



National Prevention Science Coalition

to improve lives

Separating Children from Parents Can Impair Brain Development

The members of the [National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives](#), a group of experts in neuroscience, behavioral science and public policy, feel compelled to issue a statement in response to the practice of separating immigrant children from their parents. And while this practice has now been halted, the damage has been done, with 2,300 having been separated with little effort being placed toward their reunification. A multitude of voices has risen up to condemn this inhumane approach, and now the need to reunify these families. However, the potentially devastating neurological, psychological and behavioral effects to these children have not yet been fully articulated.

Immigrant families are traveling thousands of miles under grueling conditions to escape abject poverty, violence—including gang crimes, threats, and brutal murders of family members—drug trafficking, and a complete lack of basic public services that many in our society enjoy. And adding to the mix, in the past three years we have witnessed a shift in the make-up of migrants, from primarily boys fleeing gang violence to [entire families fleeing from the increased militarization](#) of the governments of Central America of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador that has displaced their most poor and marginalized communities.

These families are not leaving acceptable home lives just to feed off American systems; they are escaping from horrors that most of us could never imagine. And unforeseen to these families, as they cross the border, they are further traumatized by US border patrols under orders to confiscate their children who are placed in holding facilities where the caretakers are constrained in their efforts to comfort them by regulations restricting physical contact with the children in their care.

And now that the separation practice has been reversed, we find that processes are not in place to reliably establish the whereabouts of displaced children, [severely impairing reunification efforts](#). To justify this practice, parents are being labeled as criminals, without considering that their only misstep was their desperate attempt to flee from unspeakably harsh and terrifying conditions to literally save the lives of their families.

Imagine being a 4 year old child, taken from a parent—the only caring adult they have ever known—without explanation, by gloved, uniformed officials, with no adult relatives or other familiar adults with whom to identify, and no indication that they will ever see that parent again. These children feel abandoned and have no alternative to blaming their parents. Such trauma produces scars invisible to the naked eye, but reside just under the surface, causing long-term harm, absent appropriate intervention.

[A tidal wave of opposition](#) to this practice is rapidly rising due to the blatant inhumane disregard for children's well-being. What many do not realize, however, is the [damage to the development and function of children's brains and bodies](#) that can result from the trauma of being separated from parents, the only stabilizing individuals in their lives. From infancy through childhood and even into adolescence, parents are virtually an extension of the child and are required for their healthy development. Parenting supports the emergence of a [network of biological and psychological functions](#) that enable children to function in multiple domains, such as the ability to learn, self-regulate behavior and emotion, establish healthy relationships, and navigate their social environment.

All these functions and more are supported by brain systems that are exquisitely sensitive to environmental challenges. And while challenges within a normal range may actually improve a child's ability to cope with the usual stresses in life, profound trauma during childhood is toxic to these very brain systems. The type of trauma experienced by these children can result in [dramatic alterations in brain architecture via stress hormones](#) that flood the brain during acute and severe stress reactions. Their cries are emblematic of this syndrome, and we can expect them to exhibit regressive behavior, withdrawal, fear, and anger. Trauma's effects on these developing systems often leads later in life to pervasive behavioral health problems, academic failure, mental illness, and drug addiction if we do not intervene on their behalf. Research has also established the detrimental effects of childhood trauma on "neuroinflammation" and immunity, in turn, increasing risk for [chronic disease](#) such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease and even cancer later in life.

Immediate steps must be taken to reunite these children with their parents to prevent innocent children from suffering a lifetime of struggles. While the evidence that traumatic experiences can have devastating effects on child development is clear, so is the evidence that safe, supportive environments provided by loving caregivers fosters health and well-being. Wherever these children end up living, they need to be reunited with their parents immediately and provided safe and caring environments. This will enable them to overcome the impact of the trauma they have been subjected to and to develop the resiliency they need to help them grow into caring, productive adults and community members.

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