



THE FLOURISH LAB  
Centering  
Families

# Supporting Torture-Affected Newcomer Parents Using a Whole Family Approach

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR CLINICIANS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS



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# Supporting Torture-Affected Newcomer Parents Using a Whole Family Approach:

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## Introduction

This resource guide was developed as part of Centering Families, a Center of Excellence focused on research, training and technical assistance and led by the University of Illinois Chicago. The Center of Excellence aims to advance whole family healing and resilience by strengthening the capacity of practitioners, leaders and Survivors of Torture (SOT) programs to support torture- and trauma-affected families and communities.

This guide focuses on the knowledge, skills and resources needed to support newcomer<sup>1</sup> parents impacted by torture.<sup>2</sup> It synthesizes information from research, interviews with practitioners in SOT programs, and other available resources. The guide is designed for practitioners in SOT programs—social workers, psychologists, case managers, and others—directly working with torture-affected newcomer parents.

## Parenting Considerations in Torture-Affected Families

Family systems are impacted by war, torture, and persecution, whether one family member is the primary survivor or the entire family system directly experienced torture. The traumatic effects of torture can impact the mental health of individual family members and have intergenerational impacts that persist long after traumatic experiences have occurred.<sup>3</sup> Rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD are generally high among torture survivors.<sup>4</sup> Children of torture survivors may also exhibit elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms, further shaped by factors such as parents' mental health, parenting practices, family communication, and household stability.<sup>5</sup>

Families affected by torture often also experience parent-children separation and other ruptures to family systems. This may include when one caregiver seeks asylum in a foreign country while the rest of the family remains in the country of origin or displaced in a neighboring country; when children and adolescents flee unaccompanied by their parents or other family members; and when nuclear families are forced by circumstances to separate from extended family networks. The term transnational family refers to families whose members are separated physically between two or more nations or locations but maintain close ties and relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Separation of parents/caregivers and children is associated with significant mental health and psychosocial problems in both adults and children.<sup>7-8</sup> Several factors can contribute to adverse outcomes associated with parent-child separation, including:

- circumstances of the separation;
- age or developmental stage of the child at the time of the separation;
- length of separation;
- additional stressful or adverse experiences during the time of separation;
- communication between parent and child during the separation;
- quality of the caregiver-child relationship; and,
- communication between parents and other caregivers.<sup>9-10</sup>

Experiences of torture and forced migration also impact parent-child relationships and parenting, in general. Common parent-child and parenting challenges include:

- changes in communication patterns;
- changes in family roles;
- lack of support in parenting roles during resettlement;
- adjustment to new parenting expectations and demands; and
- losses to social connections and support vital for individual and family functioning.<sup>11-12</sup>

Finally, torture-affected families and parenting are influenced by the broader immigration context. Immigration processes may contribute to prolonged periods of uncertainty and social instability for the family, as immigration status is tied to benefits eligibility and employment opportunities and may prolong periods of family separation.

## Whole Family Approach

Supporting parents requires a holistic service approach that integrates family experiences and needs throughout the treatment process. One approach is incorporating a *whole family* approach to SOT services.<sup>13</sup>

A whole family approach with torture-affected families draws on family systems perspectives and situates individual wellbeing within the context of the family. A whole family approach recognizes torture, traumatic life experiences, and other adversities as experiences that impact the family as a unit, as well as individual members, and primary and secondary torture survivors as integral members of their natal or chosen families, whether present, absent or deceased. Fundamental premises are that families are inherently adaptive and resourceful, can be important sources of strength and support, and have potential to support coping and healing.

In adopting this approach, providers work with individuals of all ages within a given family to assess needs and provide family-oriented services, tailored to the unique cultures, languages and needs of torture-affected families. In using this approach, providers encourage and ensure the age-appropriate participation of all family members in addressing key issues and making decisions impacting their family. This includes working in collaboration with torture-affected families to identify targeted resources and services and supporting families in overcoming hardships.

## Strategies to Support Torture-Affected Newcomer Parents

We outline six priorities for practitioners to integrate a whole family approach in support of torture-affected newcomer parents.





## 1. Conduct Family-Based Assessment and Goal Setting

Initial assessment presents an opportunity to draw on family systems theory and engage newcomer parents in a whole-family assessment and goal-setting process, even if they are alone in the U.S. Family systems theory understands the family as a dynamic structure consisting of units and sub-units with interrelated relationships and patterns of behavior.<sup>14</sup>

To begin, it is important to gain an understanding of parents' family circumstances and obligations and assess multiple domains of family life such as parent-child relationships, family communication, parenting, family support, and family strengths. It is also important to assess parent and child mental health and psychosocial wellbeing (to the extent possible). This is referred to as a two-generational approach to assessment.

## Resources on Family Assessment

The resources below provide tools to assess family functioning. These tools may not have been validated for specific cultural or language groups and have not necessarily been used to with torture-affected families.

- [Family Assessment of Needs and Strengths Trauma Version \(FANS-Trauma\)](#)
- [The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Trauma Comprehensive \(CANS-Trauma\)](#)
- [Refugee and Immigrant Children and Families Core Stressors Toolkit and Assessment](#)

Drawing on information gathered through the assessment, providers can engage parents (and children) in a process of goal setting. This includes identifying specific parenting goals or challenges that will be a focus of care, such as improving family communication or parenting skills, in addition to mental health-related goals. This can also include identifying urgent basic needs, such as food or housing insecurity. Beyond their importance for overall family wellbeing, meeting basic needs reduces stress and creates capacity to address family concerns and priorities.

To the extent possible and with the consent of clients, providers are encouraged to invite other family members into the assessment and goal-setting process, using technology such as Zoom or WhatsApp to enable virtual participation.



## 2. Provide Information and Education

Newcomer parents can benefit from information and education on various topics affecting them, their children and families. Information and education may help them better understand their current challenges and how best to meet their own needs and the needs of their children and family. It also serves the purpose of normalizing and validating parental experiences that may otherwise be overshadowed by complex emotions such as shame, guilt and hopelessness.

First, it is important to educate parents on the ways that torture can affect primary and secondary survivors and the family system. This includes providing education on:

- common reactions to torture and trauma in adult caregivers;
- child behavioral and emotional reactions to secondary trauma across different developmental stages; and,
- effects of primary and secondary torture on parenting.

Providers can also educate parents on:

- parent-child attachment;
- child development milestones; and,
- common developmental experiences of children living in new cultural environments.

For families experiencing separation, providers can also educate parents on:

- common reactions to family separation; and,
- ways to nurture multiple attachment relationships.

Newcomer parents arrive from countries with differing education systems and can face significant challenges in receiving and accessing education resources for their children once in the U.S. It is important to provide information on the educational system and related opportunities, including enrichment programs, afterschool programs and volunteering opportunities.

Relevant areas for education include:

- overview of the U.S education system, levels of education and social norms of schools and classrooms;
- extracurricular opportunities including tutoring, enrichment programs, internships, afterschool programs, and volunteering opportunities;
- parent-teacher communication practices and expectations of parent involvement in children's education;
- post-secondary education including application processes, scholarships and financial aid.

Providers can share information directly and provide linkages to other parenting, educational and family resources within schools, community organizations and healthcare settings.

## Information and Educational Resources

- [United Way](#)
- [Boys and Girls Club of America](#)
- [Head Start](#)
- [YMCA](#)
- [Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program \(MIECHV\)](#)
- Local libraries
- Local community colleges



### 3. Strengthen Skills for Coping with Distress

Newcomer parents often struggle with mental health symptoms due to experiences of torture, trauma, loss, and ongoing stressors due to displacement or resettlement in ways that can negatively impact their own wellbeing and indirectly impact their parenting capacities.

Providers can work with parents to identify relevant mental health problems and develop tools and strategies for coping with feelings and emotions. Some areas of focus include:

- identifying triggers of distress including situations, thoughts, or sensations that provoke emotional or physical reactions;
- identifying resources that can be used to cope with difficulties, which may include cultural traditions and religious practices;
- building new skills for coping with distress such as breathing, grounding, or mindful walking, which help focus on the present moment and reduce stress;
- utilizing artistic-based coping and therapeutic approaches, like art therapy, as a non-verbal way to express emotions and develop coping mechanisms;
- seeking out social support from family, friends, other survivors who can provide support, advice, or companionship during challenging times; and
- engaging in physical movement, exercise, and outdoor activity including walking, stretching and dancing, which can reduce stress and improve mood.

## Resources related to Coping with Distress

- [Coping Skills Library](#)
- [Exploring Art Therapy for Coping with Stress](#)
- [Building Your Coping Toolbox](#)
- [Faith-based Healing among Afghan Muslims](#)



## 4. Strengthen Parenting Skills

Adverse life experiences and chronic stressors can also undermine parenting capacities.<sup>15-16</sup> Newcomer torture-affected parents may be less likely to provide positive reinforcement to children and may engage in overly restrictive or harsh parenting.<sup>17-18</sup> Such parenting practices adversely impact the psychosocial development of children and can weaken or compromise parent-child relationships.

Providers can work with newcomer parents to strengthen parenting skills including positive parenting skills, parentings skills needed to navigate caregiving in a new country, and transnational parenting skills for separated families. These skills can be developed through direct services or through referrals to other community-based supports such as parenting classes or parent support groups.

*Positive parenting skills* focus on building nurturing and loving relationships with children.

Relevant skills include:

- setting clear boundaries with children;
- using positive reinforcement instead of punishment;
- engaging in open communication;
- fostering development of children through positive and enriching interactions; and
- managing children's stress and building resilience.

There are existing positive parenting curricula and interventions, some which have been used with refugee and war-affected families. Providers in SOT programs can review these resources to assess the feasibility of using them to support newcomer torture-affected parents. They may consider adaptation of existing resources to meet the specific needs of torture-affected parents.

## Positive Parenting Resources

- [The Incredible Year Evidence-based Parenting Programs](#)
- [Parenting Through Change Curriculum](#)
- [Triple P](#)

*Newcomer parenting skills* includes the specific skills needed to navigate caregiving in new cultural and social contexts and the challenges associated with acculturation and adjustment.<sup>19,20,21,22,23</sup> These can include:

- supporting children with adjustment experiences and challenges;
- negotiating acculturation differences with children;
- increasing parental language proficiency to strengthen parenting in the U.S and support children in new school and social contexts;
- supporting connection to family back home and culture of origin;
- supporting children with multicultural identity development;
- supporting children through experiences of racism and discrimination and building the vocabulary to discuss racism and discrimination with children;
- developing an understanding of the U.S. school system; and
- co-parenting and balancing new family responsibilities and roles.

## Newcomer Parenting Resources

- [Parenting in the Moment](#)
- [Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook](#)
- [Growing Up in a New Land: A Guide for Newcomer Parents](#)
- [Raising Teens in a New Country: A Guide for the Whole Family](#)
- [A Guide for Parents from the Middle East and North Africa for Approaching Topics of Racism and Discrimination with Children: English, Arabic](#)

*Transnational parenting skills* refer to skills needed to manage caregiving tasks and promote parent-child relationships during periods of separation. These include:

- managing family communication and staying connected with children and family;
- leveraging family and community support networks in multiple countries to support child rearing and stresses of migration and separation;
- providing emotional support to children from a distance; and,
- co-parenting in the context of family separation.

## Transnational Parenting Resources

- [Circle of Security Parenting](#)
- [How to Stay Connected to Your Child When You're Long-Distance Co-Parenting](#)



## 5. Encourage Family Communication about Life Experiences

It is important that torture-affected newcomer parents find ways to communicate with their children about their life experiences. This includes challenging experiences of trauma, displacement, separation, and resettlement. Yet, many parents struggle to do so in ways that feel useful and helpful to them, their children, and families. They may avoid talking about their life experiences to protect children and themselves from the hardships that they have experienced. Parents may also share too much about traumatic or adverse life experiences in ways that are difficult for children to hear and understand.

Providers can work with newcomer parents on family communication skills including strengthening their ability to speak openly with children about their life experiences, while being mindful of the child's developmental stage and needs.

This may begin by exploring:

- current family communication patterns;
- challenges with family communication;
- family knowledge and awareness of shared or individual trauma experiences; and
- parents' goals related to family communication.

When working with newcomer parents on family communication, it is important to consider:

- timing of these discussions;
- content of the discussions, such as what and how much to share;
- parental emotional preparedness for such discussions;
- identifying strengths and resilience associated with adverse life experiences, not only challenges and vulnerabilities;
- developmentally appropriate approaches to share life experiences with children;
- anticipating and supporting children's reactions to challenging topics and conversations.

In addition to learning about experiences from parents, children may find it helpful to connect with others with similar life experiences, visit public memorials, or read about their family's and countries' histories. Providers can assist with making linkages to such resources and explaining the importance of these ideas to parents.



## 6. Strengthen Parents' Social Connections and Social Support

Social isolation and gaps in social support are common among newcomer parents. Parents who previously relied on family and community networks to help with child-rearing and daily household tasks face new parenting challenges in the U.S. This separation from supportive networks can affect mothers, in particular, who are often the primary caregiver for children and other family members requiring special care.<sup>24</sup> These caregiving responsibilities in a new country and cultural environment can exacerbate the isolation of parents, oftentimes confining them and their young children to the home and hindering opportunities to rebuild social support networks in the U.S.

Parents who are separated from their children may also suffer from distress and feelings of guilt, and as a result, avoid socializing with other families, thus exacerbating isolation and loneliness.

Providers can address the importance of social connections and social support for health and wellbeing, and work with parents to further develop their social support network. This includes identifying social support needs and local and virtual resources where support may be accessed.

Programs may consider group services and programs for parents to assist them with building social support networks. Programs may also consider a mentor or peer program whereby previously separated parents provide support and encouragement.

## Resources related to Social Connection and Support

- [Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support \(MSPSS\)](#)
- [How to Build Community and Support Networks for Immigrant Families](#)



## 7. Support Parents with Family Preparedness

Many torture-affected newcomer parents face additional stress and uncertainty given their immigration status. Providers can help parents navigate the uncertainty they face. Providers can support parents by offering strategies for talking about these topics in an age and developmentally appropriate way.

Providers can also provide and help parents understand the following resources:

### **Family Preparedness Plans:**

A proactive, step-by-step plan to address various family needs, such as child custody, immigration relief options, emergency contacts, power of attorney, and family actions in the event of an emergency.

### **Family 'Know Your Rights':**

A resource on what to do in the event of immigration action that impacts the family. These resources are available in multiple languages.

### **Family Financial Plan:**

A document outlining details about the family's financial accounts and documents. This may include identifying a trusted friend or family member who the family will share financial documents with such as bank accounts, leases or deeds.

### **Childcare And Custody Agreements:**

This involves families thinking proactively about who will care for their children in the case of parent-child separation, organizing emergency contact lists, and organizing important documents.

## Family Preparedness Resources

- [Custody Arrangements \(DOPA\)](#)
- [Save the Children Resource Center](#)
- [Traumatic Separation and Refugee and Immigrant Children](#)
- [Guiding Caregivers: How to Talk to a Child about Deportation or Separation](#)
- [Immigrant Legal Resource Center Family Preparedness Plans](#)
- [Activity Book for Children Impacted by Deportation](#)
- [Family Reunification: Happily Ever After?](#)

## General Resources

In addition to the above resources, there are also free videos, worksheets and information for providers and parents, including information on parenting and family-focused intervention models. Utilize the links below to explore available resources.

- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health](#)
- [Heal Torture-Healing Survivors of Torture](#)
- [Switchboard: Resources](#)
- [Family Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services](#)
- [Using a Whole Family Approach to Care for Survivors of Torture](#)
- [Disrupted Attachments: How Torture Threatens the Fabric of Family Life](#)
- [Developing a Child/Family Focused Program](#)
- [Services in Support of Children of Survivors](#)
- [Vermont Language Justice Project](#)
- [ZERO to THREE Early Childhood Resource Center](#)
- [Child Mind Institute: Multilingual Trauma Resources - Child Mind Institute](#)
- [UNICEF Resource Hub: Caregivers](#)
- [Sesame Workshop Guide for Families Impacted by Crisis and Displacement](#)

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