

Nurturing relationships among undocumented and mixed-status families: Challenges and opportunities for healing and transformation

To *nurture* means “to care for and encourage the growth or development of.” Families serve as a foundation for individuals to thrive. For immigrants, regardless of the length of time in the U.S., changing family circumstances, the sociopolitical climate, and challenging developmental tasks (e.g., teen’s request for independence) can result in unexpected strains on the family.

What is intergenerational conflict?

Intergenerational conflict in immigrant families refers to clashes over adherence to traditional values and ways of thinking between family members of different generations.¹ For example, a parent or adult caregiver with traditional values on dating may not agree with a teenage daughter’s vision on modern dating, while the daughter may not understand their parent’s reasoning which could be perceived as “controlling.” While differences of opinion are typical among adolescents and their caregivers, it becomes concerning when family tensions occur often and lead to recurrent conflict and poor communication. For individuals with a high value on family unity, loyalty and shared responsibility, tension and conflict with family members can be distressing.

Below are some common sources of resilience and stress experienced by immigrant families. While recognizing vulnerabilities is important, it is also essential to highlight strengths and protective factors within families. These sources of resilience may be forgotten in times of stress, but can be used as opportunities for healing.

Sources of <i>resilience</i>	Sources of <i>stress</i>
Family loyalty and unity	Economic stress/changes in social status
Determination – “echándole ganas”	Separation from social supports
Motivation and love – “por una vida mejor”	Experiences of discrimination and racism
Religion and spirituality	Daily microaggressions
Ability to adapt to changing situations	Changes in family roles and responsibilities
Hopefulness and looking for a better future	Unfamiliarity with U.S. norms and values; may be left feeling misunderstood or judged

What are some common intergenerational differences?

The intergenerational tensions that emerge in families are often fueled by differing expectations and priorities. For many parents, their migration to the U.S. was driven to secure a better future for their children. As children grow up, parents often expect and hope that their children will make decisions that will align with their own values and preferences. However, this is not always the case. For example, this may occur when young adults involved in activism are empowered by the sociopolitical climate and their peers, while parents may strongly disagree with their involvement for fear of negative consequences and a desire to protect. One way to think of this type of tension is to understand the role of parents/caregivers as “keepers of stability,” while the younger generations would be the “agents of

Prepared for NLPA and UWD by Michelle A. Silva, Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, German Cadenas, Luz Garcini, Alfonso Mercado, and Manuel Paris. This resource sheet was prepared from an ECHO session with significant input from participants. We thank them for their engagement and wisdom. Access ECHO 2 information here: <https://osf.io/hb25w/>. For further information, please contact michelle.silva@yale.edu

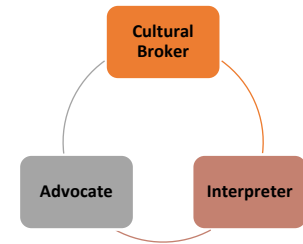
change.” Other common sources of intergenerational tensions include:

Source of tension	Considerations
Disagreement in life choices	Opposing perspectives regarding the pursuit of higher education versus joining the workforce, or differences in preferences about living arrangements (e.g., living with a romantic partner before marriage).
Negotiating intersectional identities	Intersectional identities refer to the multiple overlapping identities an individual has and how they affect everyday life and experiences. In the case of a parent, it may be balancing the identities of being a first-generation immigrant who is undocumented and a single parent. Alternatively, their young adult may be experiencing life as a second-generation immigrant, fully bilingual, college student with more opportunities for advancement than their parent. Despite living in the same household, the various identities between parent and child may offer unique advantages and disadvantages.
Value differences	Often influenced by the effects of acculturation and different degrees of exposure to mainstream culture so that a parent may worry that the family’s cultural values are no longer valued in the same way. Each family member will experience and respond to life in the U.S. in their own way. Due to their involvement in school, children may quickly gain comfort and familiarity with mainstream U.S. culture. As a result, parents may worry that the family’s cultural values are no longer valued in the same way. As tensions emerge, there may be concern about how to preserve and/or prioritize the parent-child relationship.
Not living up to each other’s expectations	Parents and caregivers may feel that they do not fully understand their adolescent or young adult, and may even feel guilty about or regret their decision to migrate. Adolescents and young adults may feel stress that they are not fulfilling their parent’s expectations by following their personal wishes and that their parent’s “sacrifice will not have been worth it.”

For Organizers and Advocates: What does this mean for your role?

As an organizer and advocate, there will be different opportunities for you to engage with families and potentially intervene. The various roles you may be expected to take on include: *advocate, cultural broker, and interpreter*. As an advocate, you may be called to give voice to the family's concerns in a public manner and linking them to available community allies; as a cultural broker, you may be called to help families navigate mainstream U.S. culture including its social structures and organization; and finally, as an interpreter, you may be called on to assist with translation and help families develop literacy around topics that may be unfamiliar to them, such as the special education system.

You might want to carefully consider how you feel about each of these roles and how you would balance providing support for the families you work with and your individual needs and experiences. It is important to keep in mind how your personal views and similarities with the lived experiences of the families you work with may result in potential blind spots, or biases, that might influence your views and behaviors.



Below are some questions to consider as you work with families:

- *How do you feel about taking on each of these roles?*
- *What specifically can you do to provide support/assistance?*
- *What qualities do you bring to this role?*
- *What additional training do you need to be effective in these roles?*
- *What are your motivations for working with immigrant families?*
- *How will your life experiences be assets and potential blind spots in your work with families?*

Some ways to help:

1. Listen to the family's story in a non-judgmental way; suspend assumptions and resist placing blame.
2. Invest time in developing trust and listen for minimized concerns that may lie behind common responses that "all is ok/*todo está bien.*"
3. Identify and affirm family strengths, such as finding a way to support one another despite disagreements.
4. Validate the challenge and grief associated with intergenerational differences.
5. Name the opportunities for growth, understanding, and new ways of demonstrating support.
6. Encourage reconnection and courageous conversations between family members.
7. Normalize the importance of respecting differing needs for physical and emotional space among family members – "even when you love them, but you need to take care of yourself."
8. Connect family members to available community-based supports as needed.
9. Pay attention to your own reactions and take care of yourself.
10. Model the development of empathy and understanding for differing viewpoints.

References:

Choi, Y., He, M., & Harachi, T.W. (2008). Intergenerational cultural dissonance, parent-child conflict and bonding, and youth problem behaviors among Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrant families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 37(1), 85-96.