

Talking With Children About ICE & Scary News

A Community Guide for Parents

Children may hear frightening things about immigration enforcement, raids, arrests, or family separation - at school, online, or in adult conversations. Even when a child's own family is not directly affected, these stories can stir deep fear and confusion.

Jewish families can also carry a long collective memory of displacement, forced migration, and separation from loved ones. Because of this, news about families being torn apart can feel especially upsetting - for adults and children alike.

Avoiding the topic can increase fear. Calm, honest, values-grounded conversations help children feel safe, supported, and held by their community.

Why These Conversations Matter

Children notice when adults are uneasy or distressed. Without guidance, they may:

- Internalize fear about safety or belonging
- Worry about their parents, teachers, or friends
- Feel helpless in the face of injustice
- Disconnect from school or community spaces
- Make up a story to explain what they don't understand

For Jewish families: Judaism places deep importance on these values.

- Pikuach nefesh (שְׁפָנָח נְפֵשָׁה) (protecting life)
- Kavod habriyot (חוּרְבָּה דָבָכָה) (human dignity)
- Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh (הָצָבָה כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבְּרָע לְאָחָשִׁים) (we are responsible for one another)
- Care for the ger (רוֹגֵג) (the stranger)

You do not need to explain everything. Being present, grounded, and honest — and framing conversations in values — makes a powerful difference.



Starting the Conversation

Begin with curiosity and listening.

You might ask:

- “What have you heard (or seen?) about ICE or immigration?”
- “Did anyone talk about this at school?”
- “Is anything you heard or saw making you feel worried or confused?”

Listen without correcting right away. Children often combine fragments of information with imagination.

If your child doesn't know what ICE is, you can explain:

“ICE is a government group that enforces immigration laws. Sometimes they decide whether people can stay in the country.”

You may add values-based context:

- “Some families are being separated and harassed by ICE because of where they were born or how they came here. In Judaism, we believe separating families and harming children is not okay.”
- “What are you curious about?”
- “Where could we look to find out more?”
- “There are a lot of people trying to help.”

This helps children understand what's happening without feeling alone or powerless.

- “It's okay to feel scared, anxious, etc. Let's talk about it together.”
- “I'm glad you're noticing what's happening. How do you feel about it?”
- “Where do you feel that emotion in your body?”

What Not to Say

Even well-intentioned responses can increase distress.

Avoid:

- “Don't worry about it.”
- (This can feel dismissive.)
- “That would never happen to us.”
- (This may feel unsafe or untrue.)
- Graphic descriptions or repeated exposure to frightening news.

Instead, try:

- “It makes sense to feel scared or upset.”
- “You're not alone - our community looks out for one another.”
- “We can keep talking about this whenever you need.”

Supporting Big Feelings

Fear and grief are human experiences, not weaknesses.

Ways to help children process emotions:

- Invite expression through art, journaling, prayer, or conversation
- Keep routines—Shabbat, bedtime rituals, school—predictable
- Use calming practices like breathing or grounding
- Reassure them they can always come back to you with questions

Helpful language:

“We don't face hard things alone. I'm here with you.”

Watch for signs of stress:

- Trouble sleeping
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Increased clinginess or irritability
- School or activity avoidance

Conversation Tips by Age

Ages 3–6

Focus: Safety, love, and belonging

You might say:

- “Some families are being treated unkindly because of where they were born. Grown-ups are doing everything they can to help.”
- “Many people are using their voices and telling our leaders they think it’s wrong to treat people unfairly because of where they were born.”

Offer:

- Extra physical comfort
- Familiar rituals (Shabbat candles, bedtime blessings)
- Reassurance of love and protection

Reassure:

“You are safe. You are loved. Our community cares for you.”

Ages 7–11

Focus: Fairness, empathy, and trusted adults

You might say:

- “Some families are being separated because of immigration rules. That isn’t fair, and it’s okay to feel upset about it.”
- “People are protesting and using their voices to let our leaders know they don’t agree with how some families are being treated and separated.”
- “Unfair rules and ways of doing things, in both the past and the present, have made life easier for some and harder for others.”

Offer:

- Questions
- Honest conversation
- Talking to trusted adults at home, school, or synagogue
- Reassurance of love and protection

Ages 7–11 (cont.)

You can add:

“We believe in standing up for people who are treated unfairly.”

Explain the situation with straightforward facts:

- Let them ask questions and answer honestly and directly
- Model taking a pause, breathing, and noticing
- Remind them to only discuss this with trusted adults
- Model critical thinking when consuming media
- Be aware of stereotypes and show positive, counter-stereotypical examples of immigrants

Ages 12–18

Focus: Honesty, moral clarity, and agency

You might say:

- “It’s painful to see families treated differently because of where they’re from. History gives us a deep understanding of why this matters.”
- “What are you finding isn’t fair about what’s happening to some people in our country right now because of where they are from?”
- “What emotion is showing up for you right now?”
- “Do you want to talk about what we can do?”
- “How can I support you?”

Support teens by:

- Listening more than talking
- Helping them evaluate media sources
- Encouraging healthy outlets (writing, dialogue, service, advocacy)

Let them know:

“Caring deeply is not a weakness—it’s part of who we are.”

Helping Children Feel Prepared and Not Afraid

For some families, especially those with immigration concerns, preparedness can reduce anxiety.

A Family Preparedness Plan may include:

- Emergency contacts
- Copies of important documents
- Temporary care plans
- School and medical information

You can frame this in a way that feel familiar to children:

“Just like we prepare for emergencies or make plans for holidays, adults sometimes make plans so children feel safe.”

Free toolkit:

<https://www.ilrc.org/resources/step-step-family-preparedness-plan>

Red Cards: Knowing Your Rights

Red Cards explain legal rights during encounters with immigration officers. They can be shown instead of speaking and are available in many languages.

They state:

- “I choose to remain silent.”
- “I do not give permission to enter.”
- “I want to speak to a lawyer.”

Free cards:

<https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards-tarjetas-rojas>

You can tell children:

“If someone official ever asks you questions and you feel scared, you have the right to stay silent and ask for a trusted adult.”

You might want to add:

“You don’t have to talk to someone who looks like the police.”

Knowing this can help children feel empowered, not frightened.

When to Seek Additional Support

Reach out for help if a child:

- Has ongoing fear or panic
- Refuses school or other regular activities
- Shows major changes in mood or behavior
- Talks frequently about being unsafe
- Has experienced harassment
- Is disturbed by shelter-in-place or other safety drills at school

Supports may include:

- School or religious counselors
- Jewish Family Service
- Community mental health providers
- Parent coaching or family therapy
- Shape

Being There Matters

Tradition reminds us that presence is powerful.

You don’t need perfect answers. What matters is:

- Listening with compassion
- Speaking with honesty
- Holding children in love and community

For Jewish families:

“**וְדַבֵּל פְּדָאָה תַּוְהַ בָּטָא**” — it is not good for to be alone.”

When children feel held by their family and their community, fear loses its grip.

Special thanks to Amazeworks for their [“How to Talk to Children About Immigration and ICE”](#) resource.

For information about how to talk to ICE when it directly impacts your family, check out Melinda Wenner Moyer’s Substack post [“How to Talk to Kids About ICE and Keep Them Safe.”](#)