The Devastating and Long-term Consequences of Parent-Child Separations

A public statement from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI)

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) strongly supports policies and practices that keep families together and promote family reunification.

From early May through mid-June of 2018, the U.S. Government forcibly separated thousands of immigrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border. Separated from their parents, immigrant children were placed in tents and cages within empty warehouses. National laws were used to legitimize such maltreatment. While the U.S. Government has recently ended this practice, its effects—for the affected children and parents and for the nation—will be significant and long-lasting.

As a society of psychologists who study social issues, we know that child maltreatment is associated with detrimental psychobiological effects such as alterations in brain maturation and neurophysical outcomes (for example, language and cognition).\(^1\) We also know that children who are cared for in institutions can suffer adverse effects in terms of functioning, physical growth, and mental health, and that children do best when they are cared for in a family environment.\(^2\) The research tells us that access to adequate social and material services can provide critically-needed supports for families that are at risk of being separated (for example, families experiencing homelessness).\(^3\) Moreover, the research tells us that children are the family members often most affected by the deportation of a parent because they suffer the consequences of increased poverty—due to the loss of a provider—as well as emotional stress and feelings of abandonment by the parent who has suddenly gone missing.\(^4\)

As psychologists who study social issues, we have learned about the long-term effects of parent-child separations. For example, structural violence embedded in the forced removal of Aboriginal children of mixed heritage from their families between 1910 and 1970 had a devastating impact on Aboriginal Australians and their relationship with non-Aboriginal Australians.\(^5\) Fortunately, we have also learned that communities have the power to end harmful policies and practices. Research on community organizing shows that community groups can bring about desired changes. Engaging in community organizing can also benefit psychologically the very people who take part in the community organizing.\(^6\)

The evidence could not be clearer: There are devastating and long-term consequences of parent-child separation. Moving forward, it is our responsibility as a society to ensure that the practice of separating immigrant families at the border never returns. It is also our responsibility to look at other contexts in which children are being separated from their parents (for example, because a parent has a substance abuse problem, mental health problem, and/or is incarcerated) and 1) work to ameliorate the conditions that have necessitated these separations; and 2) help children and parents build, maintain, and strengthen their relationships despite being separated.

Masi Noor serves as the Editor of SPSSI’s Virtual Issues. This statement borrows content and language from Masi Noor’s Introduction to SPSSI’s virtual issue on parent-child separations. All of the articles referenced in this statement can be found in the virtual issue.

To read the virtual issue on parent-child separations, visit https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15404560 and click on “Virtual Issues.”
This statement has also been endorsed by the following individuals:

- Adriana Espinos
- Andrea Mora
- Brad Sickels
- Cassie O’Brien
- David Caicedo
- Elizabeth Moschella
- Jaboa Lake
- Jeanine Grütter
- Kala Melchiori
- Leanna Papp
- Lisa Rosenthal
- Monica Biernat
- Özge Savaş
- Ronnie M. Greenwood
- Sarah Mancoll
- Shannon Wood
- T. Evan Smith
- Alexa Harris
- Angela Robinson
- Caitlin Kearney
- Cynthia Meyersburg
- David Gordon
- Elizabeth White
- Jacob Smith
- Jenna Zucker
- Kathryn Kroeper
- Lilibeth Watson
- Lizbeth Kim
- Nicole Overstreet
- Rachel L. Austin
- Ryan Lei
- Sarah Schaible
- Stacey Williams
- Tangier Davis
- Alyssa Lisle
- Anila Balkissoon
- Carey S. Ryan
- Danielle Parra
- DeBorah Gilbert White
- Gina Roussos
- James M. Jones
- Jennifer Goetz
- Kay Deaux
- Lindsay Palmer
- Mackenzie Kirkman
- Nuha Alshabani
- Rafael Aguilera
- Sam Hughes
- Sarah Schulz
- Stephanie Wright
- Traci Kennedy
- Amber Raley
- Anna Kallschmidt
- Caroline Shahbaz
- Darrin Rogers
- Elise Ozier
- Glenda Russell
- Jazmin Brown-Iannuzzi
- Jessica Cox
- Leah Pound
- Lisa M. Brown
- Michele Schlehofer
- Özden Melis Uluğ
- Rakshi Rath
- Sandra Oviedo Ramirez
- Seini O’Connor
- Susan Dudley
- Victor Adebusola

References


