programa extracurricular (si aplica)	
Otro programa extraescolar	
Número de teléfono del otro program extraescolar (si aplica)	
Alergias	

Family preparedness plan



Appleseed Network



Appleseed Network
**Deportation
Planning Manual**

[Explore the Manual](#)

[Build Your Guide](#)

[State Child Safety Plans](#)

English ▼

TOPICS

[Family](#)

[Finances](#)

[Property](#)

TOOLS

[Checklist](#)

[Reference](#)

CHAPTERS

[Browse the Manual Online](#)

Not sure where to start? Take a guided journey.

Feeling overwhelmed? We get it. Answer a few simple questions to generate a personalized roadmap, delivering only the chapters tailored to your situation.

[Build Your Custom Guide](#)



Case Example: Daniel

After Daniel's dad was detained, the family experienced a sense of loss, and many of Daniel's earlier challenges resurfaced. What began as shock and confusion grew into anxiety and fear that his mother could also be detained after just being reunified. The family also became more hesitant to go out in public, even avoiding some everyday activities like going to the store.

At the same time, financial strain and shifting roles at home added new stress, and Daniel began taking on more responsibility while struggling to stay engaged in school.

Even with these challenges, the family showed resilience. They maintained their daily routines, leaned on one another, and accepted support from a trusted neighbor who had gone through a similar experience, helping them stay connected and move forward together.



Community Building

Supporting Provider Collaboration

- Create safe spaces
- Partner with local organizations - share resource maps
- Establish regular multidisciplinary meetings

Peer Support and Community Connection

- Build support circles - childcare, rideshare
- Information/resource sharing
- Celebrate cultural traditions
- Practice collective coping
- Stay informed





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[ABOUT](#)
[PARA FAMILIAS](#)
[FOR PROVIDERS](#)
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UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN RESOURCE CENTER

CENTRO DE RECURSOS PARA JÓVENES INMIGRANTES



INFORMACIÓN PARA JÓVENES Y FAMILIAS

TALLERES PARA JÓVENES Y FAMILIAS



INFORMATION FOR PROVIDERS

TRAINING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

NÚMEROS DE CRISIS Y APOYO | CRISIS AND SUPPORT HELPLINES




Resources:

- [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\) Fact Sheets and Data](#)
- [ORR Policy Guide: Section 2: Safe and Timely Release from ORR Care](#)
- [ORR Home Study Policy- 2.4.2](#)
- [Transnational families negotiating migration and care life cycles across nation-state borders](#)
- [Casey.org- Child Protection and Immigration](#)
- [Childhood immigration enforcement exposure and young adults' anxiety: A mixed methods study,](#)
[Georgetown University](#)
- [Activity Book for Latino Children Impacted by Deportation](#)
- [Family Preparedness Plan](#)
- [Red Cards](#)
- [UC Resource Center](#)
- [Facilitating Effective Conversations about Mental Health with Newcomer Youth and Families](#)