



ISSOP

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY for
SOCIAL PEDIATRICS and CHILD HEALTH

International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health (ISSOP) Statement on forced separation of children from parents

In recent months, publicity has been given to children who have been forcibly separated from their parents by state governments and security forces, supposedly on the grounds of security concerns.

There are numerous examples of such separations that include, but aren't limited to the following:

1. Separation of children from parents at the US-Mexico border

The highly inappropriate and harmful treatment perpetrated on children by the Trump administration's Zero Tolerance policy has been widely reported. Paramount has been the separation of children from their parents upon entering the United States. The ACLU recently estimated that as many as 5400 children were separated from their families, more than the 1500 previously reported (1).

2. Detention of minors at UK airports

More than a thousand children were detained at Heathrow Airport last year, including babies and unaccompanied minors who spent more than 10 hours in holding rooms (2).

3. Separation of children from parents at the Gaza/Israel border when being referred for medical treatment

Roughly 20 percent of parents of children who are residents of Gaza seeking medical treatment in Israel were separated at the border and not allowed to travel with them (3). This includes a 10 year-old Gazan child who died from cancer while separated from her parents (4).

Reasons of security are usually given for the separation of children from their parents. Detention of children for immigration purposes is known to be practiced in over 100 countries worldwide, despite a significant body of research and experience demonstrating the extensive harm of such policies. A recent systematic review documents the impact of family separation and detention of children for immigration purposes, which include damaged attachment relationships, traumatisation, toxic stress, health effects and wider detrimental impacts on immigrant communities (5).

ISSOP strongly condemns such actions that are violations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These violations result in acute distress for children at the time of separation, and will result in lasting adverse emotional and physical sequelae across their life course.

Articles of the CRC most relevant to the rights of children not to be separated from their parents and care givers include:

Article 2. Child rights are to be respected without discrimination of any kind, including race, colour, sex, language, religion or political affiliation.

Article 3. The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children.

Article 9. A child should not be separated from parents against their will.

Article 16. There should be no arbitrary interference with a child's privacy.

Article 19. Children shall be protected from psychological violence.

Article 20. If a child cannot be looked after by their parents, the state has a responsibility to provide alternative care.

Article 22. A child seeking refugee status should receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance.

Article 37. No child should be tortured or treated in a cruel or inhuman way. Children who are detained should not be imprisoned with adults and they should have the opportunity to remain in contact with their family.

In all situations, except those in which violence is being perpetrated by parents, the separation of children from their parents is likely to be counterproductive. Separation provides no solutions to the underlying policy issues, whilst considerable short and long-term distress and sequelae are created.

ISSOP therefore condemns such separation unreservedly and calls for authorities in all countries to respect the rights of children and ensure that parental support for children is always available. If parents are incapacitated or in another country, then humane protection must be provided and return of the child to the parents or close carers facilitated at the earliest opportunity.

References:

1. New Count By ACLU Brings Migrant Children Separation Totals Up To 5,400. Hill Reporter.Com accessed @ <https://hillreporter.com/new-count-by-aclu-brings-migrant-children-separation-totals-up-to-5400-49285>
2. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/heathrow-airport-detained-babies-children-unaccompanied-minors-immigration-home-office-a8406196.html>
3. <https://www.phr.org.il/en/forced-separation-new-position-paper-november-2019/>

4. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-gazan-girl-died-after-israel-denied-her-parents-visit-she-won-t-be-the-last-1.8631960>
5. 4. Wood LCN. Impact of punitive immigration policies, parent-child separation and child detention on the mental health and development of children. *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 2018; 2(1): e000338.
<https://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com/content/2/1/e000338#ref-6>