

Call to Action: Supporting Immigrant Children and their Families

The Georgetown Center for Child and Human Development (GUCCHD) expresses its deepest concern over the long-term repercussions of separating immigrant children from their caregivers, as well as other border-detention practices that place children and their families at risk for adverse outcomes. As researchers, educators, and clinicians, we recognize that the absence of a parent or caregiver is one of the most stressful events that a child can endure—especially in the face of other losses or challenging events.

Children turn to the important adults in their lives to help them feel safe, calm, and regulated in the face of stressful or traumatic circumstances. Many immigrant children have already experienced traumatic events or situations associated with the need to seek refuge—such as religious persecution, poverty, violence, displacement, and/or other extreme circumstances. For these vulnerable children, the consequences of losing their sole source of physical and emotional protection can be devastating.

Decades of research suggest that unrelenting stress and trauma can make an imprint on the developing brain and negatively influence children’s health and development across the lifespan. Exposure to severe or chronic stress can condition a child’s developing neurobiological systems to become more reactive—increasing the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol, and wiring the brain to become more sensitive to perceived stress. Over time, the chronic activation of developing stress response systems can result in poorer concentration, memory, and capacity for emotional self-regulation, as well as increased risk for physical and mental health challenges. While support from a trusted, responsive caregiver can help to buffer the effects of chronic or traumatic stress, the absence or loss of a supportive, nurturing adult can exacerbate these long-term, negative outcomes.

While the policy to separate families at the border has reportedly been revoked, the process for reuniting thousands of children with their families has been slow and complicated. Furthermore, the continuation of the “zero tolerance” policy may continue to place children at risk for being placed in detention facilities, the conditions of which the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has cautioned “no child should ever have to endure...,” even when accompanied by their families. These policies are inconsistent with our fundamental Jesuit values.

Together, we need to summon a call to action that holds the Administration accountable for enacting policies that protect, rather than harm, immigrant families. We also need to ensure that those families who have already experienced separation receive the services and support that they need to reunite, reconnect and heal. As a trusted voice in the realm of early development and trauma, GUCCHD stands at the ready to work locally and nationally on behalf of children and their families affected by unjust, unsafe policies and conditions. We hope that you, as educators, mental health professionals, members of law enforcement, members of spiritual organizations, university staff/faculty, staff/leaders at nonprofits, and other community neighbors—far and wide—will stand with us. Together, we can work collaboratively to promote health, healing, and resilience for those who have traveled so far, and endured so much.

GUCCHD and our partners have ongoing projects and resources that can help people working with and on behalf of children of immigrant parents nationally and locally:

<https://www.samhsa.gov/iecmhc/special-topics/maternal-depression>

<https://gucchdtacenter.georgetown.edu/TraumaInformedCare/>

<https://gucchd.georgetown.edu/products/FCCLCGuide.pdf>

<https://www.ecin.org/>

Resources for those working directly with families impacted by this policy:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/traumatic-separation-and-refugee-and-immigrant-children-tips-current-caregivers>

https://www.scanva.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/FamilyReunification_English.pdf

Other resources about this issue:

<https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/our-childrens-fear-immigration-policys-effects-young-children>

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/AAP-Statement-on-Executive-Order-on-Family-Separation.aspx>

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2244-statement-in-response-to-babies-being-separated-from-their-parents-at-the-u-s-border>

<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/emergency-response/historical-emergencies/us-border-crisis>