



What Separation from Parents Does to Children

Psychiatrist on family separation: 'The worst nightmare I can imagine for a child'.

By William Wan, originally published in the Washington Post, 18 June 2018

This is what happens inside children when they are forcibly separated from their parents.

Their heart rate goes up. Their body releases a flood of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline.

Those stress hormones can start killing off dendrites — the little branches in brain cells that transmit messages. In time, the stress can start killing off neurons and — especially in young children — wreaking dramatic and long-term damage, both psychologically and to the physical structure of the brain.

“The effect is catastrophic,” said Charles Nelson, a pediatrics professor at Harvard Medical School. “There’s so much research on this that if people paid attention at all to the science, they would never do this.”

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The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association have all issued statements against it — representing more than 250,000 doctors in the United States. Nearly 7,700 mental-health professionals and 142 organizations have also signed a petition urging President Trump to end the policy.

To pretend that separated children do not grow up with the shrapnel of this traumatic experience embedded in their minds is to disregard everything we know about child development, the brain, and trauma,” the petition reads.

‘PUT IN CAGES’ OR ‘TAKEN CARE OF’: HOW SEPARATED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ARE HOUSED IN DETENTION

Nelson has studied the neurological damage from child-parent separation — work that he said has often reduced him to tears.

In 2000, the Romanian government invited Nelson and a team of researchers into its state orphanages to advise them on a humanitarian crisis that the country’s previous policies had created.

For decades, Romania’s communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu had banned birth control and abortions, and imposed a “celibacy tax” on families with fewer than five children. Ceausescu believed that ratcheting up the country’s birthrate would boost Romania’s economy. Instead, the government ended up opening massive state-run orphanages to deal with more than 100,000 children whose parents couldn’t afford to raise them.

At those orphanages, Nelson said, “we saw kids rocking uncontrollably and hitting themselves, hitting their heads