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September 3, 2018

The Traumatizing Effects of the Immigration Policy Separating Children from Their Parents.

The separation of young children from their parents has evidence of short and long term disabling mental and physical health consequences. Countless research studies substantiate this fact. Recent immigration policies that have created forceful separation of parents from their children have compelled the California Association for Infant Mental Health (CalAIMH) to add its voice to experts and expert organizations who are decrying this as an injustice not only to the affected children but to their parents and families as well. The act of willful separation and its consequences is of concern to CalAIMH and goes beyond politics, policy and partisanship.

Recent research has documented that there is a higher risk of mental health issues encountered by both parents and children during the immigration process when they are separated. There are also long-term effects on the child's overall well-being, even after reunification has been completed. These children can exhibit challenges with attachment to their parents, and their physical and psychological health including their self-esteem. For some children, even time will not completely heal this psychological trauma.

At times of intense stress, children depend upon their primary caregiver to guide them through a difficult situation. Their adaptive stress response can be significantly reduced through having contact with their primary caregiver. Without access to the primary caregiver or family, the impact of the situation is mentally and physically heightened for the child. The subsequent social and economic cost to society should be considered as well.

On June 26th, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California ordered an immediate reunification of children with their families. While this is an important first step, it cannot be the only step in healing the lives of many traumatized children and their families. It is essential that the immediate reunification of children and their primary caregivers occur as quickly as possible. In addition, we are advocating for the provision of appropriate, high-quality support, careful assessment and availability of appropriate treatment modalities guided by neurodevelopmental sequential processes and parent/child interventions that will assist in the reestablishment of relationships, and help children and primary caregivers begin to recover from the trauma of separation. We are also advocating for the infusion of trauma-informed practice in all aspects of reunification, assessment and intervention for children and families impacted by short and long term separations.

The scientific evidence on the impact of separation of parents and children is irrefutable. The separation of parent and child leads to a host of short and long-term physical, emotional and social problems that require immediate action to remediate the harm and decrease the long-term consequences. All disciplines involved with children and families need to consider the kinds of collaborative, relationship-based interventions that will help children and families reconnect and heal.

Our organization advocates for the broad, community approach that transcends political and discipline-related divisions, and considers the need for an informed and healing stance based both on strong scientific evidence and a deep sense of compassion for others.

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