

TRISH ALLISON

DEI

# Parent Guidebooks

*How to Explain  
Immigration  
to Kids*

# How to Explain Immigration to Kids

DEI for Parents

Trish Allison

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HOW TO EXPLAIN IMMIGRATION TO KIDS

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Written by Trish Allison.

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*My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants. We were strangers once, too.*

*- Barack Obama*

# Introduction

It's likely that your child has already heard about immigration in one way or another. But because kids might have spotty knowledge about the subject, it's important to fill in the gaps of information with the truth and to correct any misconceptions they might have.

The best approach? Offer simple explanations to questions like 'What is an immigrant' and 'Why do immigrants leave their home countries.' Most important, weave the following concept into all of your discussion and activities: 'America was founded on principles of fairness to people who enter our country seeking a new life.'

To make the basic principles in this guidebook as easy as possible for kids to learn, information is broken into small chunks.

*"Learning by chunking increases working memory capacity by reducing memory load and facilitates acquisition or recall by organizing long-term memory for information in perceived stimuli, motor sequences, or cognitive representations."*<sup>1</sup>

The goal is to utilize chunks of expert-backed information to help you guide your child toward a *basic* understanding of the importance of respecting immigrants. The strategy used here is to teach the basics *only*, without overloading them with extraneous information.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you're reading this guidebook:

- First and foremost, none of the steps are meant to be completed on a single, dictatorial occasion. The intent is to communicate the values described here on a casual basis over a period of time.

- Tips are written for parents of elementary-school children but there's a wide spectrum of maturity at every age.

Some 6-year-olds are mature way beyond their years and some 10-year-olds are learning at a different pace than their peers. That said, you know your child best including what is and isn't appropriate for their maturity level.

Note: All tips adhere to the child development guidelines published by the [American Psychology Association](#).

- The chapters are organized linearly; it's best to read chapter one first and chapter five last. That said, if you have an immediate concern, feel free to read whichever chapter is most pertinent at the time.
- Many of the tips assume that you and your child already share a fairly solid foundation of mutual communication. The tips are doable without this foundation but they'll be much harder to implement successfully without it.
- The most efficient method for teaching children (and adults too) is to guide, not lecture. Help your child reach their own conclusions by providing 'breadcrumbs' of information that lead them to discover concepts using their own reasoning skills. Kids learn much more efficiently when they feel like they've arrived at a concept on their own instead of believing something because that's what they've been told to believe.  
Remember, this book's goal is to guide your child toward their *own* understanding of why immigrants deserve to be viewed with the same lens as all Americans.
- It's so important to praise kids when they do something that's aligned with whatever you taught them. Be specific with your praise and look them in the eyes when you say it. Your approval means more than you think.

Finally, while there's no one-size-fits-all solution for raising equality-minded kids, this guidebook provides suggestions for scenarios that you can tailor to fit your own situation. The ultimate goal is to help

you raise compassionate, non-biased, successful humans.



# Chapter 1: Learn What Your Kid(s) Already Know About Immigration

This chapter appears first because it's important for you to find out what your child already knows about U.S. immigration *before* you start guiding them. If you start saying things they already know, they're likely to tune out.

Maybe they're already well-versed in all aspects of current and past issues. Or maybe they know very little about immigration and you're starting with a blank slate.

Either way, you'll never know until you get them talking and really listen to their opinion.

Also, because kids tend to shy away from face-to-face, formal discussions, the best way to learn their opinion is to listen and learn sporadically. There's no need for a one-time, sit-down, eye-to-eye conversation. Keep it casual.

## **Step 1. Inspire your child to share their thoughts**

The best way to get most children to open up is to say the minimum. If you use short phrases that reassure and prompt, you're more likely to get a response. The goal here is to get your child feeling comfortable enough to express how they feel.

The other crucial element is timing. Trying to start a conversation while your child is playing a game, reading, watching TV or a video almost never works. They'll probably find it intrusive before you even start talking. Plus, you won't have their full attention.

If it's not the right time, wait. As many parents know, timing is everything, especially when you're trying to discover a child's true feelings.

If it *is* a good time, here are some ideas for sparking a conversation about immigration:

A news story, series or movie where there's an immigration issue is a good place to start. The most relatable 'immigration current event' for kids usually has to do with family separation. There's no need to trigger tears here though—stories about caged kids has been pretty grim and scary the last few years.

Instead, find a feel-good story about efforts to reunite immigrant families. Google the phrase 'family reunification.'

Look through the search results and find a link or two that you think your child might have an opinion about. Bring it up and see what kind of reaction you get. Really listen to their opinion. Make sure they know that fairness is one of the hallmarks of U.S. Immigration policy.

Also, reading a book together about family immigration is a great way to spark a conversation because it's not a face-to-face activity; there's a better chance your child will divulge their true opinion.

There are lots of wonderful children's books that tell stories about immigrant families. Here are some resources:

- [18 Books for Kids about the Immigrant Experience in America](#)
- [20 Must-Read Children's Books About Immigration](#)

Try to keep in mind that many of these books might arouse feelings of sadness and/or empathy by affirming experiences of immigrant families. This is actually a good thing because the overall goal of this guidebook is to help your child understand that immigrants deserve kindness and respect. If they have questions, take time to answer thoroughly. Make fairness and kindness your guiding principles.

Keep your discovery tactics as casual as possible. Kids are much more likely to respond honestly when they feel comfortable. As you go about your lives together, gather clues here and there. This could be in the car, at the store, eating a meal, or watching TV together. Try to initiate informal

conversations anywhere that seems appropriate to you - you know your child best.

*“Conversation helps children express their thoughts, get what they need, resolve conflicts, ask for help, and learn from adults and from one another.”* <sup>2</sup>

Another tip—regardless of the subject of your casual conversation, it's important to read between the lines of what they're telling you or asking you.

For example, suppose your child tells you that one of their classmates, Gabriella, missed two weeks of school because her family's immigration status was being questioned. Your child complains that it's not fair that Gabriella got to miss school.

You can infer from this statement that your child might not be 100% on board with immigrant equality. Even if s/he specifically said in a different conversation that they're all for it, their true opinion is likely different.

Keep the conversation going and find out more. Ask what the teacher did when Gabriella missed school. Your job is to discover what your child really thinks and feels despite any ‘politically-correct jargon’ they might have heard elsewhere.

Remember, it's important to keep your discovery tactics and opinions to yourself. Otherwise, you run the risk of making them feel like you're making moral judgements about what they're telling you. The very last thing you want to do is create a barrier for any future meaningful back and forth discussions.

Explore more deeply about the Gabriella issue (or whatever they shared) but try to keep it casual so your child is more likely to respond. If s/he thinks it's unfair, ask why? What are their peers saying? If they could, how would they fix the problem?

Continue subtly encouraging your child to contribute ideas so they feel like they're an important part of immigrant-equality progress (which their generation absolutely is!).

If your child doesn't respond to anything, save it for later.

It might be that s/he's never even thought about immigrant justice before. Give them time to think about it. Keep trying

until they're ready to share. Try to remember that the whole point of this step is to get your child to talk so you can get an accurate understanding of how they truly consider immigrant equality.

## Step 2. Listen carefully

Once your child starts talking, listen attentively and silently. The only words you need to utter, if any, are to let them know you're eager to learn more. Be ready to listen without judgement.

Never interrupt. Even if what they're saying is completely against everything you believe about immigrant equality, try to remind yourself that this is their time to talk and your time to listen and learn.

Kids can tell if you're paying attention to them. Today's Parent explains:

*“When you’re really connected, your body is leaning in and your phone is down. You’ll find that if you do a really good job in those moments, they will come to you for the hard stuff.”*<sup>3</sup>

Let your child sort through their feelings as they talk. Remember that this is not about you.

While they're talking, if you feel like you're going to burst if you don't say something, feel free to nod your head and say “hmmm.”

Otherwise, here are some phrases you could use to let them know you're interested in what they're saying, and you want to learn more:

- “*Tell me more.*”
- “*Wow, you have quite a story to share.*”
- “*Please keep talking. I’m really interested.*”
- “*It sounds like you have a lot on your mind, so I’m glad you’re sharing.*”

- *“I love that you’re so open and honest with your feelings. “*
- *“It means a lot to me that you feel comfortable talking to me. “*
- *“You’re doing a great job of describing what happened. “*
- *“Could you repeat that? I want to be sure I understand what you’re going through. “*

Listen to what your child tells you or doesn’t tell you about immigrant equality. Look for messages even in silence or outbursts. Listen carefully—not just to the words, but to the feelings (and body language) behind them.

Silence makes most of us uncomfortable. But if you can stay quiet during moments of silence while s/he’s gathering their thoughts, you might be surprised by what s/he says next and what you learn.

Also, because we usually think three to four times faster than we talk, we often get impatient with a speaker’s slow progress, especially with children, and our minds wander.

Try using the extra time by silently considering your child’s point. Then, when they’re finished, you can restate the points and ask if you’ve correctly understood the message.

Questions like *“Is this what you mean?”* or *“Do I understand you correctly?”* are not only supportive because they show you were listening, but also reduce the chance of a misunderstanding later on.

When they’re finished, you’ll know. The pace of the conversation might slow and body language might soften.

Listening with the intent to understand is not easy, but it can be done. Most of us are half listening or listening with the intent to respond instead of listening to understand where the other person is coming from. It’s really common.

Give your full attention. Listen, and model active listening by putting down your phone, and making eye contact. Knowing

what is not said is sometimes as important as what is said.

For example, maybe on TV, there's a show about a family that emigrated to the United States from India. Your brother, 'Uncle Don' to your kids, says something derogatory about how immigrants are ruining America.

Follow up with your child later and ask them "*What did you think about what Uncle Don said about immigrants when we were watching TV?*"

Starting a conversation about 'Uncle Don's opinion' can create an open space for discussion. A scenario like this could potentially give you enormous insight into how your child really feels about immigrant equality.

Again, learning your child's true opinion requires active listening. The Center for Parenting Education tells us:

*"By listening to them, you are communicating that they are worthy of your attention."*<sup>4</sup>

One day your child will hopefully follow your lead and really listen to whomever s/he's with and respect their opinion.

Finally, achieving sustainable immigrant equality is an ever-evolving subject with lots of twists and turns. It won't be possible to successfully guide your child through the maze without listening to their position and understanding how to proceed.

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## More Resources

- [Foolproof strategies for getting kids to talk](#)
- [Age-by-age guide to getting your kid to talk to you](#)
- [Center for Parenting Education - The Skill of Listening](#)



# Chapter 2: Start by Explaining Immigration Basics

This chapter assumes that you deduced from your information-gathering activities in the previous chapter that your child knows next-to-nothing about U.S. immigration and you're starting with a blank slate. If that's not the case and your child already knows the basics, feel free to skip steps 1 and 2 below.

Keep it simple. Most kids don't need to know details about political immigration ramifications. Nor do they need to know the difference between asylum and naturalized citizenship.

Instead, talk about basics like 'what is an immigrant?' and 'why do immigrants leave their home country?'. When you feel like your child understands the basics, you can connect your discussion to the real world by talking about America's immigrant history and your own family's heritage.

Finally, strive to be as reassuring as possible. Immigration and family separation can be a really scary subject for kids. Make sure you're using age-appropriate terminology that makes them feel safe. Explain that the U.S. government is already working on solutions to make things better.

## Step 1. What is an immigrant?

Explain that an immigrant is a person living in a country other than that of his or her birth. An immigrant can be an adult or a child. An immigrant can even be a plant or animal. For example, a bear found in Alaska that has previously only been found in Montana is called an immigrant bear.

This is a good time to ask your child if they know any immigrants. If they're not 100% sure, offer your own ideas.

If you know someone, talk about their situation. Have they been in the U.S. a long time? Do they work here? Do they have kids who attend school? How well do you know them? Are they good people?

Offer as many words of encouragement as you can here. It's best to begin your child's understanding of immigrant equality with a sense of confidence. The odds of them wanting to learn more will be much greater if they feel confident about the subject from the beginning.

## **Step 2. Why do immigrants leave their home country?**

Explain that there are many reasons why immigrants leave their home country. Sometimes they're fleeing because they fear for their safety. Sometimes they can't find work in their home country. Sometimes it's because a family member is already here. Or maybe they need better healthcare. Or it could be because their homeland was destroyed by a natural disaster.

Regardless of the reason, immigrants are most often seeking a better life for themselves and for their families. It's a hard decision for them to leave their home. Their journey is often long and arduous.

If you feel like your child is emotionally ready, ask him/her to imagine what it would feel like if they were told they were going on a long one-way trip and could only take a few of their favorite toys (and clothes) with them. This will hopefully connect the plight of immigrant families with your child's world. Talk about it together. Make sure s/he feels safe.

## **Step 3. Offer a BRIEF history of U.S. immigration**

The purpose of this step is to provide context for the ideas discussed in previous steps ('what is an immigrant' and 'why do immigrants leave their home country?'). You only need to provide enough background information to convey that America started as a welcoming country.

Since most kids hate history lessons (and some adults too for that matter), you'll be doing both of you a big favor if you communicate this step sporadically and not all at once. Keep it short and simple. Here's a really brief list of U.S. immigration history events:

- In the 1800s, rising instability plagued Europe fueling the largest mass human migration in the history of the world.
- At the time, America was known as the land of opportunity and the majority of European immigrants headed west to start a new life in America.
- A new building was constructed on Ellis Island in New York harbor to process the massive influx of European immigrants arriving by boat. The statue of liberty, gifted by France, was erected on Ellis Island to celebrate America as a symbol of freedom and democracy.
- Since the initial influx from Europe, waves of immigrants from additional distressed continents and countries has occurred consistently. Most people aren't aware that every single American today (except for native Americans) is a descendant of immigrants.
- Today, Ellis Island (now called Liberty Island) has been decommissioned as the nation's immigrant processing center. But the statue of liberty remains as a universal symbol of freedom and democracy.

#### **Step 4. Talk about your own family's heritage**

To give your child a 'bird's eye' view of immigration and connect Ellis Island to your child's life, it's important to help them understand their own family's heritage. When you broach the subject, make them feel like you're sharing special information with them. The goal is to help them feel pride in their own heritage *first* so they can then relate that feeling to immigrants.

*"Knowing your lineage and feeling connected to your family is always advantageous, but when you start learning as a kid the benefits seem to multiply." <sup>5</sup>*

Kids love to learn about their family's past and the benefits are enormous. Look online together to discover where your

family's ancestors originated. Here's a resource that lists the best family-tree builders:

<https://www.familytree.com/reviews/>

Talk about it. Make it fun. Does your family have any rituals related to your heritage? Traditional ones? New ones?

Help your child develop a sense of pride in their heritage and your family's country of origin.

After you've helped your child feel a sense of honor about your own family's heritage, be sure to mention that other families most likely also have their own traditions that give them a warm feeling when they do it together.

Learning about your ancestors, celebrating family traditions, embracing your culture, and understanding where you came from can really help your child make a mental connection between their own sense of belonging and the plight of immigrants.

As you're discovering and discussing your family tree together, keep in mind that the goal is to help your child feel empathy and respect for immigrants.

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## More Resources

- [Family history guide – kid's corner](#)
- [Immigration Facts for Kids](#)
- [How to talk to your child about immigration](#)



# Chapter 3: Discuss What Happens When Immigrants Arrive in America

The purpose of this chapter is to help your child understand how challenging it can be for immigrants to move to a new country—not just the journey itself, but the endless backlash and adjustments they need to make once they get here. Daily anxiety and fear become ‘baked’ into their lives.

The goal here is to spin this information into a ‘positive.’ The immigrant’s plight is a great opportunity for your child to develop empathy. Immigrants need American allies to help them feel like they belong. Encourage your child to consider this as a golden opportunity instead of a ‘negative.’

## **Step 1. Talk about the immigrant journey**

Without sounding alarming, start by explaining that immigrants usually arrive at the U.S. border after a long and perilous journey. They can make the journey by foot, train, horseback, plane, boat, or all of the above. Usually, they spend days, weeks, months, or sometimes even years to get here. Often, they’re delayed by imprisonment in jails and detention centers.

Sometimes, one member of an immigrant family journeys to a new country on their own leaving the rest of their family behind. The reason for this independent migration is most often because one member of the family feels a duty to forge ahead and find safety before endangering the rest of the family.

Try to keep in mind that the goal here isn’t to scare your child, but simply to give them a sense of how badly immigrants want and need to improve their lives.

Instead of getting into gory details about the journey itself, you can base your discussion on immigrants’ willingness to endure

a dangerous journey as a testament to their determination to seek out a better future.

If your child looks worried as you're talking, reassure them that your family is safe and there's absolutely no threat that you'll ever be separated. You could say something like:

*"There are also many people that want to help and welcome immigrants to the U.S. We want everyone to belong and feel safe here. If you ever feel unsafe or if someone says something that is not nice, you can tell me."* <sup>6</sup>

Reassure them that if they ever feel worried or unsafe, they can always come to you.

## **Step 2. Explain the impact of cultural differences**

The 'lucky' immigrants who *do* make it to America often speak a different language, making their daily lives especially hard. Other cultural differences that immigrants experience include new holidays, food, language, and music. Everything is unfamiliar to them.

Here are some ideas for explaining cultural differences at a kid's level.

**Holidays.** Holiday celebrations are the best way to explain immigrants' cultural differences to kids. The only three holidays that America shares with multiple countries are Easter, Christmas, and New Year's Day. The rest of the holidays that your kid(s) might celebrate (4th of July, Labor Day, Halloween, etc) are American-only. American holiday traditions are brand new to immigrants.

**Language.** To explain the language barrier, you could say something like "*Think about how frustrating and scary it is to listen to a group of people talking in a language you've never heard before. Now flip that. Try to imagine how scary and frustrating it must be*

*for an immigrant to be surrounded, daily, by people speaking in a language they don't know.*" This is a perfect opportunity for your child to feel a sense of empathy for the immigrant plight.

**Food.** Holiday meals are another great way to explain the difference between immigrant food and American food. For example, most immigrants who come to America have never even heard of Thanksgiving. Eating turkey and stuffing on a specific Thursday in November is completely new to them. Same with hot dogs on July 4th, or ham on Easter Sunday, or eggnog at Christmas—all Americanized food traditions.

**Music.** Most countries in the world have their own distinct musical tastes. Some examples are Scottish bagpipes, Latin salsa, German polka music, or Jamaican reggae. But when immigrants come to America, they have to specifically seek out music from their home country because it's not often found on popular radio stations. You can talk about the type of music immigrants might hear frequently playing over American airwaves - rap? rock n' roll? country music? - all with English lyrics.

Note: Always try to put a positive spin on anything about immigrants that you communicate to your child. For example, when talking about cultural differences you could say something like:

*'Even though cultural assimilation is a complicated subject for immigrants, the ideas and customs that they bring with them can forever enrich the new country. For example, immigrants have made so many positive contributions to American food culture. Like pizza and tacos. We'd never even know about those foods if it weren't for Italian and Mexican immigrants!'*

### **Step 3. Discuss immigrants' daily anxiety and fear**

The purpose of this step is to continue explaining the extreme difficulties that immigrants face when adjusting to a new country.

Again, try to describe immigrant hardship without triggering fear. Even though kids sometimes ask pointed questions that are hard to answer, it's important for them to know that you're listening. Asking questions is how they learn.

*"Avoiding a child's question does not make the question go away. Instead, not being able to talk*

*about a situation can make children more scared and more worried.”<sup>7</sup>*

Instead of avoiding questions, try to find that sweet spot between accurately depicting misfortune and making sure your child feels safe.

For example, if your child asks a question like “*Why does our government separate kids from their parents?*” your answer could be “*Our government was wrong to separate kids from their parents and they stopped doing it. That will never happen to our family. If you’re concerned though, I’m here to answer your questions anytime.*”

Make sure your child feels comforted before continuing.

If immigrants want to stay in a different country than their own, they must go through a years-long process to gain citizenship. Until then, they live in constant anxiety and fear that they could be deported immediately and give up everything they’ve worked toward in their new country.

Raids are common. The purpose of raids is to round up immigrants who are in their new country illegally. Immigrants who are in the country illegally haven’t abided by the rules they must follow if they want to stay.

The level of stress about raids can be overwhelming. So overwhelming in fact that it’s common for immigrants to suffer from chronic mental health problems, which of course decreases their chance of staying in a new country.

Some immigrants are proud to say they endured the process. But most are forced to return to their country of origin. Only 5% are allowed to stay.

#### **Step 4. Talk about stereotypes and myths**

For many people who are already natural citizens, it’s hard to be empathetic to immigrants’ struggles. Unfortunately, it’s far easier for those citizens to dismiss immigrants as “lawbreakers” than to truly understand their situation. That’s how immigrants acquired so many negative stereotypes.

One of the bigger myths about immigrants is that they refuse to learn English. Not true.

*“Immigrants must speak, read, write and understand the English language, not only for the naturalization application process, but also so they can pass a 100-question civics test that has both oral and written components.”* <sup>8</sup>

While most immigrants do speak their native language at home, most make a concerted effort to speak English when they’re in public.

Another common stereotype about immigrants is that they take good jobs from existing citizens. However, research shows that there’s little connection between immigrant labor and unemployment rates of native-born workers.

*“Across all industries and occupations, immigrants who are naturalized citizens and non-citizens are outnumbered by workers born in the United States.”*

<sup>9</sup>

Like all stereotypes, a few bad apples spoil the reputation of the whole bunch. Yes, there are some immigrants who take advantage of their new country, but the majority of them are honest, hardworking, decent people.

## **Step 5. Explain why immigrants need allies**

It’s time to infuse some optimism.

The good news is that immigrants need allies. They need someone who can help them participate in a new culture and help them feel like they belong.

Talk about how much of a difference in someone’s life an ally can make. Especially in schools where stereotypes of immigrant children are so impactful, your child can really make a difference by befriending a marginalized classmate.

The goal here is simply to help your child feel special because they have a real chance to make someone’s life feel less lonely. Simultaneously, this is also a great opportunity for him/her to learn first-hand the benefits of kindness.

The next chapter continues this conversation by providing specifics about what your child can do to help make immigrants' struggle feel less daunting—how and when exactly to be an ally. For now, the purpose of this step is simply to introduce the notion that children can be part of the solution.

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## More Resources

- [The influence of stereotype threat on immigrants](#)
- [How does immigration affect mental health?](#)
- [Stop telling immigrants to assimilate and start helping them participate](#)



# Chapter 4: Explain How to be an Immigrant's Ally

This chapter brings together concepts from previous chapters: immigrants' arduous journey, adjustment challenges, fear and anxiety, and stereotypes.

The goal now is to merge all of those concepts into an explanation of the importance of being an ally and standing up for what's right.

The first thing to talk about is immigrant bias in schools. Then you can help your child understand how and when it's appropriate to be an ally and specific words and actions they can use.

## Step 1. Discuss school-related immigrant bias

Sometimes it's obvious if a school is biased against children of immigrants. And sometimes it's less obvious—implicit bias can be hard to spot.

*“In addition to direct interactions, individual teachers also discriminate by holding lower academic expectations for children of immigrants and focusing on what Adair calls ‘narrow learning experiences.’ Such instruction does not provide students with opportunities for creativity, inquiry and problem-solving and instead focuses on rote, simplistic tasks.” [10](#)*

School bias against immigrants, whether it's unconscious or not, is a smart way to get your child engaged in a discussion of immigrant allyship is to bring up the subject of immigrant students at their school.

Without putting them on the spot, ask your child if there are any kids who are negatively targeted solely because of their family's heritage.

If s/he hesitates to answer, you can get the conversation started by asking questions like:

- “*Does your teacher call on immigrant students to answer questions as often as other students?*”
- “*Does the playground monitor discipline immigrant students differently than other students?*”
- “*Have you ever seen an immigrant student being bullied by other students on the playground solely because of their heritage?*”

There's no one-size-fits-all checklist here, but the questions above should provide a good starting point for a conversation about immigrant bias in your child's school.

Let your child express their feelings about any incident of immigrant unfairness that they witness at school. It's important for them to put their feelings into words here. Immigrant equality is a tricky subject at any age.

Even if they feel strongly about an incident at school that isn't actually immigrant-motivated, let them describe it to you.

Let this step be their opportunity to contribute to the conversation. The rest of the steps in this chapter are more geared toward you as the coach/instructor.

## **Step 2. Explain what it means to be an ally**

First define ‘ally’ in simple terms. To be an ally just means you’re willing to stand up for someone else.

(Note: Maybe your child already knows what an ally is. If so, feel free to adjust the thought process below to fit their level of understanding.)

Consider offering an example of an ally here. Your child might be still processing what ‘ally’ means and needs more time to think.

You could say something like:

*“I heard a story about a girl in elementary school named Claire. Her best friend Sophia was the child of immigrant parents from South America. They sat together every day in the cafeteria so they could eat their lunch side-by-side.*

*Claire's other friends made fun of her and tried to convince her repeatedly to sit with them instead of Sophia.*

*Even though Claire's friends made fun of her for sitting next to Sophia, Claire ignored them and continued sitting with her best friend Sophia. That's an ally. "*

(Note: You can substitute Claire and Sophia's names for male names if needed.)

Gauge your child's reaction here. Does s/he have question about the story? If so, take time to answer questions thoroughly.

Is the first time your child is grasping the concept of the importance of being an ally? If so, this is a crucial time to make sure s/he understands.

Discuss how Claire was an ally to Sophia regardless of heritage. Even though her friends made her feel scared by making fun of her for sitting with Sophia, she continued to sit next to her.

She didn't want Sophia to have to eat her lunch all by herself plus she really liked spending time with her.

Reiterate what it means to be an ally: making it clear that you care about other people and you're willing to stand by their side.

### **Step 3. Explain how and when to be an ally**

As with all of the concepts discussed in this guidebook, the best way to teach your child how and when to be an ally is by modeling the behavior yourself.

You don't necessarily have to be that person who makes a big ugly scene and shouts obscenities, but you *do* have to stand up for what's right if your child is with you. Sometimes that involves an uncomfortable situation.

For example, if your child is out with you doing errands and you both witness someone being targeted unfairly, stop what you're doing.

Ask questions before you step in. The situation might not be what it looks like. Or maybe it is what it looks like and it's appropriate for you to say something or do something.

Talk about when to step in with your child. Talk about what you did and how you knew it was the right thing to do at the time. It's an important, and sometimes abstract, distinction for children to grasp.

Not every situation warrants someone to step in. Sometimes it's better to get help from a responsible adult. Kids need to know this.

You know best how to approach the subject with your child. If needed, talk through some potential scenarios that illustrate what to do, and not do, in various situations.

Here are a few things you might talk about when discussing timing:

- If you're in a situation and you're not sure what to do, ask yourself 'Is this fair?' and 'Should I offer to help or go tell someone?'
- Never put yourself in harm's way. If a situation is unsafe or if you find yourself in a space where you need adult supervision or help, go get it.
- Know when you're not needed to speak or stand up for someone else and step back. This could be a time when someone or a group is capable of making their own change and they don't need external input.

If the conversation goes on more than you'd hoped, it might add more stress to your already stressful day, but frankly it's a small price to pay if it enables you to raise a child who knows when to be gutsy enough to say 'Nope, that's not okay,' when they spot an injustice. Or friendly enough to say 'Hi, new kid, you can sit here,' or 'Stop picking on her!'

#### **Step 4. Offer specific words and actions to use for responding to immigrant bias**

Once you feel like your child understands what it means to be an ally and when it's appropriate, it's time to offer options for specific words and actions to use.

For example, suppose your child tells you there's an immigrant student named Lucas in his/her class who always gets picked last for teams at recess even though he's really good at sports (or whatever your child tells you).

Talk about it. Ask open-ended questions. Ask how Lucas reacts to being shunned. Ask why or why not he/she thinks it's fair to him.

If someone is already doing something about it by defending Lucas, that's great. Praise that person for standing up for what they believe. Make a big deal about it.

Ask about the specific words and actions the ally used to stand up for Lucas. Ask if/how it improved the situation.

Say something about how it made you feel to hear that someone stood up for what's right. Then ask how it made your child feel.

Try to keep the conversation going here. This is a great opportunity to provide potential options for your child to respond similarly when faced with a comparable situation.

Without putting them on the spot, ask what words and/or actions they would use to come to Lucas's defense. If they need help getting started, you could say something like:

*"If it were me and I saw someone being treated unfairly because of their heritage or anything else, I would say something. But only if it felt safe. I'd probably go and stand next to Lucas and say something like 'Why don't you pick Lucas for your team? He's really good at sports.'"*

(Or whatever language is appropriate for your child's age.)

Giving your child a specific plan (standing next to Lucas, then using words to defend him) will hopefully give him/her a mental image of what it means to be an ally.

Also, your child should know that just pointing out the behavior without being accusatory can sometimes be more

effective than shaming the bully.

For example, you could say something like ‘Lucas is really good at sports’ and leave it at that. The person(s) doing the team selection will know what you mean.

Here’s another example: suppose there’s a member of your extended family who is married to an immigrant named Ana.

Your immediate family members often discuss Ana with disdain by inferring she’s a typically lazy immigrant and expressing remorse for her husband who has to do all the work.

Tell your child the next time it happens, s/he could say something like:

*“We don’t know if their household workload seems off-balance because of Ana’s heritage. There are so many other possible reasons.”*

Then suggest that your child can leave the room whenever the conversation is taking place to indicate again that s/he doesn’t agree with their assumption.

Explain that s/he can be Ana’s ally without actually being in her presence.

Provide as many words and action options as you can for responding to anti-immigrant scenarios. The goal is to allow your child to pick the one that feels right for them.

Work on wording together. Make it a big conversation.

Standing up for what’s right and speaking up against injustice, without jeopardizing their own safety, is a really important skill for kids to learn.

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## More resources

- [How young children of immigrants face discrimination at school](#)
- [How to raise kids to be allies](#)

- [Kids explain allyship \(video\)](#)



# Chapter 5: Cultivate an Immigrant-Supportive Environment at Home

In addition to the strategies already discussed in this guidebook, another suggestion, perhaps the most important one for effectively guiding your child toward immigrant-equality values, is to create an inclusive environment at home.

Children are heavily influenced by teachers and peers—that's true. But the most lasting values are taught at home. To create a welcoming attitude and an ableist home, emphasize, repeatedly, that immigrants deserve the same kindness and respect as everyone else.

## Step 1. Set an example

The best way for you to communicate immigrant equality at home is to model the attitudes, behavior, and values that you wish to see in your child.

As you probably already know, children rarely buy the 'Do as I say, not as I do' approach. If you say something is important, but your child doesn't see you behaving in a way that matches your words, they know it's not actually that important to you, so why should it be important to them?

On the flip side, if they see you doing something that's aligned with what you've been telling them, your words will be much more effective. Here are some ideas for setting an example so your child can fully embrace your guidance.

- **Be aware of your own biases.** If you behave in ways that demonstrate you're skeptical about immigrant equality, even though you say you're all for it, your child will notice and emulate your behavior. *"Studies show people can be consciously committed to egalitarianism, and deliberately work to behave without prejudice, yet still possess hidden negative prejudices or stereotypes. Implicit Association Tests (IATs) can tap those hidden, or automatic, stereotypes and prejudices that circumvent"*

*conscious control. Project Implicit—a collaborative research effort between researchers at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and University of Washington—offers dozens of such tests.”*<sup>11</sup>

- **Call out discrimination.** If someone says or does something against immigrants in your own home and you don’t intervene or say something in the moment, that will signal to your child that you’re okay with that type of language or behavior.
- **Speak kind words.** Whenever someone shares something about their heritage with you (and your child is listening), you could say things like, “Wow, that is so interesting!” or “I didn’t know that. I’m really glad you shared with me.” The goal is to teach your child how to treat people from other countries.
- **Show support for a work colleague or an immigrant family at your child’s school.** Take a stand if you see someone being teased about their heritage. Silence and inaction in the face of injustice sends the message that it’s okay to ‘look the other way.’ Instead of ignoring the issue, write an editorial in your local newspaper, call your elected official, talk to a project manager or school principal, anything — just do something to make a stand.

## **Step 2. Promote immigrant equality with household routines**

Here are some ideas for shaping your home environment to reflect the immigrant-equality values you’ve been touting:

- **Media.** Talking about acceptance is a good first step, but it’s not enough. Select movies, videos, TV shows, etc. that depict the immigrant experience. [Common Sense Media](#) is a great resource for finding appropriate media. Your media selection doesn’t have to consistently include immigrant characters, but it’s important that it never includes uncontested discrimination. This might sound like an impossible task at first, but if you can start getting

your family in the habit of choosing media based on fairness and acceptance and not based on a world where it's okay to discriminate against immigrants, you'll be doing them an enormous favor. Try it.

- **Books.** In addition to keeping an open dialogue about immigrant equality, another key to raising open-minded children is to fill your family bookshelf with stories that include immigrants. Storylines that focus on the immigrant experience itself are fine, but storylines that integrate immigrant(s) as a random part of the story is even better. Again. [Common Sense Media](#) is a great resource here.
- **Friends.** Friendships with immigrants can be one of the richest, most authentic learning experiences. Sharing a meal together, going on adventures, inviting one another to special cultural events familiarizes them with American culture and exposes you to *their* culture. The goal is to help children associate immigrants with ideals of friendship – human connection and kindness.
- **Food.** Try to establish a family meal night that celebrates food from another country. To start, pick something that you think your kids might like. Then encourage them to suggest meals from other countries. Repeat the meals that are successful.
- **Art.** Display art in your home that was created by an immigrant. Talk about what it means to you.
- **Family mission statement.** Things you say to your kids all the time can have an enormous impact on how their opinions form as they grow. Keep saying things like “we believe in justice for immigrants” or “we believe in respecting *all* humans, including immigrants” or “America was founded on principles of fairness to immigrants” — anything that denotes fairness and acceptance. It will sink in eventually.

- **Stories.** Tell stories of famous immigrants and/or immigrant journey(s) that end in both tragedy and success. You can google ‘immigrant stories’ for ideas.

### **Step 3. Make immigrant equality an ongoing conversation**

Teaching immigrant equality is not a once-and-done conversation. Issues will come up all the time that your child (hopefully) feels comfortable sharing with you.

As any parent knows, getting a concept to sink in with our kids needs to be repeated over and over again. Keep guiding them toward fairness and acceptance. Children need constant help understanding why each situation is either fair or unfair.

Children are a work in progress.

*“They have not yet reached the point of fully recognizing the needs of others.”* [12](#)

Immigrant-equality conversations need to be a work in progress too. Talking about fairness and acceptance repeatedly might feel cumbersome to you, but it hopefully doesn’t to your child. They’re progressively applying what you tell them to scenarios in their own life and deciding if it makes sense or not.

Depending on their attention span, who knows when you will say or model the right words at the right time. Keep trying. Plan for a marathon, not a sprint.

Moreover, there will be times when s/he wants to talk to you that aren’t convenient—like when you’re working, reading, or talking with someone else. Either make the time then or ask your child to remember their thoughts so they can share with you later.

Look for unexpected opportunities to chat about how the progress toward treating immigrants fairly is affecting your child’s life. The stronger their understanding of the issues, the more likely they’ll carry principles of equality and fairness with them into adulthood.

The good news is that the decisions s/he makes as s/he grows through adolescence and into early adulthood will be informed by your ongoing conversations about immigrant equality.

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## More Resources

- [15 international recipes to expand your kids' palates](#)
- [Supporting students from immigrant families](#)
- [10 ways to support your immigrant coworker in the U.S.](#)
- [Immigrant artwork \(Etsy\)](#)
- [A New Generation: 7 Inspiring Immigration Stories](#)

If you found this guidebook helpful, PLEASE consider sharing it or writing a brief review (your review can be super short if needed). Reviews are a huge boost for writers to get the word out about their books. Thank you so much! - Trish

# Reference Notes

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# Also by Trish Allison

## **DEI for Parents**

How to Respond to Disability Curiosity from Kids

How to Explain Immigration to Kids

How to Explain Transgenderism to Kids Using Simple Words

How to Talk to Kids About Poverty and Homelessness

How to Teach Boys to be Fair to Girls

How to Teach Kids Manners for ANY Religion

How to Teach Girls They're Just as Worthy as Boys

How to Teach Kids to Interact with Older People

How to Teach Kids to be Kind to Gay People

How to Tell Kids the True Story of Native Americans

Watch for more at [Trish Allison's site.](#)



## About the Author

Raising two children in a 1990s same-sex family (way before modern acceptance), gave Trish a unique perspective on the importance of teaching kids that *everyone* deserves kindness and respect.

She combined her experience as a parent, her career as a technical/procedural writer, countless hours of child psychology research, a degree in English from U.C. Berkeley, and a long-ignored passion to write something meaningful — into a collection of social-justice parenting books.

The timing couldn't be better. As the world finally (slowly) awakens to the dire need to reduce cultural unfairness, helping parents raise a generation of open-minded kids is critical.

Read more at [Trish Allison's site.](#)