

# Separating Children From Families Can Harm Them for Life

Not returning children to their parents, or primary caregiver, flies in the face of one of the most basic truths of childhood development: children need their parents. Locking them up in jails is also not only inhumane and traumatizing, it is unnecessary.

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July 25, 2018



A young boy, pictured on April 24, 2018, eats fruit at a migrant shelter in Tijuana, Mexico. He and other migrants from Central America planned to present themselves to U.S. immigration officials and seek asylum. / Photo by David Maung

San Diego is central to the national debate over the fate of migrant children who have been

forcibly separated from their parents and caregivers. U.S. District Court Judge Dana Sabraw is overseeing the government's reunification plan and just issued an order [halting the deportation of families](#).

You may not notice [the handful of detention centers](#) for immigrant children in San Diego. You also may not recognize the signs of long-term damage to the children held without their families. But the trauma is there, the damage is real and it is beyond unacceptable. As a development psychologist and a neuroscientist, I have seen that the longer a highly stressful situation persists, the more damaging it is to the brain and the body.

## COMMENTARY

The Voices of San Diego

Despite

widespread public moral outcry, multiple court orders and professional concern expressed by dozens of scientists and researchers, there are many examples of the government continuing its harmful and dangerous policy of separating children from their parents and caregivers. The sudden separation of children from their families can impair the development of what

researchers and physicians call “executive functions.”

I’ve spent more than 30 years studying these functions, [which include](#) the abilities to concentrate and stay focused, regulate emotions, problem-solve and resist acting impulsively. When children endure situations of significant stress, it can impair development of the brain’s prefrontal cortex, upon which executive functions depend. [For example](#), it can impair the prefrontal cortex’s ability to communicate with other brain regions like the amygdala, letting these other regions know they can calm down. The result is that people stay in a permanently heightened state of alert, constantly vigilant for possible danger. To recover their mental and physical health, including proper prefrontal cortex functioning, they need help from professionals with training in trauma-informed care.

Many children who entered the United States at a *legal* entry point with an adult relative other than their parent, such as a grandparent seeking asylum, were taken from their relative. Because these adults are not the children’s parents, the government is not doing anything right now to reunite these children with their families, even when the adult they entered with

is their legal guardian. PBS Newshour has been reporting on [the heartbreaking story of 3-year-old Sofi](#), who has been held [in government custody for four weeks](#) with no timeline for when she will be returned to her family. Children need to be returned to their families post haste, whether their caregiver is their mother, grandmother or another close relative.

[The administration says](#) it has completed reuniting all children under 5 years old currently eligible to be reunited. Over half the children not reunited have been deemed ineligible for reunification because the environment would be too unsafe (others are ineligible because their parents would be too unsafe). If the government is saying that the home country where their parents have been deported back to would be too unsafe, then the government is being contradictory. If where the environment is too unsafe in the home country for the children to be returned to then their parents' requests for asylum should be granted, or else these environments should be judged safe enough to return the children to their parents.

Not returning children to their parents, or primary caregiver, flies in the face of one of the most basic truths of childhood development:

Children need their parents. [Research shows that children do better with loving parents](#) even when in terribly adverse circumstances than they do in better circumstances without their loving parent.

Locking up parents and children in “family jails” is also not only inhumane and traumatizing, it is unnecessary. There are proven, less costly and more humane alternatives. [For example](#), the Family Case Management Program made sure that asylum-seeking families appeared at 99 percent of their court appearances and check-ins with authorities. [The administration ended that program last year](#). Congress should [reinstate it](#).

More than 2,500 children older than 5 are still separated from their parents, and there are scores of cases where the government has either destroyed or lost paperwork. As Sabraw has [stated](#), “The unfortunate reality is that under the present system, migrant children are not accounted for with the same efficiency and accuracy as property.” The government takes greater care in tracking the whereabouts of computers and office furniture than children separated from their families.

Let's stop the pretense and lies that asylum-seekers are dangerous criminals. The vast majority are good people willing to work hard, just as your forbearers and mine were when they came to the United States.

Treating those seeking asylum inhumanely is not only immoral, it endangers the very country those actions are designed to safeguard. It runs the risk of generating hatred and abhorrence for the United States, creating fertile soil for future antagonism.

The government should immediately reunite the thousands of children separated from their families (whether their family is a parent or other relative), treat families humanely and help children and adults recover from the trauma that's been so needlessly caused.

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