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# Research and Policy Perspectives on Separating (and Reconnecting) Children and Parents: Implications for Families on the Border

Rapid Response Talk, July 2018

# Research and Policy Perspectives on Separating (and Reconnecting) Children and Parents: Implications for Families on the Border

This report summarizes a Rapid Response Talk and panel discussion on implications of family separation for the development of young children, co-sponsored by the Zero to Thrive Initiative and the Center for Human Growth and Development at the University of Michigan on 7/11/18.

Faculty experts from different fields reviewed research evidence on the science of early childhood development, stress and trauma, and policy implications of family separation and reunions for very young children. This report highlights policy implications and provides links to papers and resources. A social media toolkit is also provided with graphics and sample posts.



**CHGD Rapid Response Talks** provide the University of Michigan community and general public a review of research evidence regarding current issues salient for child health and well-being.

**Zero to Thrive.** Zero to Thrive seeks to transform the lives of young vulnerable children and their families through research, community partnership, and service. The Zero to Thrive Translational Research Network harnesses the strength of multidisciplinary faculty across the University of Michigan whose work focuses on families with young children facing adversity.

**The Center for Human Growth and Development (CHGD)** seeks to promote innovative multidisciplinary research and provide training to the next generation of scholars in child health and development. The long range goal of CHGD's research and training mission is to promote translation of research findings into intervention and policy-relevant recommendations that will optimize children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.

*This report was compiled by Alison L. Miller, PhD and the Zero to Thrive and CHGD leadership teams, with input from the Speakers, as well as Caroline Bartholomew, Kiren Chaudhry, Tyler Hein, and Hurley Riley.*

## KATHERINE ROSENBLUM, PHD

**Bio:** Dr. Rosenblum is a Co-Director of the Zero to Thrive Initiative. She is trained as a clinical and developmental psychologist and is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan. Dr. Rosenblum's research interests center on infant and early childhood mental health, trauma and loss in infancy and early childhood, special populations including military families and children in the foster care system, and parenting interventions with young families.




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*"SEPARATION IS COSTLY TO FAMILIES AND CHILDREN."*

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- Dr. Rosenblum drew parallels between the separations experienced by families on the border and military families, who typically experience multiple planned separations and reunions, due to repeated deployments.
- Despite military families receiving extensive support both formally from the U.S. government and informally from family and community, this process is stressful and poses challenges to the family system and child development.
- Parents experience anxiety about what is to come during deployment, plus high levels of stress when planning for changes in child care, routines, and school schedules.
- Parents often feel that they must remain strong in order to manage child worries and allay their fears, which can take an emotional/physiological toll.
- When parents return from military service, despite having contact with their child during deployment, it can be a struggle to re-establish positive relationships and routines with their child. A child may show increased anxiety (e.g., not wanting to leave parent to go to school) or may act out.
- Particularly for parents who experienced trauma on the battlefield, stressors such as child tantrums can be difficult to manage and potentially re-trigger trauma experiences.

### KEY POINTS:

- (1) Re-integration into family life is a process, not a single moment.
- (2) Even under the best of conditions with support before, during, and following, separation is costly to families and children.
- (3) Trauma-informed care may be needed for families experiencing separation.



## ARASH JAVANBAKHT, MD

**Bio:** Dr. Javanbakht serves as the director of the Stress, Trauma, and Anxiety Research Clinic at Wayne State University. He is a board-certified psychiatrist, and his clinical work is mainly focused on anxiety/trauma-related disorders and PTSD. Most recently, Dr. Javanbakht's research focuses on anxiety disorders and trauma in vulnerable refugee populations.

*"EFFECTS OF RELATIONSHIP DISRUPTION CAN IMPACT A CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT, EVEN IN ADULTHOOD. 'SEPARATION ANXIETY LIMITS THE ABILITY TO GO TO SCHOOL, FIND FRIENDS, SOCIALIZE,' CREATING DEFICITS IN PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING."*

*- ARASH JAVANBAKHT, MD*

- Dr. Javanbakht discussed his work with Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the Detroit Metro Area in relation to the issues faced by children and families who have been separated at the border and have likely experienced some degree of trauma in their home countries coupled with a difficult journey to the U.S.
- Once families arrive in the U.S., they often find themselves again in challenging circumstances. Although the material living conditions may be better than in the refugee camps, refugees can often be located in low-income, poorly-resources communities which may pose new adversities.
- The impact of trauma (especially chronic trauma), limited resources, and stress, as experienced by most political refugees and asylum seekers, can be extensive and long-lasting.
- Dr. Javanbakht described that although children whose families emigrated due to war in their home country do not necessarily show full-blown PTSD diagnoses, they do exhibit heightened symptoms of anxiety: 77% of the children he studied screened positive for Separation Anxiety, meaning they have difficulty separating from their parent and usually extreme difficulty attending school. As children are often the first to learn the language and culture of a new country, when they suffer from separation fears, it becomes even more difficult for the family to connect with their new community or to thrive.
- 32% of the mothers in the study screened positive for PTSD, and many more exhibited symptoms. This is important because a mother's PTSD symptom severity is associated with her child's anxiety.
- To break this vicious cycle, Dr. Javanbakht discussed an intervention that focuses on mindful yoga for mothers, art and dance and movement therapy for children, and families being able to tell their stories, as a way to help these families contextualize and begin to cope with their experiences.

### KEY POINTS:

- (1) Although their material living conditions may be improved, new challenges of navigating and acclimating to poorly-resourced communities in the United States contribute to the stress of refugee populations.
- (2) The severity of maternal trauma (PTSD symptoms) is correlated with the severity of child anxiety.
- (3) Support in the form of trauma-informed self-regulation activities, like mindful yoga and dance and movement therapy for children, can potentially improve outcomes.

## JACEK DEBIEC, MD, PHD

**Bio:** Dr. Debiec is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Assistant Research Professor at the Molecular and Behavioral Neuroscience Institute at the University of Michigan. He was a Fulbright fellow and earned an MD and a PhD in philosophy of science. His research uses animal models and other innovative methodologies to study the impact of early life trauma on attachment formation. He also investigates the protective role of the attachment system among children experiencing trauma.




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*"EARLY TRAUMA AND SEPARATION OF THE KIND WE'RE SEEING TODAY MAY PROGRAM A CHILD FOR LIFE, INCREASING THEIR RISK OF DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND PSYCHOTIC DISORDER. NOT ONLY IS THE COST TO THE INDIVIDUAL POTENTIALLY VERY HIGH, SO IS THE POTENTIAL COST TO SOCIETY."  
- JACEK DEBIEC, MD, PHD*

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- Dr. Debiec discussed the formative role of early trauma on the brain. Research in animals and humans indicate that children are resilient to stress and trauma early in development, during the sensitive time period when they are forming strong attachments to their caregiver.
- However, being separated from caregivers at an early age can alter development of fear systems in the brain. And, if parents experience trauma, it reduces their capacity to buffer child stress. Excessive stress leads to premature development of brain regions used to process stress and threat, reducing flexibility in response to threat and the ability to “unlearn” what has previously been scary.
- Dr. Debiec discussed his research on safety and threat learning, highlighting findings that when parents experience trauma, their children fail to develop resilience.
- Infants and young children naturally mimic the emotions of their parents; maternal trauma and fear activates sites in the child’s brain that are associated with pain, stress, and fear. These threats, transmitted by the mother, can start at birth and are long-lasting.
- The brain continues to develop into our 20s, and some changes can be reversed. Yet, aspects of altered brain development following a traumatic experience may be irreversible. Maternal separation can impair development across domains, including academics and mental health.
- Early trauma and separation of the kind families separated at the border have experienced may ‘program’ a child for life, increasing risk for depression, anxiety, and psychotic disorders. Thus, not only is the cost to the individual potentially very high, so is the potential cost to society.
- Although President Trump has ended his policy of separating parents and children at the border, there are currently over 2000 children whose reunification with parents is unclear. The burden to be borne by these children, as well as our society at large, is likely very high.

### KEY POINTS:

- (1) Attachment learning is safety learning.
- (2) Fear learning emerges as the sensitive period for attachment learning ends.
- (3) Maternal presence may suppress fear learning.
- (4) Maternal separation alters fear learning.



## VIVEK SANKARAN, JD

**Bio:** Professor Sankaran’s work focuses on the area of law relating to children in foster care. He is a Clinical Professor of Law at the University of Michigan Law School, where he directs both the Child Advocacy Law Clinic and the Child Welfare Appellate Clinic. Professor Sankaran’s most recent work includes co-editing the third edition of *Child Welfare Law and Practice*, a widely recognized resource used by child welfare law professionals across the country.

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*"THIS NATION HAS ALWAYS SERVED AS A MORAL BEACON FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD. BUT OUR TREATMENT OF THESE CHILDREN — WHO HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG OTHER THAN ACCOMPANY THEIR PARENTS SEEKING A BETTER LIFE — IS A DISGRACE THAT REFLECTS ON ALL OF US."*

*- VIVEK SANKARAN, JD*

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- Professor Sankaran highlighted the protections that children and families are afforded under U.S. law. Specifically, he noted that a core principle underlying the family law system in the U.S. is to protect the family unit, and to remove children from their families only as a last resort.
- This is rooted in a national consensus that detaining children without parental contact is a dangerous and cruel sanction to inflict on a child and should only be done when it is absolutely necessary. Further, if a child does have to be removed from the home, laws require child welfare agencies to maintain connections between the child and family.
- The policies in place at the border stand in stark contrast to these policies that cover children in the U.S.
- There is a misconception that young children will be “fine” if they are removed, because they “won’t remember” what’s happened. This view is widespread in the legal sector.
- Professor Sankaran hopes that the attention to the science of early childhood development and trauma could have a positive impact for the many children currently in foster care, as well as those who have been removed from their families at the border.

### KEY POINTS:

- (1) The foster care system has laws that protect children in theory, but oftentimes, are not implemented in practice, especially within marginalized populations.
- (2) A goal of Child Protective Services is family unity in order to promote child/family well-being. Families at the border, however, are not afforded the same treatment.
- (3) It is essential to bridge the divide between researchers and the legal system by disseminating research to inform practice.

## IMPLICATIONS

- **What we can learn from research on the experiences of military families:**  
Even among military families, who have extensive supports provided before, during, and following deployment, family separation is stressful for parents and children, and re-unification takes time. It's an ongoing process, not a moment. We need to provide ongoing support and resources for the parents as well as the children who have experienced traumatic separations, such as those at border crossings.
- **What we can learn from research on anxiety and the refugee experience:**  
When families arrive in the U.S., they have often already experienced trauma in their home country, in resettlement camps, and on their journey. They face an uncertain future. Most refugees suffer from diagnosable levels of anxiety; children of parents with anxiety show high anxiety rates. Anxiety is disabling for adjusting to a new country; uncertainty can exacerbate trauma and anxiety symptoms. Establishing regular routines can help. We need to provide secure, safe environments for families to process their trauma and start adapting to life in a new country.
- **What we can learn from basic science research on the neurobiology of fear:**  
Very young children are resilient to trauma and stress during the sensitive period early in development when they are forming attachment relationships with their caregiver. These caregiving relationships buffer stress responses for young children. However, if children are separated from caregivers during this sensitive period when attachments are forming, it leaves a footprint that can last a lifetime.
- **What we can learn from the foster care system and the legal perspective:**  
Though not always achieved, the goal of U.S. foster care policy is consistent with the science of early childhood development in that the system seeks to maintain family unity if at all possible. Children should be removed from their families only as a matter of last resort, and are entitled to a hearing with legal counsel within a short time period. If a child must be removed, every effort should be made to place the child with relatives. For families experiencing separation at the border, none of these policies are being followed.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION, CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES:**

- **A Sudden and Lasting Separation from a Parent can Permanently alter Brain Development**
- **The Neurobiology of Safety and Threat Learning in Infancy**
- **Enduring Neural and Behavioral Effects of Early Life Adversity in Infancy: Consequences of Maternal Abuse and Neglect, Trauma and Fear**
- **Mental Health in Syrian Refugee Children Resettling in the United States: War, Trauma, Migration, and the Role of Parental Stress**
- **Military families can teach us about the cost of family separations**
- **Opinion: U.S. laws are based on kids' best interests. Trump's border policies aren't.**
- **As Migrant Families Are Reunited, Some Children Don't Recognize Their Mothers**
- **Frequently Asked Questions about Separated Children and the Welfare System**

## SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLKIT



### Sample Tweets

- There must be follow-up support for parents and children after families are reunited. #UMichTalks #familyseparation @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk
- 'Even with time to prepare and support, separations and reunions pose unique challenges.' U-M Professor of Psychiatry, Katherine Rosenblum on military family separations. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #familyseparation #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- Maternal separation alters fear and safety learning. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #familyseparation #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- Maternal presence buffers fear learning and promotes resilience. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #resilience #familyseparation #attachment #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- The insights of military families should inform our response to immigrant families who arrive at our borders. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #familyseparation #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- #Militaryfamilies can teach us a great deal about family separations, confronting challenges and transitions, and the work it takes to maintain relationships and promote children wellbeing. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk
- Despite the joy of reunification, great challenges remain when children reunite with their parents after a separation. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- Effects of relationship disruption can last far into the future; children often remain fearful that their parent will disappear again. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- When service members return, the U.S. #military invests in #support for #families as they reconnect and strengthen #relationships. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks
- The trauma of being separated may pile on top of other #trauma #refugees experience in their home country and during the journey to the US. @zerotothrive @UMCHGD #rapidresponsetalk #UMichTalks

Sample Graphics

### THE IMPACT OF SEPARATING CHILDREN FROM THEIR PARENTS

Since May 2018, over 2300 children have been separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border. This experience may have long-lasting health impacts on children including:

- TOXIC STRESS**  
Parents help to buffer the impact of traumatic experiences. Without parents, children undergo prolonged intense stress. When developing brains are constantly exposed to stress hormones, the brain may have long-lasting impairments.
- BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES**  
After experiencing separation, children may have increased aggression, withdrawal, and/or regression. The children are also at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse later in life.
- PARENTS' SAFETY**  
While separated, children may worry about their parents' safety. This places children in a constant state of worry, especially if children and parents are not in contact.
- FEAR OF SEPARATION**  
Upon reconnecting, children may constantly fear being re-separated from their parent. Children may have difficulty tolerating even brief separations from their parents.
- REINTEGRATION**  
Once children are reconnected with their parents, they may avoid their parents' efforts to comfort. Reintegrating the family is a complicated process which involves re-establishing relationships, roles, and routines.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT US AT [ZEROTOTHRIVE.ORG](http://ZEROTOTHRIVE.ORG)

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“This nation has always served as a moral beacon for the rest of the world. But our treatment of these children — who have done nothing wrong other than accompany their parents seeking a better life — is a disgrace that reflects on all of us.”

— Vivek Sankaran, JD, University of Michigan

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Separation of Children from their Parents at the US-Mexico Border

2300+ CHILDREN HAVE BEEN SEPARATED FROM THEIR PARENTS AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER SINCE EARLY-MAY

57 DAYS IS THE AVERAGE TIME THAT CHILDREN SPEND IN A SHELTER BEFORE BEING PLACED WITH A SPONSOR

“THIS NATION HAS ALWAYS SERVED AS A MORAL BEACON FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD. BUT OUR TREATMENT OF THESE CHILDREN — WHO HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG OTHER THAN ACCOMPANY THEIR PARENTS SEEKING A BETTER LIFE — IS A DISGRACE THAT REFLECTS ON ALL OF US.”

— VIVEK SANKARAN, JD

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“Reintegration is not a moment, but a process.”

— Katherine Rosenblum, PhD

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“We think that we’ve made the family whole again by simply bringing them back together and letting them go on with their lives, when the reality is that there’s a lot of work that still needs to be done.”

— Vivek Sankaran, JD, University of Michigan Law School

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