

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Immigration, Children, Adolescents, and their Families

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2021

Approved by the Assembly, November 2021

“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. . . These are . . . position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects. . .” – *APA Operations Manual*

Issue:

An unprecedented level of migration due to a variety of socio-political and economic factors has marked the 21st century. Increasingly, migration has included child and adolescent migrants, including entire families. Psychosocial support for refugee children* and their families are a worldwide concern. 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. To this date 666 children remain separated from their families and their parents have not been located. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, detained migrant parents were faced with two options: consent to forced separation from their children, some as young as six months old and breastfeeding, or allow their children to be exposed to coronavirus in detention centers experiencing outbreaks, a highly coercive situation. In addition, over 200 children from countries including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have been forced into Mexico, indefinitely displaced without adult protection, often into highly dangerous situations.

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). Children and adolescents separated from their families are at increased risk of being victims of physical and sexual abuse and poor health.

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). Because of the lack of adequate protections in U.S. immigration policy, the U.S. border enforcement and immigration detention system

inherently creates conditions in which torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and abuse occur for children, adolescents, and families. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, detaining children and adults gravely threatens their mental and physical health and endangers their lives and parents must not face the forced choice of separating from their children or placing them at risk of COVID related illness.

APA Position:

- 1. The APA opposes immigration policies and practices that negatively impact children’s and adolescents’ mental health and development, including:**
 - a. Forcible separation of children from their parents;**
 - b. Displacement, return, or retention in a third country without adult protection, access to health care, and/ or a defined pathway to asylum and safety;**
 - c. Prolonged detention and other forms of inhumane treatment; and**
 - d. Limited or no access to timely, quality healthcare.**

- 2. The APA supports immigration policies and practices that protect immigrant children’s and adolescents’ mental health and development, including:**
 - a. Expeditious reunification of children with community caregivers following forcible separation to avoid further trauma;**
 - b. Timely access to healthcare and legal services;**
 - c. Pathways to seek asylum and safety;**
 - d. Measures to ensure the physical and mental safety and dignity of families fleeing danger;**
 - e. Living in a violence-free environment;**
 - f. Access to evidence-based, trauma-informed, and culturally, linguistically, structurally and developmentally appropriate physical and mental health care services;**
 - g. Best practices in screening, prevention, and early intervention in medical health, mental health and education; and,**
 - h. Measures to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable illnesses.**

Collaborators: Council on Children, Adolescents, and Their Families; Council on Quality Care; Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities