

The Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences calls on President Trump to immediately end the policy of separating families at our southern border.

Decades of psychological research have demonstrated unequivocally that separating children from their families causes irreparable harm to those children. Like other childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences, separation from parents and families creates negative health impacts that will last an individual's entire lifespan. Separation has significant effects on the developing brain, which is highly influenced by childhood experiences, affecting the ability to respond to stress and regulate emotions, and leading to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and posttraumatic stress disorder; to cognitive and academic difficulties; and to a host of physical disorders.

This harm is more severe when the children are placed in situations of extreme uncertainty and/or in institutional care, such as that provided in the shelters employed in the current crisis. As families seeking refuge in the United States have already endured significant emotional and physical stress related to the conditions that led them to flee their home countries, separating family members from each other will serve to dramatically exacerbate that stress. Moreover, the effects of separation are not erased when families are reunited. The longer that children and parents are separated, the more of these symptoms the children will experience, and recent research suggests the effects of this early adversity may even be transmitted across generations. Thus, the current policy of separating children from their families will have a lasting impact on the children and families affected and, potentially, on generations to come.

As an organization that represents behavioral and brain scientists, we are strongly committed to the application of scientific evidence to promote the health and wellbeing of all individuals. We therefore call on the Administration to immediately end the policy of separating families, to make all possible efforts to reunite separated families, as rapidly as possible, and to provide comprehensive mental health care to all individuals who have been touched by the policy.

We implore the Administration to pursue alternate and humane means of detaining families who cross our borders in search of a better life. In particular, we ask that the Administration identify policies that take into account the clear and abundant scientific evidence demonstrating harmful and long-term effects of separation on the mental and physical health of children, and work instead to develop policies that protect the health and wellbeing of these vulnerable children. Policies that keep children with their families will promote normal development and resilience, outcomes that are not only good for the children and their families, but for society as a whole.