

Developmental Neurotoxicology Society [DNTS] Position Statement

Separating Children and Parents at the Border

As an organization dedicated to research on children's healthy development, the Developmental Neurotoxicology Society feels compelled to speak out about the recent separation of immigrant children and infants from their parents and/or guardians at U.S. border crossings. This policy ignores compelling scientific evidence that adversity during infancy, childhood, or adolescence contributes to "toxic stress," and has lasting harmful effects on children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Toxic stress puts a child at risk for changes in brain architecture, epigenetic alterations, and modified gene function (1, 2). These changes can have a lingering influence on mental and physical health problems well into adulthood (3), and could impact subsequent generations (4). Published research has also clearly demonstrated the association between childhood adversity and an elevated risk for multiple forms of psychopathology, including depression, PTSD, and substance abuse, as well as health problems, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and stroke, well into adulthood (1, 5).

The harsh reality is that for the children who have already been separated, the damage has been done. Although critically important to limit further damage, just reuniting these children with their parents will not solve the problem. While rapid re-unification is essential, a committed plan for future support of these injured families is also critical. Without it, the long-term societal cost will be enormous. This is a devastating issue which demands that new policies be implemented to maintain the integrity of immigrant families, and stop the shameful practice of separating children from their parents at the border.

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3. Gregory E. Miller, Edith Chen, Karen J. Parker. Psychological Stress in Childhood and Susceptibility to the Chronic Diseases of Aging: Moving Towards a Model of Behavioral and Biological Mechanisms. *Psychol Bull.* 2011; 137(6):959-97.
4. Mark A. Hanson and Michael K. Skinner MK. Developmental origins of epigenetic transgenerational inheritance. *Environ Epigenet.* 2016; 2(1).
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