



SSWAA Calls for End to Family Separation Policy at the Border

As an organization dedicated to the social and emotional growth of children and as professionals with the ethical responsibility to advocate for children and their families,¹ the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) condemns the Trump administration's policy of separating children from their parents at the border and now the move to warehouse innocent families. The "Zero Tolerance" policy, with over 2000 children being separated from their parents, was cruel and inhumane and already has resulted in long-term damaging effects on the children, families, and our society as a whole.

School social workers have a long history working with immigrant children and families, ensuring their success and integration into American society. As school social workers, we also understand the long term effects of adverse childhood events. Separating children from their parents after an already arduous and traumatic journey when seeking asylum or refuge from life-threatening circumstances is without a doubt harmful and must stop immediately.

Immigrants who cross the border without authorization into the U.S. automatically face prosecution and are separated from their children, without any plans for reunification or contact. While separating children from their parents is unacceptable for any unauthorized immigrant, it is important to note that, contrary to the rhetoric, many of these families are not violating any laws. In fact, they are seeking asylum in accordance with international law.

The United States has been a beacon of hope for many families escaping war and violence. A family's first choice is not to leave their home. Rather, it is a forced decision necessary to survival due to war, civil unrest, natural disasters, or extreme poverty. Most Americans are from immigrant families, no matter how far back they have to go to trace those immigrant ancestors. Those families overcame obstacles, made sacrifices for their children as any parent does, and ultimately became contributing members of American society.

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child² asserts that children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence (Article 19), the right not to be separated from their parents against their will unless that separation is determined to be in the child's best interest after careful review (Article 9), and the right to be free and protected from discrimination based on the child's or parents' race, religion, sex, language, national/ethnic origin, or some other status (Article 2). As members of a profession with a basis in the protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice,³ school social workers must call out this violation of human rights.

The separation of children from their parents at the border, knowingly inflicts psychological trauma on the child. Many of these children have already experienced trauma in their homelands and during the migration journey, and rely on their parents for a sense of security, comfort, and stability. This separation, particularly for younger children, causes attachment

¹ Supplemental Ethical Standards for School Social Work Practice.

² Convention of the Rights of the Child, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.

³ Global Definition of Social Work, <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>.

trauma with effects that can endure over time and into adulthood. Our current approach to immigration is not only traumatic to the those at the border, but also to immigrant children who live in constant fear of being separated from their parents.

This current practice is destroying families, creating negative health outcomes due to the painful and devastating experiences of children being pulled away from their parents and is dehumanizing. As a nation, we must uphold our commitment to ensuring the ethical treatment and protection of ALL children. There is no justification for such a policy which not only goes against the values of our profession, but diminishes our sense of ethics, social justice, and humanity as a nation. SSWAA calls on this Administration to immediately end this practice and protect the rights and well being of all children.

1. Although President Trump has rescinded the harmful policy of Separating Children from their Families, we now urge the Administration to reunite the families that have been separated as quickly as possible to reduce further trauma to their children, especially those “tender age shelters.”
2. We urge the Administration to end the “zero-tolerance” policy and the criminal prosecution of unauthorized migrants and asylum seekers.
3. We urge the U.S. Departments of Justice and Homeland Security to uphold international human rights law regarding asylum seekers and provide them with case management and legal assistance rather than indefinite detention.
4. We urge the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services to provide mental health services to traumatized families through trauma-informed care delivered by trained social workers and other mental health professionals.
5. We urge the U.S. Department of Justice to appoint or transfer more immigration judges to expedite cases and provide quick decisions, so families can get on with their lives
6. We urge the U.S. State Department to provide financial support to countries such as Honduras and El Salvador for the purpose of social and youth development, the strengthening of civil society, and addressing issues of human rights, so their citizens can remain safely in their own homelands.
7. Finally, we urge congressional leaders of both parties to work together to draft a bipartisan solution to immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for Dreamers (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

Additional Resources:

Kids in Need of Defence (KIND). How you can help end family separation and ensure protection for children.

<https://supportkind.org/resources/how-you-can-help-end-family-separation-and-ensure-protection-for-children/>

National Association of Social Workers (2018). How to volunteer to help immigrant children separated from family. <http://www.socialworkblog.org/advocacy/2018/06/how-to-volunteer-to-help-immigrant-children-separated-from-family/>

Villarreal Sosa, L., & McCoy, C. (2017). Statement from the School Social Work Association of America: Rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. London, KY. School Social Work Association of America