

Opinion: Separating children from parents harms their development

When a child is separated from a parent, the resiliency of the young brain erodes

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Liana Chavarin, of Berkeley, carries her son Oliver, 9, during a recent protest outside ICE headquarters in San Francisco. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

By Dr. Jaime Peterson |

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As I entered the exam room, the screaming began. 14-month old Antonio (not his real name) began to shake and cling to his mother. He had just arrived from El Salvador after a traumatic border crossing. It took 15 minutes before I could approach him for a cursory physical exam. I never took him from her arms.

During the critical first years of life children need safe, stable and nurturing relationship for early brain development. If a child experiences an adverse event the young brain can recover and is remarkably resilient in large part due to the social-emotional buffering provided by a strong, loving parent relationship. But when you fracture that relationship

by separating a parent and their child, the resiliency of the young brain erodes and if prolonged, permanently changes the brain architecture.

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I remember the first day I dropped off my 14-month old daughter at daycare. Despite the bright room full of toys she was terrified. She cried the entire day. At pick-up I could still hear her frantic wail: “Mammaaaa!!!” Unlike Antonio, once safe in my arms, she quickly calmed. Each day she cried less and played more. Our strong, consistent relationship helped her “cope.” She knew I would always come back.

What if I had not returned? What if Antonio had been “ripped from his mother’s breast while feeding him” to be housed in a “tender aged” detention facility? We know what happens.

When traumatic events are prolonged or repeated they become toxic. The physiologic stress response (fight or flight response) goes into hyper-drive: children panic, scream, and look for the reassurance of a parent. If the stable parent relationship is missing, the hormonal stress response persists and changes brain structure with long-term negative consequences: growth delays, sleep disturbances, tantrums, attachment difficulty, learning disabilities and problem behaviors. What’s worse is the collective impact of each adverse childhood event may extend into adulthood with higher rates of substance use, anxiety, depression, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

Antonio wasn’t separated, but he was detained with his mother. Soon after he developed breath-holding spells. When frightened, he stopped breathing, turned blue and passed out. He was never separated. For months he cried at night, even in his mother’s arms. His language development stopped. Any detention, even with a parent, is harmful.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) represents more than 66,000 pediatricians in the United States and has repeatedly opposed the detention of children. While the executive order signed by the president ends family separation and the recent court injunction mandates reunification, children remain separated and families now face indefinite detention.

Children are not silent when they are in distress. Listen to their cries and their pleas for “Papi.” They are asking for safety, for familiarity, for comfort. With a parent they can heal. Antonio is slowly learning to cope, re-wire his stress response and adapt to a new life full of opportunity. Now in clinic, I get “high-fives” and hugs. The power of a loving, parent is remarkable.

Yet, I still can't sleep at night knowing we could have prevented much of Antonio's trauma. The pediatric and public health fields are rooted in upstream prevention: If you know lead is in the water, remove the water source. If we know separating and detaining children harms their development, stop the practice and find an alternative. Not July 11, not after the mid-terms, immediately. We don't ask for a "deadline extension" when it comes to a child's health because the stakes for Antonio and countless other children are just too high.

Dr. Jaime Peterson is a pediatrician at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

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