

Northern Triangle Unaccompanied Children and Families Seeking Asylum: Traumatic Effects on Children's Attachment and Reunification



Unaccompanied minors from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador make up 48%, 27%, and 14%, respectively, of all unaccompanied minors arriving in the United States. This population is at significant risk for psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress, and is less likely to access culturally responsive mental health services, thus continuing to be undiagnosed or untreated. This can lead to negative outcomes, such as negative interactions at school and with authorities, increased disconnection from family and society, and exposure to the criminal justice system.

It is well documented that many children seeking asylum in the US have experienced trauma related to war or persecution. These traumatic events may occur while children are in their countries of origin (e.g., gangs and violence), during displacement from their countries of origin (e.g., coyotes, assaults, deprivation), or in the resettlement process in the US (e.g., hieleras (iceboxes) and detention), which have an impact on mental and physical health long after they have occurred. Furthermore, such experiences have an impact on the child's attachment style as well as emotional well-being.

The intersection of trauma with detention and the reunification processes in children may result in:

- PTSD or PTSD symptoms
- Fear of being returned to home country
- Shattered sense of safety
- Feeling criminalized
- Dysregulation of child's stress response
- Symptoms, behaviors, and biological measurements
- Internalized negative attributions
- Diminished hope, and expectations for future
- Difficulty with self-esteem regulation
- Functional impairments in key psychological, social, and academic areas

For children seeking asylum and those who have undergone these experiences, reunification can be complicated as the attachment with primary caregivers is often disrupted. This, in turn, will have an impact on attachment styles as they reunite with family members. Among asylum-seeking children with trauma experience, two main attachment styles may become evident:

1. Insecure-Avoidant

- a. Expects rejection from the parent on the reunion;
- b. Displays avoidance rather than seeking proximity; and
- c. Avoids contact to reduce anticipated conflict or rejection.

2. Insecure-Ambivalent

- a. Is uncertain of the parent's response to the reunion;
- b. Displays passive or angry-resistant behavior that serves to establish proximity to the parent; and
- c. When the parent responds, the child is ambivalent and does not feel comforted by the parent.

Tips for clinicians working with children who have been detained and reunited with family members include:

Explore previous trauma experiences, and its impact on current social, emotional, and school well-being.	Assess acculturative stress, including perceived discrimination and immigration-related stress.	Consider the impact of traumatic events on attachment styles.
Consider migration processes as main contributor to family fragmentation, dislocation and reconstruction.	Recognize child's developmental stage at the time of traumatic events.	Identify adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and symptoms related to these.
Explore child's sense of safety.	Identify sources of support.	Distinguish attachment style and how it manifests in reunification processes.
Identify children's strengths and resiliency.	Provide psychoeducation to increase sense of control.	Keep in mind engagement and cultural considerations as important first steps during the therapeutic session.

However, we would like to state that this comes with an important caveat: these clinical considerations be used or incorporated with caution. It is incumbent on the person providing therapeutic services to determine if and when the child and family are prepared to discuss their trauma. It is a slow process.