

# Special Considerations for Young Children in Immigrant Families

*For kids as young as the ones I teach, keeping the routine going is vital, as well as reassuring them that we love them and want them here in school with us. When the kids go home feeling happy and safe, that seems to reassure parents some too, but I wish I could do more.*

– Educator response to [Colorín Colorado’s survey](#) on support for immigrant families

## Key Takeaways

- Early childhood programs can play a critical role in providing support for young children.
- Early childhood settings are considered “sensitive locations,” where immigration enforcement should not take place.
- Early childhood providers should be familiar with policies related to immigrant students, strategies for supporting social-emotional health, and the signs of trauma and anxiety.

## See this information online

### Special Considerations for Young Children in Immigrant Families

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/preschool>
- Download PDF: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/preschool-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

## Overview

Preschools, early childhood centers, and other child care settings can play a critical role in supporting the children in immigrant families. In addition to the strategies recommended throughout this guide, early childhood educators may wish to keep these additional considerations in mind as they review their own program policies and think about the needs of young children. As noted in [the introduction](#), there are 1.6 million children under the age of five nationwide who have at least one parent who is undocumented (Gándara & Ee, 2018a, p. 3).

### Notes:

- Guidelines and laws that apply to early childhood programs may vary depending on the program’s location, affiliation, and sources of funding. They also may vary from K-12 public school policies. If clarification is needed, look for assistance from program administrators, local early childhood agencies, or national early childhood organizations.
- In addition, it is important for educators and leaders to keep in mind that immigration issues may be impacting staff as well, such as [Karen Reyes](#), a teacher of hearing impaired toddlers in Austin, Texas who is a DACA recipient. See more on this topic [in our section on how immigration issues can affect staff](#).



## Opportunities for professional development

When considering professional development for staff, keep in mind the following:

- Community partners, as well as colleagues in nearby K-12 settings who serve the same families, may have guidance what kinds of training will best serve the staff.
- Early childhood agencies may also wish to offer centralized training for providers who are not in a large program setting.
- As part of the U.S. Department of Education’s non-regulatory guidance on implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) with English learners, school districts are strongly encouraged to include local early childhood teachers in professional development. This might give providers an opportunity to learn how their local district is responding to current concerns of immigrant families.



# Look for ways to build relationships with families

## Why this matters

Strong family partnerships are a valuable tool not only in supporting young children's future academic success but also in supporting healthy social-emotional development – particularly in the face of stress and uncertainty. Early childhood programs may need to be creative in building and expanding these relationships with immigrant families, but the results will be well worth the extra effort. It is easier to address challenges after trust has been established.

## Tips for getting started

There are a number of things that early childhood programs can do to get started, including:

- Making immigrant families [feel welcome](#)
- Creating an environment [that celebrates families' cultures and languages](#)
- Looking for new ways to [get to know families and their neighborhoods](#)
- Being proactive about [identifying families' strengths](#)
- Providing opportunities for families to ask [questions about issues of concern](#)
- Ensuring that communication is happening in [parents' languages](#)
- Building partnerships with [local community organizations that serve your families](#)

## The role of home languages: Family outreach

In addition, it is critical to communicate in families' home languages and provide forms and documents in families' home languages to the extent possible, such as registration forms, home language surveys, and emergency contact forms. Keep in mind that the U.S. educational system will be new to families and they may have lots of questions related to the program, on top of their questions about complex issues related to immigration. See more recommendations in our section on [communicating with families](#).

## The role of home languages: Language and literacy development

At the same time, welcoming and including children's home languages in their learning environment provides numerous benefits to their social-emotional development, sense of identity, early literacy development, and acquisition of English.



Learn more from the following:

- [The Importance of Home Language Series](#) (Head Start)
- [Creating an Environment That Helps Young Bilingual Children Thrive](#) (Harvard News)

## Recommended resources

- [Engaging ELL Families: A Guide for School Leaders](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [ELLs in Early Childhood Education: Recruiting Immigrant Families](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Increasing PreK Access for the Children of Immigrants](#) (Eye on Early Education)
- [Welcoming Refugee Children into Early Childhood Classrooms](#) (National Association for the Education of Young Children)
- [Voices of Immigrant Parents in Preschool Settings](#) (NAEYC)
- [Early Childhood Resources](#) (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services)
- [The Inner World of the Immigrant Child](#) by Cristina Igoa

## Resources from Head Start

- [Communicating Across Language and Culture: How Do I Reach Out to Parents Who Are Immigrants?](#)
- [Families Support Their Children Who Are Dual Language Learners](#)
- [Creating Programs to Partner with Immigrant Parents](#)
- [Gathering and Using Language Information that Families Share](#)
- [Raising Young Children in a New Country: A Handbook for Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development](#) (with [tips for using the handbook](#))

## Research and books

- [Administrators' Roles in Offering Dynamic Early Learning Experiences to Children of Latinx Immigrants](#) (Bank Street College of Education)
- [Rethinking Parent Involvement: Perspectives of Immigrant and Refugee Parents](#) (Bank Street College of Education)
- [Building Bridges Between Home and School for Latinx Families of Preschool Children](#) (Bank Street College of Education)
- [Building Bridges, Not Walls, Between Latinx Immigrant Parents and Schools](#) (Bank Street College of Education)
- Book Recommendation: [Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress](#) by Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Álvarez-Ortiz and Judie Haynes



# Review program enrollment guidelines

## Why this matters

The benefits of early childhood education for immigrant children are well-documented (Greenberg, Michie, and Adams, 2018, p. 1). In the majority of early childhood programs nationwide, children can enroll in the program if they (or their parents) are undocumented.

**Staff who are enrolling children should not ask families about their immigration status.** While programs must follow all legal requirements in their state for maintaining information on each family, when possible, programs are also strongly discouraged from asking about country of origin and social security numbers. If children or family members volunteer the information, **staff should not share it with others.**

## Maintaining student privacy and confidentiality

There are a number of student privacy policies that can apply to different kinds of early childhood programs. All staff should be familiar with the policies that apply to their program. If clarification is needed, look for assistance from program administrators, local early childhood agencies, or national early childhood organizations that can provide appropriate information.

## Tips for getting started

Program administrators and staff assisting with enrollment should be familiar with:

- program policies related to enrollment
- all types of documents that can be used to verify a child's age (described [in these videos](#) from attorney Roger Rosenthal)
- requirements for establishing local residency
- applicable privacy policies.



# Ensure staff are familiar with other policies and issues related to immigrant students

## Why this matters

Families and staff members may have questions related to immigration issues; making sure that everyone has accurate and updated information will make it easier to address questions and concerns when they arise. Here are some important topics related to early childhood settings:

### “Sensitive locations” guidance for early childhood settings

The federal "sensitive locations" guidelines that apply to schools also apply to early childhood settings such as preschools and day care centers. (See more about [“sensitive locations” guidance](#) and [this brief](#) about how “sensitive locations” guidance impacts early childhood settings from the Center for Law and Social Policy, or CLASP.) There is no indication that this policy will change, although there have been cases of immigration enforcement activity happening near child-care and early childhood centers. Many early childhood settings have also reported drops in attendance and enrollment related to concerns about immigration enforcement. This may partly be due to the fact that many early childhood providers do not know that their settings are considered “sensitive locations” (Ullrich, 2018).

Following in-depth interviews with early childhood providers, researchers from CLASP concluded the following:

*Many early childhood providers weren’t aware of the sensitive locations policies or didn’t know their programs were included. Few providers had internal policies for dealing with ICE or CBP agents who try to enter their facilities. They also didn’t know if they were legally obligated to admit immigration agents without a warrant. Consequently, many providers couldn’t assure immigrant families that the center was a safe place. (Ullrich, 2018)*

This research speaks to the importance of ensuring that early childhood providers are familiar with the “sensitive locations” guidance. In addition, programs may wish to create a policy that clarifies what should happen if an immigration agent comes to the center.

**Note:** The “sensitive locations” guidance is just that – guidance – and not codified into law; it could change at any point. The guidance also has certain limitations, which is why program administrators should become familiar with other related local/state laws and should stay current with updates on this topic.



## Making a plan to care for children whose caregivers are unavailable

In June 2018, a [large immigration raid](#) left dozens of young children stranded at day care centers and preschools in Ohio as caretakers scrambled to find relatives and emergency contacts. This example underscores the importance of having updated emergency contact information and a plan in place to care for children whose caregivers/parents/guardians are detained during the day.

Putting protocols in place for these situation improves the chance of finding an appropriate caregiver for children. See suggestions and resources in the following sections of this guide:

- [The Importance of Emergency Contact Information](#)
- [Make a Plan to Care for Children Stranded Following Detention](#)

## Answering questions about proposed “public charge” rule changes

The White House announced a proposed rule change in September 2018 that would make it harder for legal immigrants to get green cards if they receive certain kinds of public assistance. Head Start programs, services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and enrollment in free- and reduced-price meal programs **are not included** in this rule change.

However, other benefits have been added to the list that would likely impact many immigrant families if the rules go into effect, and some families have already started withdrawing from benefits programs. Learn more from our section on the “[public charge](#)” issue.

## Answering questions about immigration and legal resources

There are a number of steps early childhood programs can take to address families’ questions and concerns about immigration issues, as well as to connect families to legal support. Many of the strategies detailed throughout this guide can be applied in early childhood settings as well:

- [Understanding How Immigration Issues Impact Students](#)
- [Addressing Immigrant Families' Questions and Concerns](#)
- [Addressing Questions About Immigration Enforcement](#)
- [How to Connect Immigrant Families with Legal Support and Advice](#)

## Other issues that might impact young children

Other immigration issues that may affect children include changes to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#)); Temporary Protected Status ([TPS](#)); and [travel restrictions](#) that impact family reunification.



## Tips for getting started

- Identify the policies that apply to your setting. If you have questions, look for assistance from program administrators, local early childhood agencies, or national early childhood organizations that can provide appropriate information.
- Identify the information that staff should have and the best ways to provide the training and professional development they need.
- Identify the information families should have and the most appropriate ways to share that information, such as one-on-one conversations or [parent outreach events](#).
- Determine whether any [existing policies, procedures, or forms](#) need to be updated.
- Determine whether any new policies should be created to address these issues; if so, look for sound guidance on how to do so.





# Look for ways to offer social-emotional support to children throughout the day

## Why this matters

Young children in immigrant families may be experiencing a number of situations that are causing stress (see examples in our section on [how immigration issues can affect children](#) as well as the following section on anxiety and trauma). This can impact their healthy development, social interactions, and motivation and also result in their asking adults questions about these issues.

In addition, the situations children's families are facing may have an impact on whether their [basic needs are being met](#). This is why it is so important for early childhood programs to look at the whole picture when identifying and addressing young children's needs.

**Note:** See our related information on:

- the various causes of [changes in behavior](#), particularly as they relate to special education referrals
- [sibling caregivers](#)
- [strategies for providing social-emotional support for students](#).

## Tips for getting started

Early childhood environments can provide a nurturing, safe environment for children by:

- maintaining their familiar routines
- designating a primary caregiver/support person for an anxious child
- doing age-appropriate activities where kids can share feelings, such as drawing, [circle time](#), or one-on-one time
- [reading stories](#) about related topics
- providing staff with training on topics related to [trauma and anxiety](#)
- providing parents with tips and training on how to address anxiety and answer children's questions.



## Recommended resources

### *Sesame Street*

You may find some helpful ideas in the following toolkits from *Sesame Street*. While there is no "immigration toolkit," these resources include related topics. All are available in Spanish, and the *Sesame Street in Communities* toolkit is available in multiple languages.

- [Traumatic Experiences](#)
- [Helping Kids Grieve](#)
- [Coping with Incarceration](#)
- [Sesame Street in Communities: Care, Cope, Connect](#)

You may also get some helpful ideas from these [bilingual activities and videos on self-expression from Sesame Street](#).

### How to calm down

These articles provide some activities to calm down, such as the following:

- [Fred Rogers: Parent Resources on Fear](#) (Fred Rogers Company)
- [8 Fun Breathing Exercises for Kids](#) (Childhood 101)
- [How to Teach Your Child Calm Breathing](#) (Anxiety Canada)
- [Calming Anxiety in Children](#) (Coping Skills for Kids)

### Recommended videos

- [When Immigration Status Impacts Younger Children](#) (Lori Dodson, ESOL Teacher – Maryland)



# Train staff and families on the impacts of trauma and anxiety on young children

## Why this matters

In 2018, researchers at CLASP published a study on how immigration policy affects young children (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018). Researchers report that early childhood educators and providers around the country have recently observed more stress, anxiety, and behavioral difficulties in the immigrant children they serve, such as:

- “aggression, hyperactivity, and separation anxiety” (p. 9)
- more bathroom accidents from kids who were toilet-trained
- “symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as frequent crying, trouble sleeping, and increased anxiety” (p. 11).

This correlates with findings by the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) that “young children whose undocumented parents have been detained or even deported...experience in the short term, frequent crying, withdrawal, disrupted eating and sleeping patterns, anger, anxiety and depression.” See more [age-specific effects of trauma](#) from the National Child Trauma Stress Network.

According to the report, educators and families have also reported:

- decreased engagement and participation in the classroom, fear of police, and actions to protect relatives from police
- children as young as three (both immigrant and U.S. citizen children) expressing fears about being separated from a parent.

These changes can impact children's healthy development, both physically and emotionally, their confidence and self-esteem, and their identity. The APA notes that, “Over time, these (stresses) can lead to more severe issues like post-traumatic stress disorder, poor identity formation, difficulty forming relationships, feelings of persecution, distrust of institutions and authority figures, acting out behaviors and difficulties at school.” (See the [APA’s Report of the Presidential Task Force on Immigration](#) for more information.)

Parents want advice on how to address these issues as well. CLASP researchers noted that multiple educators reported that immigrant families had asked for support or training about



social-emotional health, such as tips for dealing with anxiety. (See more about this topic in our section related to [changes in behavior](#).)

## What explains these trends?

Children may be feeling anxiety or fear about:

- losing a parent (such as the [case of Sophie Cruz](#), a five-year-old who slipped past security during Pope Francis' 2015 visit to Washington, D.C. to give him a letter expressing her fear that that her parents would be deported)
- [an unexpected or lengthy separation](#)
- having to move to a new country if a parent is deported
- losing a friend
- family members' stress, anxiety, depression, or intimate partner abuse.

Children may also have experienced a traumatic event, such as:

- witnessing a loved one's arrest
- being separated from a parent during interrogation
- a forced and/or lengthy separation from family
- detention in an immigration detention center
- coming into contact with immigration enforcement officers
- an arduous journey to this country
- violence or hardship in a home country.

## Tips for getting started

- In order to better equip providers and parents to address these challenges, offer training about topics that are most relevant to the setting. Topics could include the impact of trauma on young children's healthy development and behavior or tools and words for different situations, such as "That sounds really hard. You can talk to me anytime you need me."
- If needed, request additional training, information, or support from a program office, community partner, or expert in mental health for young children, ideally someone who is familiar with culturally responsive practices. It is critical for staff and parents to have accurate information on this topic.



## Recommended resources

- [How the Toxic Stress of Family Separation Can Harm a Child](#) (PBS NewsHour)
- [Tutorial: Recognizing and Addressing Trauma in Infants, Young Children, and Their Families](#) (Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development)



### The impact of trauma on a preschool child

Kristina Robertson shares the following anecdote from a preschool setting.

*We learned about a preschool child who was acting out – biting, grabbing, hitting – and the mother was depressed and withdrawn, so it was very difficult to address the child’s needs proactively with parenting suggestions. It was apparent that the mother was overwhelmed. This increased her isolation and lessened her support.*

*The other parents began to get angry and wanted the program to “kick out” the student. Instead, the preschool director worked very carefully to place a paraprofessional with the child to play positively, model, and act as a mediator to help the child learn the skills she needed to function better. This also provided the child with a consistent, supportive adult; she wasn’t so thrown by transitions in the classroom. The child is doing very well now – although the mom still struggles with depression.*

*These kinds of situations can be challenging because trauma contributes to kids acting in unsafe ways – just at a time when they need the security of that setting most.*

