



Illinois childhood trauma coalition

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The Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition's (ICTC) Statement Regarding the New "Zero-Tolerance" Immigration Policy June 16, 2018

As an organization devoted to trauma prevention and the wellbeing of children throughout Illinois, the Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition (ICTC) condemns the new "Zero Tolerance" policy announced by the federal administration in early May. Under this policy, immigrants who cross without authorization into the United States automatically face prosecution and are immediately separated from their children. Further, there is no effective plan to reunite the family once the legal issues are resolved. The forcible separation of children from parents inflicts further trauma on families who are seeking asylum from life-threatening circumstances in their countries of origin. This policy is harmful to children and can have lifelong consequences to families.

Loss of a parent is an Adverse Childhood Experience factorⁱ that can traumatize children. The strongest known protective factors for children, having a safe environment with supportive adults, are lost under "Zero Tolerance," both by the initial separation and the failure to reunite families. Thus, children can become traumatized, and families will suffer the long-term, negative psychological, social, and physical health consequences.

The federal government has long recognized that the health and development of children require that they have "safe, stable and nurturing" environments that include relationships with their parents and caregivers. In its publication, "Essentials for Childhood Framework,"ⁱⁱ the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) explains

Young children experience their world through their relationships with parents and other caregivers. Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments between children and their caregivers provide a buffer against the effects of potential stressors... and are fundamental to healthy brain development. They also shape the development of children's physical, emotional, social, behavioral, and intellectual capacities, which ultimately affect their health as adults. As a result, promoting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments can have a positive impact on a broad range of health problems and on the development of skills that will help children reach their full potential.

Safety, stability, and nurturing are three critical qualities of relationships that make a difference for children as they grow and develop. They can be defined as follows:



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- **Safety:** The extent to which a child is free from fear and secure from physical or psychological harm within their social and physical environment.
- **Stability:** The degree of predictability and consistency in a child's social, emotional, and physical environment.
- **Nurturing:** The extent to which a parent or caregiver is available and able to sensitively and consistently respond to and meet the needs of their child.

The results of “Zero Tolerance” fly in the face of what we know is best for child development and are intentionally harmful to families. The implementation of this cruel policy must stop.

To forcibly separate children from their families also appears to violate Article 9 of the UN Office of the High Commissioner's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989): “States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.” As explained, this new federal administrative policy is not in the best interest of children.

It is also critical to remember that the majority of immigrants being detained and subsequently arrested are not dangerous criminals and have never been accused of abusing or neglecting their children. Many immigrant families have already experienced the extreme stress and trauma of fleeing their home countries and making the trek to the border, hopeful for a better and safer future. Taking their children away only makes these problems worse.

The Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition calls on the federal administration to end “Zero Tolerance” and keep immigrant families intact. As mental health practitioners and advocates for children, we have a moral obligation to take a stand against this devastating new policy and work collectively to keep families together and find better, more humane, and reasonable solutions to border control. Much trauma can be healed, but the first step is to stop the abuse.

We must adopt policies that take into account what we know about the harmful effects of trauma and toxic stress on children and their families. The ICTC is opposed to the federal administration's current "Zero Tolerance" immigration policy and will continue to advocate against it until it is rescinded.

ⁱ For a discussion of ACEs, see <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/practicing-effective-prevention/prevention-behavioral-health/adverse-childhood-experiences> and https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about_ace.html

ⁱⁱ **CDC Essentials for Childhood Initiative:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Essentials for childhood: steps to create safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: Atlanta, GA, 2014. <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/essentials/index.html> at page 7.