

## **How Family Separation Negatively Impacts the Psychology of Immigrant Children**

Children in the Northern Triangle have gang members knocking on their door and asking for them to join their workforce or risk dying. This danger, along with the ways recruited children are socialized in gangs or exposed to violence, can cause great panic, fear, and anxiety in a young child. When leaving your home and taking the dangerous journey to opportunity, the trauma of past experiences in origin countries, such as gang violence, is only one component of the psychological impact the immigration process can have on children. Specifically, young migrants entering the United States through the Southern border have the potential of having prior traumatic encounters such as being separated from family by Border Control and experiencing discriminatory and inferior treatment once in the country. The immigration procedures and barriers result in profound lifelong impacts on the development of the brain. While detainment of immigrants has been around for over 40 years, recent administrations have set stricter policies that include child-parent separation as a part of the legal process (Ghosh, 2019). We have seen public outcry on the ways in which detention can negatively impact growing children, parents, and the family structure. It is necessary to bring awareness to the deep repercussions of our immigration policies that can last for generations and impact an entire community of immigrants and refugees.

The immigration process, in general, is a stressful and life-altering process for anyone who undergoes the system. As discussed earlier, one of the important factors that must be considered when looking at the effects of detention and separation of immigrant children is past

trauma and the journey they may have taken to get to the Southern border. Most of the children and families entering the United States are from Central America, specifically Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, or the “Northern Triangle.” (Warren & Kerwin, 2017). This region has been plagued with corruption, violence, and economic instability and has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. (Cheatman, 2019; Meyer & Taft-Morales, 2019). Because of these factors, many families coming to the United States are refugees and in need of support. An additional point that is key to consider is the parent separation of many immigrant families prior to the immigration journey. Due to the rising costs of transporting one’s entire family to another country, many immigrant families send adults first, followed by their children when enough money is earned to afford the trek to their new home (Lu, 2018). Temporary and long-term separations are detrimental to both children and the course of their mental and physical health.

On their journey north, there are few checkpoints and protection facilities available to families and children, and most travel through unknown territories and dangerous cities (msf.org). For children and adults, venturing into unfamiliar countries and local cities and towns can be anxiety-provoking and cause high levels of stress for what is to come next. When children finally reach the border, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) places them in detention centers run by the Customs and Border Protection (CBP). If proper paperwork is not provided proving the relationship of the child and adult, the children are separated and placed in detainment shelters by the Office of Refugee Resettlement or if possible, released to relatives or sponsors in the United States (Sriraman, 2019). If guardianship is confirmed, families are detained together and are deported or released into the United States until their hearings. However, for a few months last year, all families, either immigrant or refugee, were separated due to a new policy enforcing prosecution for all illegal border crossings (Wood, 2018). The

psychological effects of child-separation are a pressing issue, for there are many reports that have shown the continuation of separations occurring at the southern border since the termination of the policy (Child Separation by the Trump Administration, 2019). Children should be of top priority to immigration officials because they are still developing methods in which to process adversity and adapting ways to understand the relationships around them.

The transitions we experience in our lives are typically emotionally challenging because we are attempting to adapt to the changes around us. When separated from a parent, children transitioning from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood are in need of the psychological, physical, and emotional support from their caregivers. During infancy, attachment to one's caregiver is the main source of developing a sense of safety and security (source). Attachment theory is the concept that a child's first loving relationship will lay the groundwork for the future development of relationships, intimacy, and safety. Essentially, attachment behavior is triggered by separation and resolved by the proximity of sight, touch, and sounds to the caregiver (Holmes, 2014). When a child is in distress and then comforted by a caregiver, they develop their own ways of distinguishing their "...own capacity for self-comfort and self-regulation, and later, the capacity to provide the same for others" (Firestone, 2018). This pivotal age is important for developmental skills such as expressing emotion, relationship response, and how one seeks care (Adshead, 2018). As an infant, the skin-to-skin contact with their caregiver secretes hormones that help connect and strengthen their bond. When this contact is taken away, parts of the brain, such as the hippocampus and amygdala that involve fear and attachment, can develop in different ways (Wan, 2018). Additionally, this bond is important to the development of representational models (aspe.hhs.gov). These models are key to how the human brain unconsciously separates and distinguishes the physical self from others. Attachment

relationships, while most important as an infant, can also explain child-parent connections through adolescence after separation or traumatic events (i.e. detainment) (Sriraman, 2019). This simple attachment to a caregiver has profound impacts on a child's mental health, and when negatively impacted, it can lead to behavioral problems, developmental delays, physical differences in the structure of the brain and difficulty with relationships (Firestone, 2018). In one study, the IQ levels and physiological response to the stress of children separated during the first two years of life were significantly lower than the baseline group (Wan, 2018). Increased separation at our southern border is creating life-altering developmental delays to children and changing the course of their careers, relationships, and general well-being. Overall, this critical early life period is crucial to the health of a child and the longitudinal course of their life.

Looking at immigrant children categorically, there are many studies that look at the specific effects of separation and detainment in general. Many reports highlight how childhood trauma is a common defining influence on the development of a psychological disorder. The diathesis-stress model is a good point for starting to understand the importance and predictive nature of life stressors on the vulnerability of forming a disorder. In this model, genetic predispositions to certain disorders and the amount of stress from the environment can predict how likely one is to develop a psychological disorder (Kaufmann, 2019). When one is exposed to a traumatic experience, their stress hormone, cortisol, comes online and begins to regulate numerous systems in the body. Along with cardiovascular and immune functioning, cortisol also plays a crucial role in our fight, flight, or freeze system (Fong, Measelle, Conradt & Ablow, 2017). When a child is separated from their parents, this system is immediately activated, and, depending on the length of the independent detainment from their parents, persistent stress impacts the development of the fight, flight or freeze system (Wood, 2018). The difference in

this system changes the physiological and psychological response in the body to have unusual or the lack of response to threatening stimuli(White, 2019; Wan, 2018). When there is a significant impact from stressors in the child's life, along with their genetic heritability from their parents, disorders such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are all possible outcomes of child separation (Sriraman, 2019). The diathesis-stress model provides us a solid base for understanding the effects of stress and heritability on disorder vulnerability and explains the basic components of how stressors at high levels, for longer amounts of time, can impact the safety system in our brains and change the ways in which children's development is thrown off track.

Not only can separation at the southern border provide higher likelihoods of psychological disorders, but also substantial changes in the physical shape of the brain, which impacts the processing of the neuro-systems. In a growing brain, the neuroplasticity of a child's brain, or their ability to create new neural pathways in response to new situations or changes in their environment, is especially high (Wood, 2018; Shiel, 2017). When in situations of chronic and repeated stress, children's brains react by relapsing into a constant state of immediate fear, threat, and anxiety. This circumstance can lead to the development of consistent protection responses that lead to poor access to cognitive functioning, hypervigilance, agitation, flashbacks, and emotional reactivity or numbing, to name a few (Wood, 2018). According to Ryan White in his article on Charles Nelson, an established Harvard pediatrics professor, and his research on instituted children and brain development, physical deformities and lack of key elements of the brain can result from separation (2019). A lack of white and grey matter was found in young separated children from Romania, which are materials that help guide neural connections, solve problems, and process external stimuli in our brains. The development of white and grey matter,

are again, crucial during young years, and especially in infants and toddlers. (White, 2019).

Child separation is a devastating situation for both the child and parent, and we must be aware of the ways in which disrupting their relationship can impact all facets of life including emotional, physical, and neurobiological influences.

There are multitudes of research on the ways in which child-parent relationships are critical to children's brain development and environment interaction. Pediatricians around the nation have published guides for treating immigrant children in order to curb the possible effects of children's past upheaval and current stress (Kroening, 2019; Sriraman, 2019). The short-term solutions that must be enacted into the current system include reverting to previous policies where separations were not a deterrent factor in the immigration process and family unification is a priority for all types of border crossings. While we do have policies, such as the Flores Agreement and the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 that are in place to provide guidelines to the responsibility of care and custody of immigrant and refugee children, there are still specific pediatric protocols that must be prioritized by the various immigration systems and services (The Rights of Children In The Immigration Process, 2014). When separated children are reunited with their caregivers, the threat and stress are dissolved and the relationship, while negatively influenced by the adversity in both the child and parent's lives, can be resolved and restored (Wood, 2018). Services including mental, dental and general medical care that children coming from poverty may not have had access to prior to arrival. Also, training any personnel on how to treat and reduce stress, traumatic experiences, and conditions in which separations are necessary is pivotal to limiting the short and long term consequences of the immigration process on a child. Improving the conditions and available care, comfort, and

security of detainment centers across the US, as well as repeal the separation of any families, can provide ease to children in this difficult and transitioning time.

Most importantly, as a nation and as human beings, we have to work towards changing the ways in which we approach immigration policy and treatment of migrants and refugees. Children are the most vulnerable immigrant population, and it is vital to spread awareness of the decades of research on this topic. Hundreds of thousands of pediatricians, doctors, organizations and mental health professionals in the United States issued a petition last year regarding child separation (Wan, 2018). This petition emphasized the detrimental effects and addressed recent policies by stating, “To pretend that separated children do not grow up with the shrapnel of this traumatic experience embedded in their minds is to disregard everything we know about child development, the brain, and trauma” (Wan, 2018). As a society, we have to take on the responsibility of first, voting for representatives that place high importance on immigrant children, families, and adjusting the process, and second, to work to change the negative ways in which undocumented immigrants are viewed and treated in this country. We must understand the effects of the detention and separation of immigrant and refugee children to consider the ways in which the United States is negatively affecting a whole immigrant population in this country.

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