

HANDOUT 1

Using Sensitive and Parent-Centered Language



The language used by mental health providers, social workers, family support professionals, and others working with immigrant parents matters. Terms such as “separation” or “separated” may carry emotional weight and may not reflect how parents understand their experiences.

In this study, parents who initiated their migration or migrated in planned stages* often experienced the term “separation” negatively, while those who experienced government-enforced separation used it to describe their circumstances. Many parents described themselves as “siempre ahí” (“always there”) for their children, maintaining emotional and psychological connections despite physical distance.

Providers are encouraged to listen tentatively to parents’ narratives, honor parents’ own language and avoid assumptions. A helpful starting question is: “Can you tell me about the circumstances that led to you and your child living apart?” Such open-ended questions can support meaningful conversations while minimizing the risk of emotional distress or retraumatization.

**Although some parents initiated or planned their migration, these decisions were often made within significant economic, social, political, and structural constraints. Thus, parent-initiated migration should not be understood as entirely voluntary or free from coercive circumstances.*

Parent-Informed Assessment and Exploratory Questions on Migration-Related Family Separation and Reunification

AREA	QUESTION
Circumstances of Migration and Separation	• Can you tell me about the circumstances that led to you and your child living apart? • How much choice or control did you feel you had over what happened? • What was it like for you as a parent when you and your child could not be physically together?

AREA	QUESTION
Parent-Child Connection	• Can you tell me about the time when you lived here while your child was living in [country] after migration? • What helped you stay connected to your child during that time? • What stands out most from that time as a parent? • In what ways did you feel close to your child during that time? • What was it like when you and your child came back together? • What helped you maintain your connection with your child, particularly when circumstances made communication difficult?
Exploration on Parental Efforts and Intentionality	• What do you remember doing during the time your child lived in [country] and you lived here to stay connected and engaged? • [If parent and child/children are not together] Have you found any ways to help your child feel connected to you when you're not physically together? • Can you share a moment when you experienced your child's love or support after something you did for them or when it was child-initiated? • What do your own efforts (before, during after migration and once you came back together) mean to you as a parent? • What were some things you did regularly to stay present in your child's life? • Can you describe traditions, routines, or messages you kept during that time? • Were there specific affirmations or words you repeated to yourself or your child?
Support Systems	• Who supported you the most during the time you and your child lived apart? Or who is supporting you now during your time apart from your child? • Were there [or are there] friends, family, or community members who helped you feel connected to your child? • Did faith, spirituality or a culturally traditionally practice play a role in how you felt during the time you lived apart? Or does it play a role now?

AREA	QUESTION
Meaning and Reflection	• What strengths have you discovered in yourself as you navigated living apart and living together again? • In what ways did you draw strength, hope, or motivation while apart [or still draw today]? • How has this experience shaped the way you see your role as a parent today?
Reunification	• What surprised you most about your relationship when you lived together again? • How did you and your child adjust to living together again? • What parts of your connection felt unchanged, and what parts had to be rebuilt? • What was it like to reconnect with your child after living apart, and what challenges or strengths emerged during that transition?

Informed by the study *What About the Parents?* by Dra. Cheryl Aguilar, LICSW, PhD. Read the dissertation: [ProQuest](#). More resources at [siempreahi.org](#).