



Alliance for the Advancement of
Infant Mental Health

What About the Babies? A Plea to Stop Separating Infants and Toddlers from their Parents/Guardians When Seeking Safety at the Border

The Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health (Alliance) is a national and international organization whose vision is for all babies and young children to begin their lives with stable and responsive care giving relationships. Its leadership firmly opposes separating very young immigrant children from their parents or guardians. When separated from their parents or caregivers, babies experience stress that is significantly toxic to their wellbeing. Victims of exceptionally harmful stress during infancy and early childhood, these young children are sentenced to a life of increased risk for poor cognitive, physical, social and mental health outcomes.

Because we are a nation that has historically valued children as our most important resource, it is especially shocking that immigration authorities have separated thousands of young children, some 18 months of age or younger, from their families when they arrive at the U.S. Border, with increasingly explicit policies and practices.

As our federal administration fixes its attention on the adults in these immigrant families, we must ask: What about the babies? What happens to them when taken away from their parents or guardians and placed in detention centers or in random, foster care settings? What support is offered to foster parents, already under duress and in short supply due to the opioid crisis? How do we meet the cultural and language needs of very young children without input from their families? What about the separated babies of asylum seeking immigrant families fleeing violence in their home country, already carrying the experience of severe trauma exposure in their small bodies and brains? The zero-tolerance policy unnecessarily traumatizes babies and toddlers who depend on their parents or guardians for safety and security. When removed, these young children are placed at immediate physical, social, and emotional risk.

Why? The parent-child relationship provides safety, comfort, and security, promoting good physical and mental health not only in the early years but across the lifespan. Grief following a baby's displacement leads to prolonged sorrow, and despair surrounds the loss of a young child's parents or guardians. The baby or toddler may shut down emotionally, losing capacities in all areas of development without access to their familiar, primary caregivers to buffer their stress. Scientific studies provide evidence that adverse experiences (including traumatic separation from caregivers in the early years) are likely to lead to significant developmental delays and behavioral disturbances in early childhood, and contribute to psychological distress,

¹ <https://consumer.healthday.com/general-health-information-16/drug-abuse-news-210/the-opioid-crisis-hidden-victims-children-in-foster-care-729966.html>

anxiety, and depression², as well as long-term physical³ and mental health risks throughout the lifespan.

Consider this young family: A mother and her 18-month old baby seeking refuge were stopped at the border. Without explanation, the border patrol removed the baby, placed him in a government car and whisked him away to a community facility where he would remain for an undetermined length of time. In one short moment, he lost his mother. What memories will he carry about such an abrupt and cruel separation? How will he process what he does not yet have the language to understand? Who will help him grieve his loss, comfort and contain his sorrow, and manage his fear? Will he be able to form trusting relationships or depend on future caregivers? How is this better than the potentially impoverished and chaotic environment from which his mother was seeking refuge?

Knowing what we know about the importance of the protective, parenting relationship to health and growth, and the consequences of early and abrupt separation, it is clearly cruel and inhumane to continue a policy that separates babies from parents or guardians at our border. We implore the Department of Homeland Security to utilize the decades of literature regarding traumatic caregiver separation as a significant risk factor for very young children and change this policy so that border authorities prioritize babies' and children's needs for emotional and physical safety and ensure that no young child is separated at the U.S. Border from his or her parents, guardians, or significant caregivers.

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² <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/deep-dives/mental-health/>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/cestudy.about.html>