

June 20, 2018

Statement on Harmful Consequences of Separating Families at the U.S. Border

We urge the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to immediately stop separating migrant children from their families, based on the body of scientific evidence that underscores the potential for lifelong, harmful consequences for these children and based on human rights considerations.

Reports from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine contain an extensive body of evidence on the factors that affect the welfare of children – evidence that points to the danger of current immigration enforcement actions that separate children from their parents. Research indicates that these family separations jeopardize the short- and long-term health and well-being of the children involved. In addition, the Committee on Human Rights of the National Academies, which has a long history of addressing issues at the intersection of human rights, science, and health, stresses that the practice of separating parents from their children at the border is inconsistent with U.S. obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Parents' impact on their children's well-being may never be greater than during the earliest years of life, when a child's brain is developing rapidly and when nearly all of her or his experiences are shaped by parents and the family environment (NASEM, 2016, p. 1). Young children who are separated from their primary caregivers may potentially suffer mental health disorders and other adverse outcomes over the course of their lives (NASEM, 2016, p. 21-22). Child development involves complex interactions among genetic, biological, psychological, and social processes (NRC and IOM, 2009, p. 74), and a disruption in any of these – such as family disruption – hinders healthy development and increases the risk for future disorders (NRC and IOM, 2009, p.102-104). Young children are capable of deep and lasting sadness, grief, and disorganization in response to trauma and loss (NRC and IOM, 2000, p. 387). Indeed, most mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders have their roots in childhood and adolescence (NRC and IOM, 2009, p. 1), and childhood trauma has emerged as a strong risk factor for later suicidal behavior (IOM, 2002, p. 3).

Decades of research have demonstrated that the parent-child relationship and the family environment are at the foundation of children's well-being and healthy development. We call upon the Department of Homeland Security to stop family separations immediately based on this evidence.

Marcia McNutt

President, National Academy of Sciences

C. D. Mote, Jr.

President, National Academy of Engineering

Victor J. Dzau

President, National Academy of Medicine

- *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8* (2016)
- *Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities* (2009)
- *Psychosocial Concepts in Humanitarian Work with Children: A Review of the Concepts and Related Literature* (2003)
- *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative* (2002)
- *Early Childhood Development and Learning: New Knowledge for Policy*(2001)
- *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (2000)

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