

AAPCSW Response to the “ZERO-TOLERANCE Policy” and the Child/Family Status of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

As psychoanalytic mental health professionals and members of the American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work, we bear witness to people’s stories of loss, pain, and trauma in our daily work. President Trump’s “Zero- Tolerance Policy” has led to inhumane treatment of refugees and forced separation of infants, toddlers, and children from their parents. And this compels us to raise our collective voice in protest. When such experiences are superimposed on stressors the parents have already endured in their countries of origin, it is not hard to imagine that their children traumatically experience the strange spaces (i.e., cages), the forced separation, and the deprivation of parental comfort and safety.

Ample research (see below) supports the fact that forced separation has acute and chronic consequences for mental and physical health of children. This includes derailment of normal brain development, damage and dysregulation of other organs, attachment disorders, learning difficulties, depression, PTSD, substance abuse, damaged sense of self-worth, and lack of trust in the environment. Furthermore, the resulting fear, terror, and trauma of these experiences have lifelong and intergenerational implications for the health and wellbeing of children, their families, and the larger community. It is also essential to understand that these harrowing, trauma-inducing, ill-conceived, and deliberate policies are based on societal forces that promote the marginalization of immigrants.

Using a policy of forced separation for over 2,300 children in one month as a “deterrent” and punishment of the parents without any regard for its destructive impact is simply an assault on our Constitution, our laws, and our cherished democratic values! Even the attempted remedy of a Presidential Executive Order for ending the family separation policy fails to cover the plight of those already affected and poses the further threat of prolonged family detention. As a result, with phenomenal obstacles in the way, the future quality of family reunification remains unclear for this group and the new asylum seekers. As mental health professionals with ethical standards rooted in the reverence for social justice and human dignity, we find the continuation of the current state of affairs simply unacceptable. We must and we will stay focused on the task of finding solutions. Once more, silence is not an option for us.

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