

# Separation of Immigrant Children and Families

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2018

Approved by the Assembly, November 2018

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### Issue:

Psychosocial support for refugee children\* and their families is a worldwide concern, with the number of children and adolescent immigrants increasing in the last decade (UNHCR Global Trends, 2016). It is known that immigration can have an impact on the social and emotional development of children, especially those separated from their families (NCTSN, 2005).

The United States adopted a "zero-tolerance" policy in the spring of 2018, resulting in federal prosecutors filing criminal charges against any adult caught crossing the border illegally, including those traveling with minors. As a direct consequence of this policy, thousands of children have been separated from their parents or caregivers.

Separating children from their parents or caregivers can lead to acute distress which can be harmful to a child's ability to cope and may lead to a cascade of psychological sequelae including the development of mental illness. Furthermore, many of these families are dealing with the effects of stress and trauma from their countries of origin (Linton 2017), and this separation further exacerbates their distress by creating extreme fear, difficulties with emotion regulation, and puts them at increased risk of other mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Prolonged separation from primary attachment caregivers can also lead to attachment disorders and interfere with the development of healthy social, cognitive and emotional regulation skills (American Psychological Association, 2008).

A substantial body of literature affirms both the importance of the caregiver-child relationship on the mental health and well-being of the child and that exposure to violence and other traumatic events is associated with an increased likelihood of mental health conditions, including depression and PTSD (CDC, 2016). Conversely, healthy connections with caregivers help children regulate themselves in the face of trauma or stress (NCTSN, 2011).

\* In U.S. Immigration Law, a child refers to anyone who is under the age of 21:  
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1101>

### APA Position:

**1) No child should be forcibly separated from their parents or caregivers as a consequence of**

immigration policies. For children who undergo forcible separation, trauma-informed, culturally, linguistically, developmentally and structurally competent qualified health professionals should be readily available to provide for their needs.

- 2) All children must have the right to live in a healthy environment free from violence and with access to evidence-based, trauma-informed, physical and mental health care services.
- 3) Effective partnerships between the APA and immigration agencies and affiliated relief and aid organizations should be developed to address gaps in providing trauma-informed, culturally, linguistically, developmentally and structurally competent care for these children\*.
- 4) Immigration agencies should collaborate with medical societies and with key stakeholders to address gaps in providing trauma-informed, culturally, linguistically, developmentally and structurally competent care for these children and their parents or caregivers.
- 5) There must be development of resources that promote best practices in prevention and early intervention for immigrant children and adolescents by making relevant screening instruments and other resources publicly available.

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