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The Impact of Family Separation and Detention on Childhood Development and Mental Health

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Young children separated from their parents can suffer irreparable harm to brain development, psychological health, learning, and development.

Separation from a Parent is Psychologically Hazardous for Young Immigrant and Refugee Children

- Children who are detained are at risk of a variety of psychological and developmental problems linked to detention experiences. [1]
 - Potentially traumatic experiences include pre-immigration and/or migration trauma, family disruption, separation from parents, and poor and unsafe conditions of detention. [1]
- Children's healthy attachment to parents is linked to optimal development, healthy adult relationships, and psychological well-being; healthy relationships buffer the impact of trauma. [2, 3]
 - Children with previous trauma histories are particularly vulnerable to psychological harm caused by separation from parents. [4]

Children Who Have Experienced Traumatic Loss are at Risk of Suffering Irreparable Harm to Brain Development

- The lasting effects of traumatic stress on a child's brain development can lead to emotional dysregulation, maladaptive behaviors, poorer cognitive functioning, and impaired social attachments. [5, 6]
 - Stress hormones, such as cortisol, are elevated by severe stress and trauma, resulting in damage to areas of the brain including the frontal lobe, amygdala, and hippocampus. These parts of the brain regulate mood, fear responses and social attachment, and support learning and memory. [5]
 - High levels of distress can have long-term negative cognitive impact and impair the overall psychological and physical development of a child, with harm lasting into adulthood. [5, 6]
- Children separated from their parents living in institutional settings are at high risk for reduced physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Physiologically, this is manifested by lower levels of electrical brain activity and reduced white and gray matter of the brain that persist beyond the period of institutionalization. [7-9]

Children Who Have Experienced Traumatic Loss are at Risk of Suffering Irreparable Harm to their Mental Health

- Mental illness may surface when children are placed in confined, institutional settings, especially when separated from family. [10-12]
- Long-term and recurrent trauma, separation from parents, and social instability can impede personality and identity development and subsequently impair functioning. [13]
- Uncertainty created by separation from parents challenges children's mental health, learning, and well-being. [13]
- Childhood trauma can result in school failure or drop out, persistent poverty and hopelessness, addictions, mental illness and even suicidality later in life. [13-15]

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