

A Mother Leaves her Children to Find Work in the USA

Arlette is a 9 year old Mexican girl. She has been in the US for almost three years. Her mother wanted her to see a counselor because Arlette does not talk. Mother says Arlette in the past few months has begun to talk a little more. Mother says she was a very talkative child up until age 5. Also the school department suggested that Arlette see a psychologist. Arlette repeated the 1st grade and may have to repeat the second grade according to the teacher. The school has just completed a CORE evaluation.

Arlette lives with her mother, stepfather, two and half year old brother (from mother's second marriage), and her 6 year old brother. Mother's mother in law also lives in the home. Arlette came to the US "por tierra" (by land). She was accompanied by her 18 year old aunt and younger brother who was 3 years old at the time.

During this initial appointment Arlette was accompanied by her mother and two younger brothers. The two younger brothers came skipping into my office and immediately dug into a large bucket full of toys. Arlette had to be slightly coaxed by her mother.

There was some initial chatting about why the mother had come today and brought Arlette. Within this context she started to tell the family story. The children were encouraged to add to the story as they would like or they could play.

Mother began: "We lived in Mexico City until five years ago. My husband suddenly left me when I was pregnant (with Arlette's younger brother). After he was born I tried to support myself and the children but I couldn't do it. When Arlette was 5 years old and the baby was 8 months someone told me that if I went to the US I could find work and send the money home for the care of the children. I decided quickly; I would leave the children with my mother in Oaxaca (southern Mexico). My husband had left me; I was desperate. I made the decision to come to the states; I had to do it quickly and not think or I would not be able to do it at all.

"I packed the children's clothes and put the new green dress on Arlette. We got on a bus to Oaxaca. Arlette asked me to take her with me and leave the baby with 'the grandmother in Oaxaca'. I told her I could not do this. We got to my mother's house that day. I took the children inside. My mother and sisters are very loving. I knew my mother would love the children. All I remember thinking that day is that I have to do this quickly or I will not be able to do it at all. My mother held the baby; Arlette was standing there in her green dress. I turned and left. I said nothing. I just walked out of the house and left. I said nothing to anyone: (Mother starts to get tears in her eyes and turns and faces the wall. When she turns around she says she would like to continue). Arlette is sitting on the floor a few feet from her mother looking at her. I asked Arlette if she remembers this day. She shakes her head no but she looks up at me and smiles faintly. Her mother says to her that it is OK if she would like to talk. Then mother asks her if she remembers the green dress. Again Arlette shakes her head no. She smiles at her mother and mother seems to feel it is OK to continue with her story.

"After two years in the US I was able to save enough money to send for the children. They came with my youngest sister. When I came her (to US) I worked two jobs and sent money home to my mother. I tried to call my mother every week or so. Arlette would not talk to me. She had been such a talkative child. I didn't understand what was happening to her. I asked my mother; she said she did not know either. Arlette would not talk. But she said she did not seem angry; her behavior was very good. I felt so bad. It made me feel so sad that Arlette would not talk to me. I couldn't understand why she would not talk. And really, it has only been in the last few months that Arlette has begun to talk a little. She speaks English now; she speaks good English.

Mother asks Arlette again if she remembers the green dress. Arlette, now on the floor, a few feet away from mother shakes her head no. I ask her in English what she remembers about the house in Oaxaca. She thinks a while and then says "The kitchen was outside". We laugh. Arlette smiles and then with more courage she starts to talk a little "and there was no bathroom. Then they made a bathroom. But that was outside and I remember I was scared to go outside at night: "Then they made the kitchen inside the house but the bathroom was still outside the house." I asked her where she slept.

"We slept in a big bed". The 6 year old stops playing and starts to laugh and says "Sometimes somebody would fall out of

bed”. Everyone laughs. Arlette says everyone slept in the bed. There was only one bed. Grandmother too? “No, Arlette says, she slept on the floor! Beside the bed. The 6 year old says, “But she put a blanket down and then sleep on top of it”. How many are sleeping in the bed. Arlette and brother now play a little game of who can remember everybody who slept in the bed. They name their cousins and teenage aunts.

The children have been talking in English. We asked mother if she is understanding. She smiles and says “a little”. Arlette translates into Spanish for mother. The children are giggling about the bed and who would fall out sometimes. As they are talking Mother asks if it is OK for the children to talk about this. Isn’t it better to forget all this?? This leads to discussion and explanation with mother about what may and may not be helpful for Arlette. The children aren’t paying much attention at this point. We agree to come back and meet again. We ask Arlette if she will come back. She smiles, comes over to the worker’s desk, put her hands on the desk, and then leans back into mother’s lap. She shakes her head yes and says OK.