

THE TRAUMATIC EFFECTS OF SEPARATING FAMILIES AND FAMILY DETENTION ON CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

Hello everyone. My name is Erica Serlin . I am speaking today as a retired psychologist who has dedicated my professional career over 35 years to understanding and working with traumatized children, adults, and their families.

The Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy of treating every asylum seeker as a criminal continues. Even though Trump has overturned the official policy of separating children from their parents at the border and a judge has demanded reunification within 30 days and 15 for children under 5, approximately 2000 children are still separated with no clear plan for reunification. Hundreds of these kids are under 5 years old. We've all seen images and heard recordings of screaming toddlers being ripped from their parents' arms, and we certainly don't need scientists to tell us this is cruel, harmful, and simply morally outrageous, but what does the research tell of about the immediate and longterm effects of such separation?

The evidence dates back to studies on the effects of parent-child separations on children's well-being during WWII. This research documented far reaching effects of these separations into adulthood. including increased risk for serious mental and physical health problems. More recent work has documented the increased mental health risks faced by both parents and children when separated in the immigration process. Long term effects can occur, even with reunification. After being separated, some reunited children can experience difficulties with emotional attachment to their parents, trusting adults to be safe, self-esteem and a whole host of physical and psychological problem. (Ex of 4 yr. old who couldn't be

comforted even after reunification, continuously clinging to his mo. and asking if she would be taken away again and fearfully asking if his mother's lawyer was "another bad man who would take her away")

Why is separation, even if it's temporary so harmful? Parental separation is considered a toxic stressor. A toxic stressor is an experience that overwhelms the body's stress-management system, resulting in an excess of stress hormones that leads to being in a state of chronic high alert, constantly ready to fight/flee or freeze. Toxic stress negatively affects the mind and body, including brain development and functioning and puts these kids at higher risk for all kinds of health and psychological problems, including anxiety, depression, aggression, cognitive delays, learning problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical health problems.

As we know, most of these children have already faced tremendous danger and trauma, fleeing from violence in their home countries. Children depend on their parents or other primary caretakers to successfully navigate stressful and traumatic events. Now imagine being in a completely unfamiliar place that may be scary and dehumanizing, not speaking the language, AND being separated from the only person who can soothe and comfort you, help you cope and provide a buffer or shield against overwhelming stress!

Separation from parents impacts kids of all ages, but children 3 and under are especially vulnerable because they don't even have the mental capacity yet to think about their parent for comfort when that parent isn't present or to have hope the parent may return. It's "out of sight, out of mind" for them.

Of course family separation is also extremely painful and stressful for the parent involved and can easily lead to mental health problems including PTSD ..and ,over the long haul, addictions to manage and dull the pain. This is especially true when parents have no way to find out where their kids have been taken , to contact them, or to know if they will ever be coming back.

We've talked about the impact of family separation, but what about family detention? We know that indefinite internment in military-style camps and jail-like detention centers is also traumatic for kids and their families...and is totally unnecessary as a solution to the current immigration crisis but will continue as long as the inhumane and morally outrageous "zero tolerance" policy continues.

So is there any good news in all of this? To start with , we know that children are remarkably resilient and that immigrants who have made it to the border have already demonstrated tremendous strength, courage and resilience, and, especially with help and support, will likely continue to do so if given the opportunity.

What can we do to feel less helpless and to really make a difference.? We can continue to demand an end to cruel, dehumanizing and morally repugnant policies and to demand more rational and compassionate solutions to the current immigration crisis, including family case management. We need to keep up the pressure on our public officials , to vote our conscience, and get others to do the same. We need to be aware of resources for parents, other caretakers, educators,, child care workers and mental health professionals regarding the effects of traumatic stress and empirically proven interventions that provide psychological

first aid and help people recover from trauma. Many resources and training materials are available on line from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network website .

Primary caretakers and educators, especially, need to know the importance of reestablishing safety, security, and predictable routines to help children recover. We can volunteer our time to organizations helping undocumented immigrants. It's crucial to remember that just one reliable, supportive relationship can make a huge difference to a traumatized child (or to anyone). We can also contribute money and needed supplies to organizations working with immigrants and refugees.

Finally,. We need to emphasize our common humanity and teach our children and grandchildren about the experience of undocumented immigrants in kind, compassionate, and non-polarizing ways.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak, and keep doing the great work you're doing!

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