

Child Separation from Families and Mental Health

FPI is strongly opposed to policies and practices that separate children and youth from their families when their parents are detained for unauthorized entry into the US, often seeking asylum from violence in their own countries.

The forced separation of children from their families and communities has been a political tool used to dominate, exploit, and control people of color and the poor throughout history. Under the system of slavery, children were sold away from their parents without any pretense because they were chattel—the master’s property. Thus slavery dismantled and fragmented African American families in ways that continue to have adverse psychological effects today. Indian boarding schools operated under the guise of “civilizing savage children.” Their expressed intent and purpose were education—assimilation into the beliefs and value systems of Whites in the USA. By any means necessary, native children were forced to reject their natural heritage and to accept white culture as superior to their own. As a result, native children, families, and tribes were ripped apart by white supremacist ideology. And, they too, still suffer psychologically and physically from the lasting effects of forced family separation.

Targeting of children in poor families is yet another example of child separation from family in American history. Poor children were sometimes removed from their families and placed in orphanages against their parents’ will. While these children may not be as visible because they don’t belong to a single cultural group, they nonetheless bear the scars of trauma associated with the separation of children from their families.

The current separation of immigrant children from Latin America from their parents when they commit the civil offence of crossing the border without authorization in search of asylum is a human rights issue, a mental health issue, as well as a matter of social justice.

Dignity, fairness, equality, and respect are basic rights belonging to every person from birth till death. Images of caged children crying out for their parents make clear the absence of their human rights. The sudden and unexpected separation of children from their parents is certain to be experienced as a horrific and tragic event by children, parents, and siblings. Trauma exposure and adverse childhood events both pre-, during-, and after- migration intensify the risk of maladaptive social, emotional, and behavioral functioning both presently and in the future. When and if reunited, these traumatized immigrant Latino children and their parents are handicapped further in achieving better lives when they encounter racism and discrimination by virtue of the color of their skin and country of origin. Thus, as systems thinkers and clinical practitioners we cannot expect to promote the well-being of individuals, couples, and families without attending to human rights, laws, policies, and social justice.

The Family Process Institute unequivocally affirms the right to life, liberty and happiness for all people regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, religion, age, ability, **and immigrant status**. We denounce all actions, including policies and laws that target, oppress, exploit and cause injustice to any group of citizens as well as those who seek citizenship/asylum in the US.