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March 1, 2018

The Honorable Kirstjen M. Nielsen
U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Nielsen:

On behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit professional organization of 66,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, I write to follow-up on my January 11th letter seeking a meeting to discuss how the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can best safeguard the health and well-being of immigrant children.

In our previous letter, the Academy urged you in the strongest possible terms to reject a policy that would separate children from their parents at the border. To our knowledge, no decision has been made with respect to this policy. However, we are aware of reports that parents and children are being forcibly separated at our borders. We write to implore you to intervene with immigration enforcement and put an end to the separation of parents and children.

As pediatricians, it is our view that the separation of children from their parents as a tool of law enforcement to deter immigration is inhumane and counterproductive. We remind you that the people most affected by a policy of parental separation are children. Many of these children are terrified, young, and are victims of or witnesses to violence themselves. As noted by the authors of a recent *New York Times* [op-ed](#), "Parents will continue to flee violence to protect their children and themselves. It is reprehensible to punish them for that basic human impulse."

Children are not just little adults. Children have unique needs including medical, developmental, dietary, and other physical needs and, as such, our immigration system must recognize this reality. Children may not even know why they were brought to the U.S. if their parent understandably chose to protect them from the dangerous circumstances that forced them to flee their home country.

Separation from the very parents who would provide them with love, stability and reassurance only exacerbates children's suffering. Separation of children from their parents increases the number of unaccompanied children and, in some cases, increases the number of children in foster care in the U.S. At a time when the U.S. is shifting child welfare practice to recognize the importance of keeping families safely together where possible, it is extremely concerning that immigrant children are facing the unnecessary trauma of entering foster care for reasons unrelated to their safety.

We ask you to put children first and not exacerbate their suffering by the additional trauma of being separated from their parents. As children develop, their brains change in response to environments and experiences. Fear and stress, particularly prolonged exposure to serious stress without the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships— known as toxic stress – can harm the developing brain and harm short- and long-term health. Pediatricians work to keep families together in times of strife because we know that in any time of anxiety and stress, children need to be with their parents, family members and caregivers.

The AAP looks forward to hearing from you on our request for a meeting. To arrange that meeting, please contact Tamar Haro at tharo@aap.org or 202-347-8600. In the meantime, we urge you to publicly reject the separation of parents and children at our nation's borders.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Colleen A. Kraft". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Colleen A. Kraft, MD, FAAP
President

CAK/tmh

The New York Times

Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Cruel Ploy of Taking Immigrant Kids From Their Parents

By DORA GALACATOS, ALAN SHAPIRO and BRETT STARK

FEB. 28, 2018



A boy from Honduras watching a movie at a Border Patrol detention center in McAllen, Tex., in 2014. Credit John Moore/Getty Images

The Department of Homeland Security may soon formalize the abhorrent practice of detaining the children of asylum-seekers separately from their parents. Immigrant families apprehended at the southwest border already endure a deeply flawed system in which they can be detained indefinitely. In this immigration system, detainees too often lack adequate access to counsel. But to unnecessarily tear apart families who cross the border to start a better life is immoral.

Sadly, such separations are already happening. The Florence Project in Arizona documented 155 such cases by October and other immigrant advocacy organizations report that children are being taken away from their parents. If the secretary orders this practice to be made standard procedure, thousands of families could face unnecessary separation.

The Trump administration's goal is to strong-arm families into accepting deportation to get their children back. Kirstjen Nielsen, the secretary of homeland security, admitted this when she told the Senate on Jan. 16 that separating families may "[discourage parents](#)" from seeking refuge in America.

But the increasing informal use of family separation has not proved to be a deterrent. Last year, the number of family apprehensions at the southwestern border skyrocketed from 1,118 families in April to 8,120 in December.

Parents will continue to flee violence to protect their children and themselves. It is reprehensible to punish them for that basic human impulse. It is also despicable that the government would use children as bargaining chips. This policy is tantamount to state-sponsored traumatization.

Those of us who have seen the sites where families are detained and work directly with children and families who have gone through the system know what's at stake.

The children we work with call the Border Patrol processing stations for migrants stopped at the border "iceboxes" (hieleras) and "dog kennels" (perreras). "I was wet from crossing the river and it was so cold I thought I would die," one child said.

Another told us: "The lights were kept on day and night. I became disoriented and didn't know how long I had been there." A third said: "I was separated from my older sister. She is the closest person in my life. I couldn't stop crying until I saw her again a few days later."

In our work we have heard countless stories about detention. But the shock of bearing witness to them is hard to put into words. In McAllen, Tex., you enter a nondescript warehouse, the color of the dry barren landscape that surrounds it. It could be storage for just about anything, but is in actuality a cavernous, cold space holding hundreds upon hundreds of mostly women and children.

Chain-link fencing divides the harshly illuminated space into pens, one for boys, a second for girls and a third for their mothers and infant siblings. The pens are unusually quiet except for the crinkling of silver Mylar blankets. This is where family separation begins, as does the nightmare for parents and children.

The parents whose sons and daughters have been taken from them are given two options: either agree to return home with their children — or endure having those children sent on to shelters run by the Health and Human Services Department while they themselves languish in detention centers scattered around the country.

This country's medical and mental health organizations have rightly recognized the trauma of this practice. The American Academy of Pediatrics has condemned immigrant family

separation, and family detention overall, as “harsh and counterproductive.” The American Medical Association has denounced family separation as causing “unnecessary distress, depression and anxiety.”

Studies overwhelmingly demonstrate the irreparable harm to children caused by separation from their parents. A parent or caregiver’s role is to mitigate stress. Family separation robs children of that buffer and can create toxic stress, which can damage brain development and lead to chronic conditions like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and heart disease. For that reason, more than 200 child welfare, juvenile justice and child development organizations [signed a letter](#) demanding that the Trump administration abandon this ill-conceived policy.

Family separation is also unjustifiable legally, as “family unity” is central to our immigration laws and our longstanding policy of reuniting citizens and permanent residents with their relatives.

More fundamentally, family separation is anathema to basic decency and human rights. For our government to essentially hold immigrant children as hostages in exchange for the “ransom” of their parents’ deportation is simply despicable.

It is every parent’s nightmare to have a child snatched away. To adopt this as standard procedure to facilitate deportations is inhumane and does nothing to make Americans safer. This country, and Secretary Nielsen, must reject family separation.

Dora Galacatos is the executive director of the [Feerick Center for Social Justice](#) at Fordham Law School. Alan Shapiro is a co-founder and the medical director and Brett Stark is a co-founder and the legal director of [Terra Firma](#), which aids unaccompanied immigrant children.

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