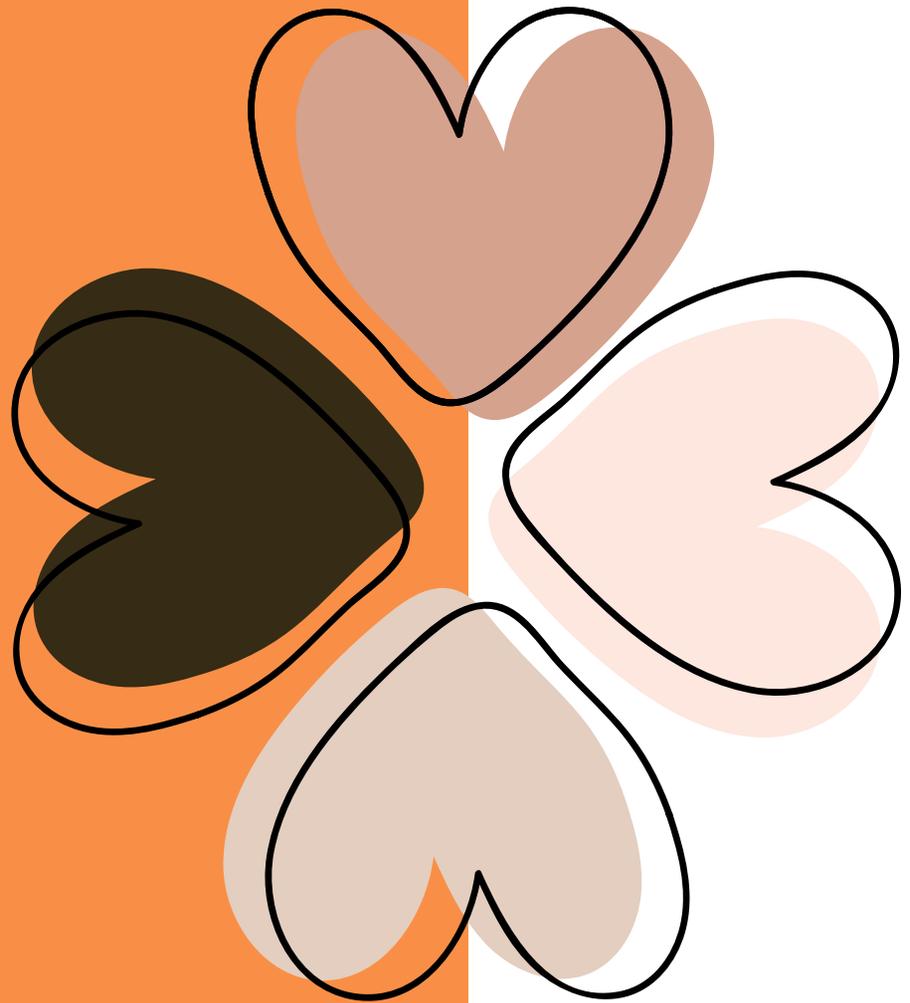


**RECOVERING FROM  
TRAUMA AS A FAMILY:**  
A GUIDE FOR PARENTS  
AND CAREGIVERS



# WE ARE HERE TO HELP

Moving to a new country can be scary. It's possible that you and your family also encountered frightening situations in your home country or on your way to the United States. The recent practice of separating families at the US border may have made the experience of migration more painful.

Immigrant Families Together and Lumos recognize that this may be a difficult time for your family, and we are here to support you. We have written this guide along with social workers, psychologists, and other development specialists to help you and your children make sense of the feelings and behaviors you might be experiencing at this time. We hope it aids your recovery and helps you regain a sense of peace in your lives. Information on other free resources and sources of support can be found on pages 26-27.





## Your family may experience some of the following common reactions to trauma:

### In both adults and children:

- Clingy behavior or pushing loved ones away
- Reliving the traumatic event, with intrusive memories of the traumatic event
- Fear of things related to the traumatic event (images, gestures, sounds, food, faces, etc)
- Development of new fears
- Nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of sadness and withdrawal
- Feelings of anger and irritability
- Feelings of nervousness and anxiety
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Difficulty in remembering facts, details, or events
- Difficulty concentrating, feeling disoriented
- Decline in school or work performance
- Difficulty in having positive feelings such as joy or love
- Physical complaints (headache, stomachache)
- Distrust of people
- Hiding food
- Startling easily (jumpy, strong reaction to sudden noises)
- Self-harming behavior (hurting yourself physically such as cutting or burning skin)
- Drug and alcohol abuse

### Children may have some additional signs:

- Acting out through play (for example, creating violent scenes with toys)
- Re-enacting traumatic events through play
- Tantrums (younger children)
- Separation anxiety (fear of being apart from parent/caregiver, particularly in young children)
- Reverting to previous stages of development such as: bedwetting, difficulty with language



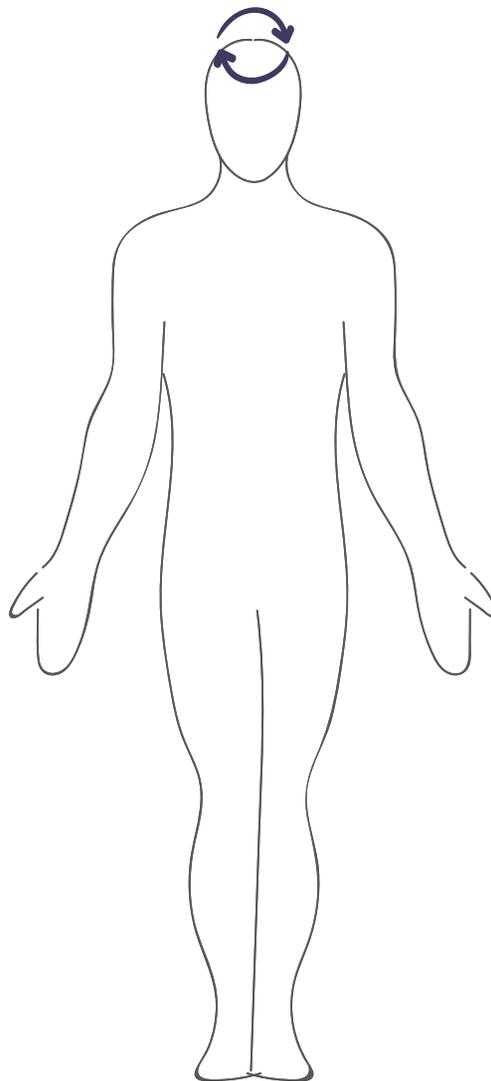
**Jorge's story**

*Jorge is a 10-year-old boy who witnessed gun violence before coming to the United States. He now picks up objects regularly and pretends to shoot people. His parents realize that since children communicate through play, he may be saying something about what he saw in the past.*

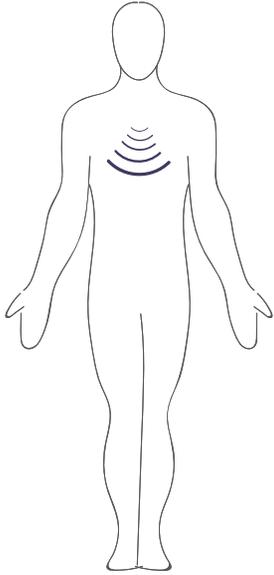
*They found a therapist who can guide Jorge in naming and communicating what he might be feeling, and give his parents additional support in helping Jorge heal.*

# BODY MAP

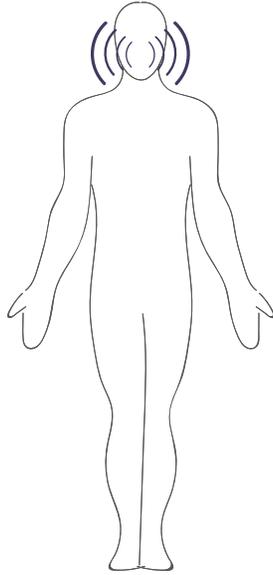
Overwhelming experiences can cause both physical and emotional reactions. When our brains react to trauma or are reminded of stressful events, flight, fight and freeze signals are sent to our bodies. Our bodies can react in a variety of ways:



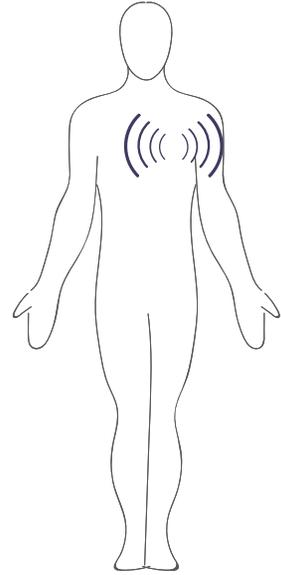
**Racing thoughts or  
dizziness**



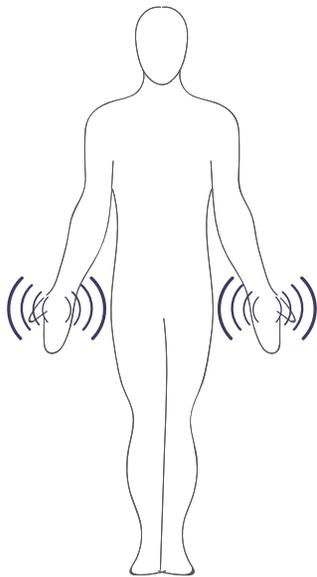
**Rapid breathing**



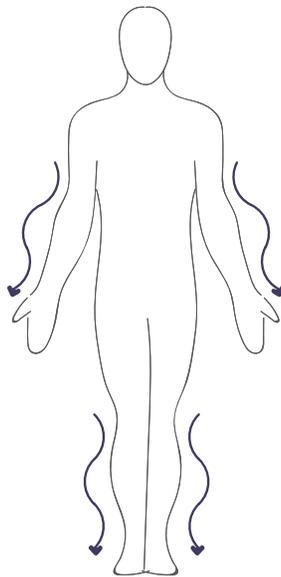
**Dry mouth**



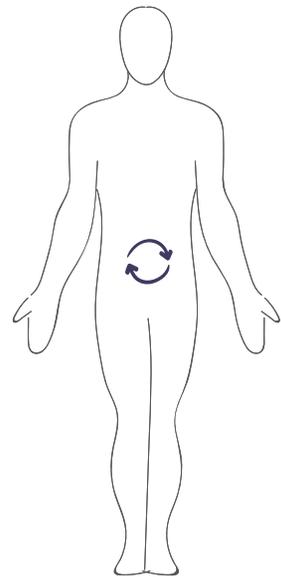
**Increased heartbeat**



**Sweaty palms**



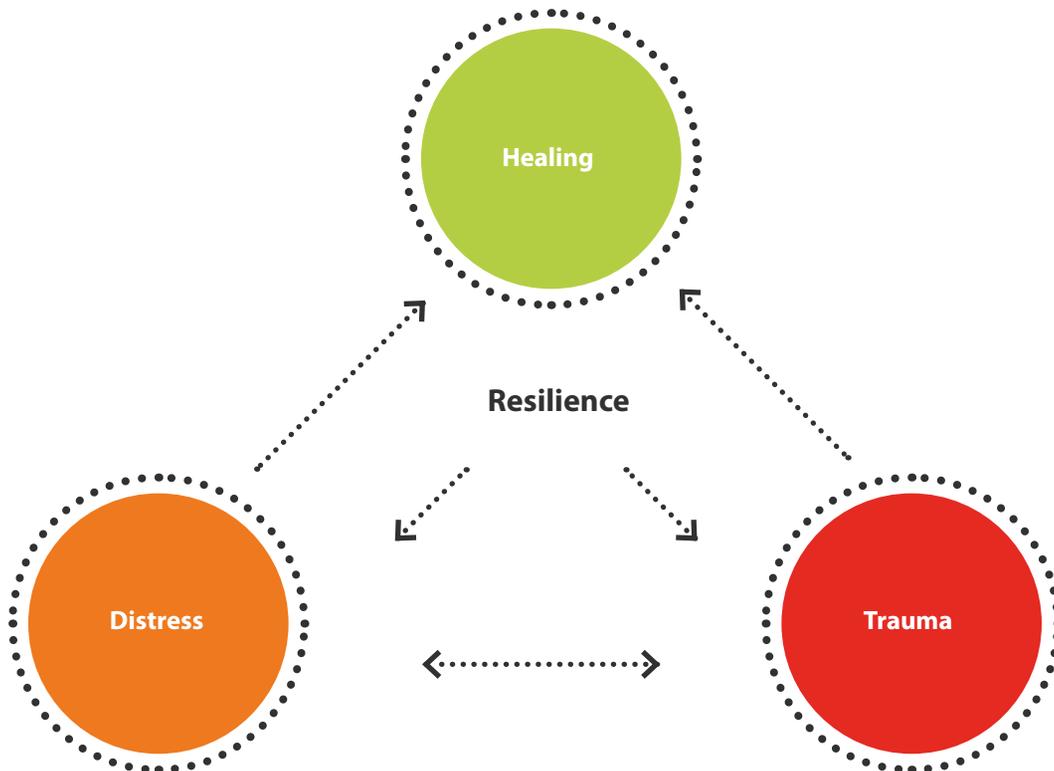
**Tense or shaky muscles**



**Nausea/butterflies in stomach**

## Healing together:

Acknowledging trauma and distress, and promoting resilience



Trauma, distress, and resilience interact with one another to create a range of responses to traumatic events. Resilience is the process of coping in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. Research has shown that resilience in difficult situations is normal and not unusual, and people regularly demonstrate resilience in different ways. Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

A primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster your resilience. We can all acknowledge traumatic events by understanding the signs of trauma and how trauma might impact us. Resilience helps us to find a way to get back up after being knocked down by trauma.

**Unexpected**

**Predictable**

Prepare your child for changes to their day or living situation ahead of time. Create predictable, expected patterns.

**Unwanted**

**Welcomed**

Plan activities that are enjoyable to your child or that make them feel loved and appreciated.

**Overwhelming**

**Slow and in control**

Move at a slower pace, make sure your child understands what is happening to help them have a sense of control over deciding what to do and how to do it.

**Disorienting**

**Clear**

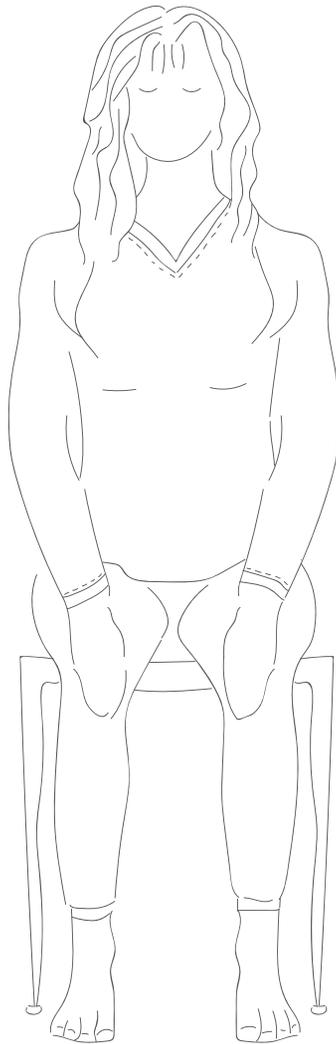
Be clear when you are speaking with your child and mindful of the intentions of your words and actions.

**Unsafe**

**Safe**

Learn what feels safe to your child and teach them how to say yes and no, so they can communicate what feels safe for them as well.

It is possible to encourage resilience and healing by promoting positive relationships and protective factors in your child's environment, such as supportive parenting, regular routines and clear expectations of behavior. This will help to stabilise what traumatic events have destabilised.



***Maria's story***

*Maria is a 36-year-old mother of three who fled violence to come to the United States. When she smells cigarette smoke, some of those memories come to her and she feels her heart race and her hands shake. She knows that this is her body's automatic response to a smell that triggers painful memories.*

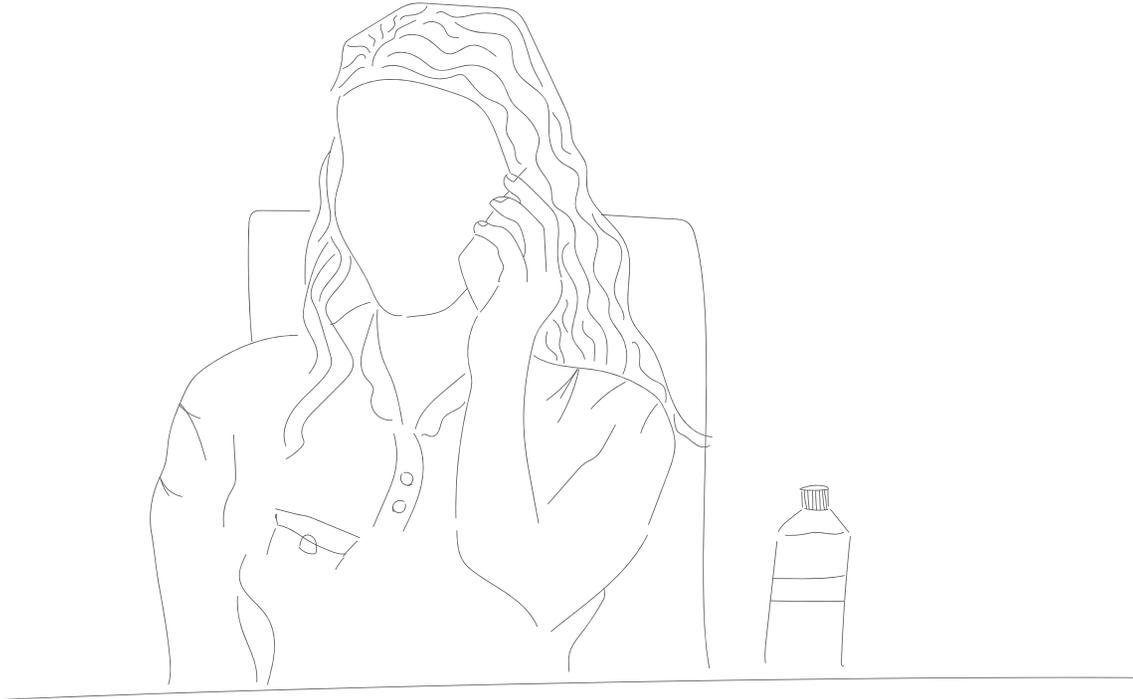
*She has learned when these automatic responses in her body are triggered, she can calm herself by sitting down, feeling the ground under her feet, noticing the colors around her, and breathing deeply several times. When she does this, she is able to feel more calm.*

# HEALING AS A FAMILY

Once parents and caregivers have an understanding of the ways trauma can affect the brain and body, it is easier to work on healing themselves and their children. We know that trauma can affect a child's ability to bond and form healthy relationships later in life, so it becomes important for parents to learn how to restore a foundation of trust and security.

To begin this process as a parent, you can develop strategies to identify and manage your own feelings. It can help to keep these questions in mind:

- *How do I feel?*
- *What do I need when I feel this way?*
- *How can I meet that need?*



***Meeting your needs as a parent: Norma's story***

- *How do I feel (emotion and bodily sensation)?*

*Norma, a 22-year-old mother notices that she feels anxious and has a headache.*

- *What do I need when I feel this way?*

*Norma knows that when she feels anxious and has a headache, it helps her to take a deep breath and call a friend to talk. If her headache persists after taking several deep breathes and talking to a friend, Norma knows that she may need to rest and if necessary, take basic pain medication.*

- *How can I meet that need?*

*Norma has learned three breathing exercises, which she practises regularly. She also knows the numbers of two friends who she trusts, who have agreed to make themselves available when she needs to talk. Norma also carries a water bottle and a single dose of basic pain medication for use in emergencies or a crisis.*

# HELPING YOUR CHILD

Creating a secure bond with children involves consistently meeting their needs and honoring their feelings by helping them to identify and express them. After you have practised identifying your own feelings and needs, consider asking the same three questions of your children:

- *What emotion might my child's behavior be trying to communicate?*
- *What is my child saying they need, or what do I think they may need when they feel this way?*
- *How can I meet that need?*



***Meeting your child's needs: Sofia's story***

- *What emotion might my child's behavior be trying to communicate?  
Norma's daughter Sofia is six years old. When Sofia feels scared, she often gets a stomach ache.*

- *What is my child saying they need or what do I think they may need when they feel this way?*

*Norma waits for a time when Sofia is feeling better and thinking more clearly, then asks Sofia what helps her when she has a stomach ache. Sofia said that she likes to lie down and have Norma sing to her and rub her back.*

- *How can I meet that need?*

*Sofia knows to tell her mom if she is scared and getting a stomach ache so they can make sure she can lie down and Norma can sing and rub her back.*

# WAYS TO PROMOTE WELLBEING

When we are struggling with difficult emotions such as anxiety, anger, or sadness, it can prevent us from thinking clearly or responding to our children with patience and compassion. One of the first steps towards healing is to recognize our emotions, identify how they may be affecting us, and to reflect on how they might affect our children. When we feel anxious, our children may feel anxious too. When we feel calm, it is easier for our children to feel calm. Once we've identified our emotions, we can work on how to manage the impact they have on us.

In order to manage feeling overwhelmed, it can help to make time for activities that promote and enhance wellbeing. Here are some simple steps to help you feel better:



**Get plenty of sleep**



**Eat well**



**Get plenty of fresh air**



**Talk and connect  
with friends**



**Connect with religious, cultural  
or spiritual communities**



**Go for a walk  
or other exercise**



**Find ways to relax  
that work for you**



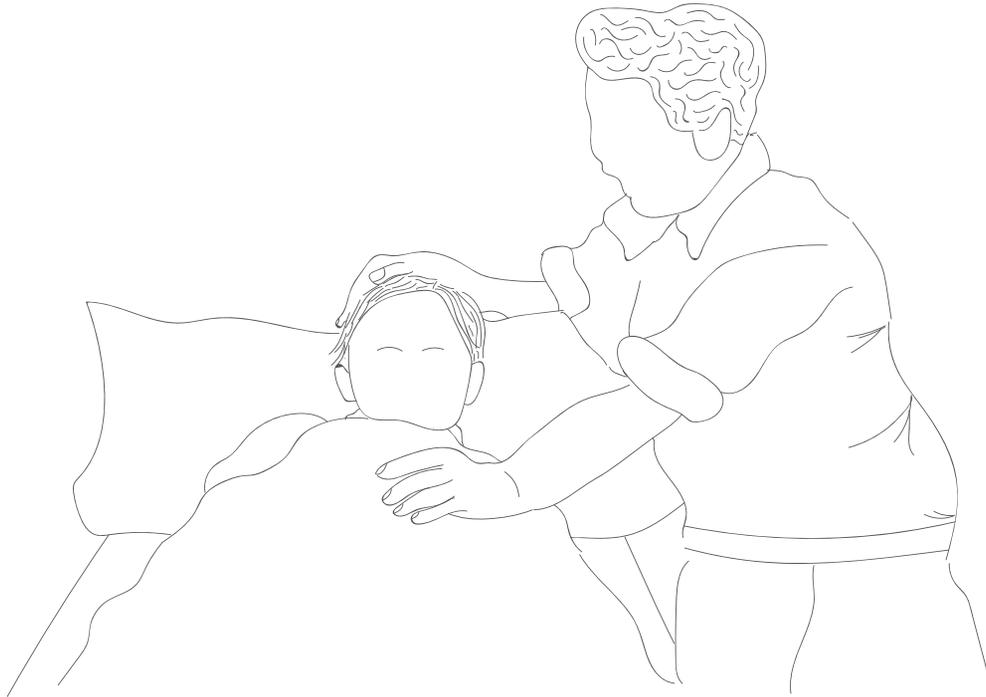
**Connect with community resources  
(such as support groups  
or recreation centers)**



**Seek therapy if needed**



**Revive good memories through storytelling, play, and music**



### **Marta's story**

*Marta is a 28-year-old mother with three small children. They have all experienced difficult and scary situations before coming to the United States. Sometimes the noise and disruptions that the children cause in their small apartment are overwhelming for Marta.*

*This can cause Marta to become frustrated. Once Marta recognized this, she took steps to start their bedtime routine earlier so she can have some time to feel calm at night.*

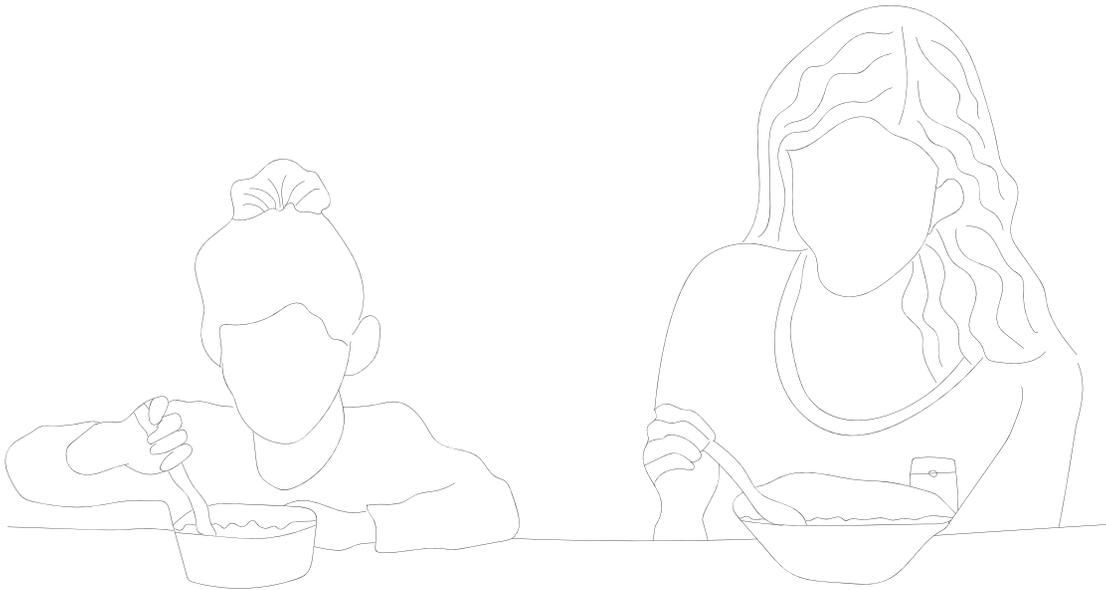
*This also gives the children more time to rest and recover.*

*Marta schedules regular time to play with her children and has created a playtime suggestion box. She uses it to ask her children to think of games they want to play, so everyone can enjoy their time together.*

# CREATE A CALMING ENVIRONMENT

Once we establish regular practices and routines that promote wellbeing, it can provide the foundation for healing. Then, we can think more clearly about how to build on this foundation in our environment and interactions with others. When we experience a traumatic event and its effects, it feels unexpected, unwanted, overwhelming, disorienting, and unsafe.

In order to help ourselves and our children recover, our reactions and behaviors need to be the opposite of what we experienced during the traumatic event. Creating a calm, predictable environment will help the healing process:



## **Carolina's story**

*Carolina, a 24-year-old mother, was reunited with her five-year-old son Santiago after being separated for several weeks. Santiago seemed angry and withdrawn.*

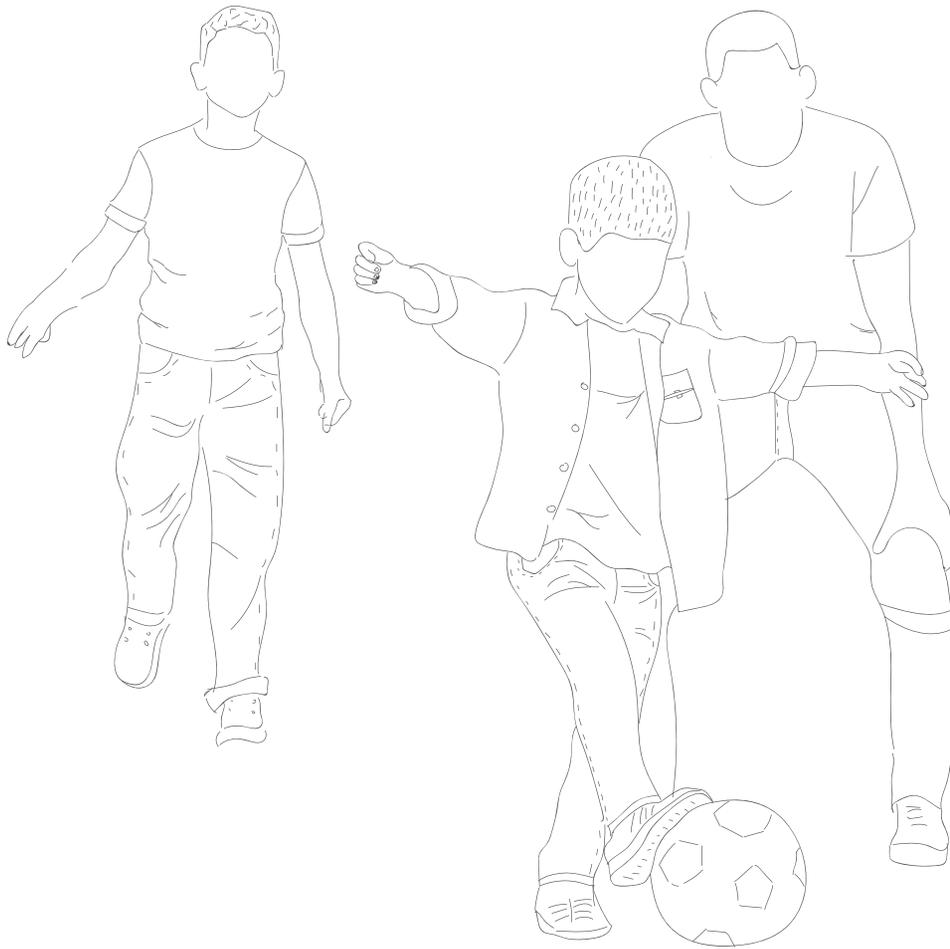
*Carolina realized he needed time to adjust and a consistent routine with her to reassure him that she would be there for him. After spending several weeks creating consistent schedules and showing him affectionate care, he was able to feel calmer.*

# CREATE ROUTINE AND STRUCTURE

When we understand what a calming environment will look like for us and our children, we can begin establishing routines and structure to reinforce a sense of wellbeing within our families. When children know what is going to happen next, they feel safer and more in control.

Routines built around having fun or spending time together can strengthen family relationships. Some ideas include:

- Daily routines for work and school mornings
- Bath time, naps, bedtime, mealtimes, greetings and goodbyes
- Weekly routines for housework such as laundry and cleaning
- Daily or weekly routines for outings such as shopping or park trips
- Gathering in community, cultural celebrations



### **Juan's story**

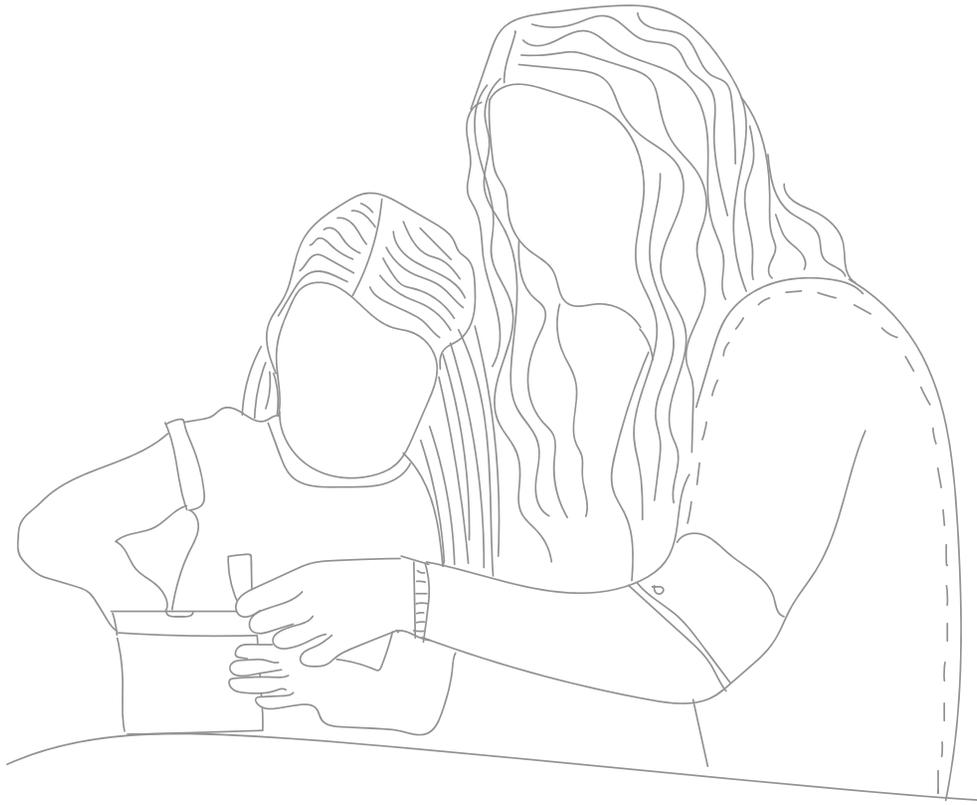
*Juan is a 30-year-old father of two boys, aged eight and 12. All three are having difficulty sleeping and are experiencing distressing responses to some of their difficult memories. Juan added an extra lock to their apartment door to help him feel safer. He also makes time to eat lunch with friends once a week.*

*This helps him feel calmer, so he can focus on supporting his boys. Juan helps his sons by having a consistent daily routine. In addition, he lets them know as soon as he can if things will change, allows the boys to have control over choosing play activities, and regularly reminds his boys how much he loves them.*

# COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CHILD

How we express ourselves through words and actions with children is an important part of creating a healing environment. Communication ties together all of the elements needed for healing. Here are some suggestions to keep in mind that will support your child:

- Speak honestly with your child about what is happening, in words they can understand
- Remind your child that none of what has happened is their fault
- Help your child identify and label their feelings. Ask questions such as: "I wonder if you feel really frustrated about that?" or "I wonder if you're sad that it's time to leave the park?"
- Reassure them that their feelings are normal and understandable
- Try setting aside specific time with your child to talk about their worries. This can create a sense of calm, as they will know their fears and concerns are being heard
- Remember that affection is a form of communication, and your child may want or need more hugs and attention than usual. This is normal and expected
- Spend time with your child doing activities that they enjoy, such as playing games and singing songs together
- Try to share happy memories with your child, or tell stories about your country or culture



### **Maricarmen's story**

*Maricarmen is a 27-year-old mom who has an eight-year-old daughter, Nina. Nina is often very quiet and withdrawn, spending a lot of time coloring in her room. Maricarmen sets aside time twice a week to sit with Nina and colour. While they are colouring together, Maricarmen checks in with Nina to chat about what's happening at school, what's new and anything else Nina wants to talk about.*

*Maricarmen makes sure to praise Nina for any progress or success she has had and encourages her to share her hopes, dreams and worries. Sometimes they just colour, other times they make pictures. Maricarmen lets Nina decide what to do with what they have created. Sometimes Nina hangs them up, other times Nina throws them out and other times Nina puts her and Maricarmen's creations in a special box which they have decorated together.*

## DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

During and after trauma, feeling a strong bond between parent and child is vital to healing. When faced with challenging behavior from your children, it is helpful to respond with patience and caring rather than reacting with anger or punishment. If a child is unable to express their emotions due to being fearful of the parent's reaction to their behavior, they may have trouble learning how to express and manage their feelings appropriately. Reacting negatively to a child's behavior may also make them feel disconnected from the parent and have difficulty feeling safe. Often children act out or misbehave due to an unmet need or feeling unsafe. The first step to dealing with challenges is to determine what your child might need to make them feel safe, then decide how you can meet this need.

Setting clear expectations and limits also helps children feel safe and secure. Respond to your child's behavior the same way every time. When you are consistent, the behaviors you like will happen more often and problem behaviors are less likely to happen. Consider creating family rules together, and placing them somewhere easy to see inside the home. Family rules can include clear statements about the positive behaviors you expect at home. Remember to promote wellbeing and positive coping skills by communicating in ways that are nurturing, predictable, welcoming, clear, and safe.

# HELPFUL RESPONSES TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

If difficult behaviors arise, there are some effective ways you can respond:



**Maintain consistency, setting and explaining limits**



**Develop confidence by offering two safe choices whenever possible**



**Try to understand the need the behavior is expressing**



**Help children identify what they are feeling**



**Demonstrate the behavior that we wish to see in our children**



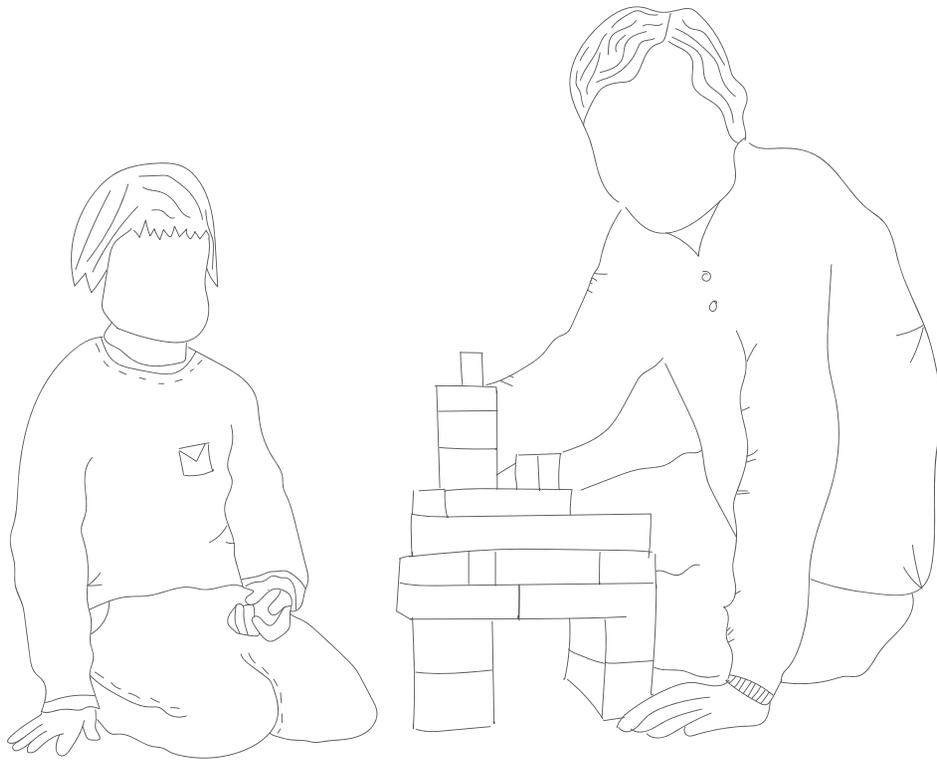
**Remind children that you care about them**



**Talk about mistakes, using them as opportunities to make better decisions**



**Create more quality time with your child (play, read, create art together)**



### **Ignacio's story**

*Ignacio is a 34-year-old father with an 11-year-old son, Enrique. Ignacio spends much of his time working two jobs. When he is home, Enrique is often loud, breaks things, and is untidy. Although Ignacio is frustrated and tired, he knows that Enrique is expressing a need to be heard, for his father's attention and affection, and a need to be creative. Ignacio calmly acknowledged to Enrique that perhaps it might be frustrating being left alone so much. Ignacio explained that working two jobs is the only way he knows how to make sure they can have what they need. Ignacio reassured Enrique that he loved him and working two jobs was a hard decision.*

*This helped Enrique to identify and express his feelings to his father. Ignacio acknowledged that he recognised how talented and creative Enrique is through the work that he sees him do on his building projects. Ignacio expressed his sadness when Enrique breaks things when he knows he is so capable of creating new and beautiful things. Ignacio encouraged Enrique to use his words and creativity, rather than break things.*

*Ignacio also made a deal with Enrique. He would plan in specific times when he's home from work for the two of them to work in a building project together. Ignacio explained that Enrique's part of the deal would be to try to work more quietly, clean up after himself and to be careful not to break things. Ignacio made sure to consistently schedule this time with Enrique and praise him each time he cleaned up and worked quietly. Enrique noticed that things weren't getting broken as much and, over time, Enrique's challenging behavior decreased and Ignacio's and Enrique's relationship improved.*

# SEEKING SUPPORT

There may come a time when difficult emotions or behaviors become too much for you, or your children, to handle alone. It then becomes important to seek additional help. At this point, you might wish to consult a therapist or other professional to help you and your child cope. In the United States there are a variety of mental health and social services for families who have had similar experiences. Some therapists or professionals work with children, others with adults, and others meet with families together to offer a variety of material and counselling support.

How do you know if additional help is needed? Here are some guidelines:

- You or your child feel hopeless, depressed, and alone consistently
- You or your child has considered harming themselves or others (people or animals)\*
- You or your child experience a level of anxiety, depression, mood swings or anger that interferes with your daily activities
- Aside from the trauma of separation, you suspect your child may have experienced additional medical, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse while in detention
- You are in a relationship where you are being emotionally or physically abused
- You have been actively hurting your child, or feeling the urge to hurt your child including any of the following: spanking, hitting, yelling, or neglecting their needs
- You or your child has engaged in self-harm, which involves hurting oneself in a physical manner on purpose with methods such as cutting or burning. Often this is a sign that either emotions have become too big to contain and they want to feel control, or that a sense of numbness has taken over and the person needs to “feel” something

\* Please reach out for professional help right away in the case of self-harm, or harm to others. It is helpful to remember that these feelings are most likely a result of trauma, and it will be important to respond with kindness rather than fear or panic.

It can sometimes be difficult to know who to contact, so we have included some helpful phone numbers on the next page.

# ADDITIONAL HELP

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-7233
- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline (Español):** 1-888-628-9454
- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline (English):** 1-800-273-8255
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-800-656-4673
- **RAICES (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services):** 1-800-409-2893
- **Catholic Charities USA:** 703-549-1390; [www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/find-help/](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/find-help/)

In addition, you may need help with any of the following:

- Housing, food, clothing
- Medical care
- Legal services
- Mental health services
- Transportation assistance
- Connecting to local and national organizations
- Connecting to school resources

Having access to all of the above can reduce your level of stress and restore a sense of control over your life.

If you would like one of our volunteers to assist you in locating resources and service providers, please contact **Immigrant Families Together** via WhatsApp: 917-539-6396.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Visit [www.girasoltexas.org/](http://www.girasoltexas.org/) for more information.

For more information visit our websites [immigrantfamilies.together.com](http://immigrantfamilies.together.com) and [wearelumos.org](http://wearelumos.org)



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