

Traumatizing Immigration Practices Put Children's Futures at Stake

As an international Network of leading infant and early childhood mental health and trauma experts, we feel compelled to speak out against the traumatizing practice of separating children from their parents and families at the border. Decades of research clearly demonstrates that children's mental health, especially in the earliest years, is extremely vulnerable to the kind of toxic stress resulting from the trauma of detention and separation from a caregiver¹. Experiencing trauma can be made tolerable for young children with the protection of a trusted and nurturing caregiver. Forced separation is particularly harmful and traumatic for children in oppressive and frightening circumstances, as is the case with the immigration policy enforcement-related detentions. Rather, many are left to cope on their own with an increasing number of Adverse Childhood Experiences, known to have long-term health and mental development consequences².

This persistent high level of stress is particularly harmful to young children under five because these experiences shape the way brain architecture is established, which because this is happening early, affects all that is to come³. These negative experiences often result in depression, anxiety, and behavioral disturbances, interfering with healthy attachment between children and caregivers that can have far reaching implications over time⁴.

Young children need caring, responsive, and stable relationships with trusted caregivers to support their healthy physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. The longer these children are kept away from their families or in detention, the more severe the harm to their development and attachment, and the more difficult it will be for them to recover. Sending at least 2,300 children under the age of 12 to shelters and temporary foster care across the country is not an acceptable alternative to keeping them with the stable, nurturing caregivers they know and love.

Every single child should be immediately reunited with their primary caregiver and families, and must have access to high-quality, diversity- and culturally-informed mental health services.

The second Tenet of the *Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children and Families* states that we must all "Champion Children's Rights Globally" as infants and children are citizens of the world. Everyone has a responsibility to welcome, protect, nurture, and support all children and their parents – regardless of their place of origin. We stand with other prominent early childhood advocates and leaders across disciplines and sectors who have spoken out about the separation of children from their families. The June 26th ruling from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California ordering the speedy reunification of children and families is a first step. However, we must also ensure that families who have been traumatized by these policies receive mental health and other culturally appropriate support services to reduce the effects of fear, inequity, and oppression in their lives. Many of these families and young children are survivors of traumatic events that forced their migration, as well as additional traumas suffered during their journeys seeking safety⁵. Forcible fragmentation of the nurturing supportive relationship provided by a trusted parent or caregiver builds on the previous traumatic experiences and further damages the relationship and the child's ability to trust. Families must be kept together living in a positive environment, and we must remain united in upholding and supporting the health and well-being of vulnerable children and families.

¹ National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016; Zayas & Cook, 2016

² Felitti, et al, 1998

³ Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2016

⁴ Brabeck Lykes & Hunter, 2014; Norona, 2018; Zayas, 2018; Zayas, 2015

⁵ Perez-Foster, 2012

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