



## From the Editor

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# Cruel Decisions: What Were They Thinking?

**A**s I write this, as many as 2,000 of the nearly 2,600 immigrant children who were separated from their undocumented parents at the United States-Mexican border remain apart (Sacchetti, Sieff, & Fisher, 2018). These children are all over the United States now, in foster homes and shelters. Some children are in institutional settings where adults aren't permitted to touch or comfort them. They are separated by gender; thus, many siblings are denied the potential support they could provide for each other. Some children are placed with foster parents who do not speak Spanish, eliminating an important avenue of communication.

Children in these circumstances are subject to trauma, which can result in toxic stress – stress that is severe or chronic, and is not buffered by adult support (e.g., their parents). Toxic stress can impair children's cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and contribute to risk for disease and early death.

About separating children from their families, I have heard many people say, "This is America. This is not who we are." Looking back in history about how Americans have treated other groups – African-American children being separated from their parents through sales to other slave owners, and Native-American children taken from their parents and put in boarding schools – some Americans have rethought this declaration. If we are honest with ourselves, this *is* who we are, at least for this time in history.

The promotion of fear – of too many things to innumerate – has led us once again to this horrible place where we watch our government do unthinkable things *en masse* to children and families. The world doesn't know what to make of us, nor do we know what to make of ourselves, or

perhaps more accurately, our nation's leaders. What were they thinking?

As reported in *The Washington Post*:

The children have been through hell. They are babies who were carried across rivers and toddlers who rode for hours in trucks and buses and older kids who were told that a better place was just beyond the horizon.

And now they live and wait in unfamiliar places: big American suburban houses where no one speaks their language; a locked shelter on a dusty road where they spend little time outside; a converted Walmart where each morning they are required to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, in English, to the country that holds them apart from their parents (Sacchetti et al., 2018).

Although the separations have stopped after a global outcry and legal threats, the damage to 2,600 children has already been done. Wan (2018a) describes what happens inside children when they are forcibly separated from their parents:

Their heart rate goes up. Their body releases a flood of stress hor-

**Figure 1.**  
**Toxic Stress Responses**

- Changes in bodily function, sleeping patterns, eating, or toileting, including bedwetting or fecal incontinence.
- Changes in behavior, frequent severe tantrums, detachment, numbing, aggression, anxiety, exaggerated startle.
- Changes in learning, limited working memory, organizational problems.

**Source.** Linton, 2018.

mones such as cortisol and adrenaline. Those stress hormones can start killing off dendrites – the little branches in brain cells that transmit messages. In time, the stress can start killing off neurons and – especially in young children – wreaking dramatic and long-term damage, both psychologically and to the physical structure of the brain.

The trauma of separation can continue long after children's reunification with their parents. After reunification, children often cling to their parents and refuse to let them out of their sight; separation anxiety is common (Wan, 2018b). Some children cry uncontrollably; others are unable to sleep because of recurring nightmares. Eating disorders are common.

What might be especially troublesome are problems with trust and unresolved anger, in some cases, against their parents. Children have unanswered questions: "Why was I taken away?" "Did I do something bad to make this happen?" "Why did my parents let them take me away?" Some children feel their parents abandoned them and blame their parents for what happened. Reattaching might be extremely difficult.

The effect of separation is catastrophic, and for many of those children, the psychological damage from

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their separation will require mental health treatment, services they are extremely unlikely to receive (Wan, 2018b). Said Charles Nelson, a pediatric professor at Harvard Medical School: "There's so much research on this that if people paid attention at all to the science, they would never do this" (Nelson, as cited in Wan, 2018a).

Separating children from their parents and detaining them in deplorable settings is a hideous, indelible stain on our nation's character. If we want to be able to honestly say, "This is not who we are," we need to stay current on the threats to children who enter our country, be alert to symptoms of toxic stress responses (see Figure 1), deliver trauma-informed care, and vote for leaders who represent our values. ■■■

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