


MAY 2026



The increase in immigration enforcement activity across the country and in Ohio has created fear and distress for many children and families. Witnessing or hearing about violent enforcement actions, whether in their community or on a screen, can be traumatic for children and disrupt their sense of safety. Trusted adults play a critical role in supporting children's emotional well-being during times like this. Whether children are directly or indirectly affected, it can be hard to know what to say.

The tips below offer guidance to help caring adults talk with children, support healthy coping skills, and foster hope during difficult or distressing times.

KNOW THE SIGNS OF STRESS

Children express fear, distress, and other emotions in different ways. You might notice changes in behavior, like restlessness, irritability, trouble sleeping, eating more or less than usual, or difficulty concentrating in school. These shifts can be signs that your child is feeling overwhelmed. Gently paying attention and creating space for them to share can make a meaningful difference.

TALKING TIP

Ask open-ended, body-based questions to help children connect with their feelings. For example: "When I feel scared, my chest sometimes feels tight. Have you ever felt that way? What have you been feeling lately?" Naming emotions can help children feel more in control. Tools like a [feelings wheel](#) can also make it easier for them to express what they're experiencing.

GAUGE THEIR UNDERSTANDING

Young people take in a lot of information through their peers, the news, and social media. They may know more about current immigration enforcement actions than you realize. Before explaining, take time to understand what they already know or believe. Starting with a simple question like, "What have you heard about what's going on?" helps you to meet them where they are. From there, you can provide facts, clarify any misunderstandings, and offer reassurance.

TALKING TIP

Choose the right moment to start the conversation. Avoid talking right before bedtime or during stressful moments. Instead, look for a calm, unhurried time when your child feels safe to talk and you can give them your full attention.

CREATE A FAMILY SAFETY PLAN

Having a plan can help children feel more secure, even if your family is not directly affected by immigration enforcement. This may include discussing what would happen if a loved one were detained or deported, identifying trusted adults, knowing emergency contacts, discussing encounters with immigration officials, or supporting affected friends and neighbors.

The Immigrant Legal Resource Center offers a [step-by-step guide](#) for creating a plan and [printable "Know Your Rights" cards](#) to support these conversations.

TALKING TIP

Framing preparation as empowerment can reduce fear. You might say, "Having a plan helps us know what to do, even in hard situations." Teaching children their rights in an age-appropriate way can also help them feel more confident and less helpless.

TEACH AND MODEL COPING STRATEGIES

Helping children build healthy coping skills gives them tools to manage strong emotions. Try different strategies together and notice what works best.

One example is the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique: take slow breaths, then name five things you see, four you touch, three you hear, two you smell, and one you taste. After, check in on how their body and mind feel and whether they notice any changes.

You can also create a [“coping skills toolbox”](#) with calming activities like drawing, music, or time outside.

TALKING TIP

Children learn by watching adults. Modeling healthy coping shows them how to manage stress. You might say, “I’m feeling overwhelmed, so I’m going to take a few deep breaths,” or “Listening to music helps me relax—want to join me?”

FIND HOPE WHERE YOU CAN

Many things are happening in our world right now that are frightening and distressing. It is easy to feel powerless, especially as a young person. At the same time, small moments of hope can help counter feelings of helplessness.

Encourage your child to notice kindness and care in their community or around the world. Examples of people supporting one another, standing up for others, and offering help remind children that they are not alone. You can also help them feel empowered by finding ways to be helpers themselves, whether that’s checking in with neighbors, volunteering for a local organization, or simply practicing kindness.

Remind children that they are valued and deserving of safety, connection and joy. Support them in taking pride in their identity, culture, and community, and in finding moments of joy even in difficult times.

TALKING TIP

Make space for positive stories in your daily routine. Sharing moments of kindness during meals, car rides, or at the end of the day can help shift focus toward hope and empowerment.

SOURCES:

- [How to Talk to Your Children About Their Feelings and Experiences Related to Immigration Enforcement Actions | UNICEF USA](#)
- [Talking to Kids About Immigration Enforcement in Their Communities | Children’s Hospital Los Angeles](#)
- [Supporting Immigrant Children’s Mental Health During Community Violence | Kids Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Support for Youth and Families of Undocumented Status | Center for Childhood Resilience](#)

RESOURCES:

- [National Immigration Legal Services Directory - Ohio | Immigration Advocates Network](#)
- [Immigrants’ Rights | ACLU of Ohio](#)
- [Step-by-Step Family Preparedness Plan / Plan de Preparación Familiar | Immigrant Legal Resource Center](#)
- [Red Cards / Tarjetas Rojas | Immigrant Legal Resource Center](#)
- [Toolkit: Protecting Immigrant Families Facing Deportation | Child Thrive Action Network](#)
- [6 Mental Health Resources to Help Children & Youth Cope with the Terror & Uncertainty of Immigration Raids | The Children’s Partnership](#)
- [Immigration Resources for Young Children and Their Families | Division for Early Childhood](#)
- [Building Your Coping Toolbox | Mental Health America](#)
- [La Rueda de Sentimientos | Judi’s House](#)
- [Feelings Wheel | University of Central Arkansas](#)

