

February 2, 2018

The Honorable Kirstjen M. Nielsen
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Nielsen:

As executives of organizations focused on the well-being of children, we are deeply troubled by media reports that the Administration is again considering a proposal to separate children from their parents at our Nation's borders. We are writing to strongly urge you to reject this misguided and harmful proposal.

The premise that separating families will deter immigration significantly and over the long term is false. Rather than discouraging migration, such a policy will likely encourage families to rely even more on criminal smuggling networks, at much greater financial and physical risk.¹

One thing that is absolutely clear: separating children from parents is a highly destabilizing, traumatic experience that has long term consequences on child well-being, safety, and development.²

Secretary Nielsen, our Nation understands that the stability and security of family is not only one of the fundamental pillars of societies, it is extremely important to the protection and well-being of children. The relationship with a parent or primary caregiver is critical to a child's sense of self, safety, and trust. This principle holds true for any child, regardless of nationality.

Separation from family leaves children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, no matter what the care setting. In addition, traumatic separation from parents creates toxic stress in children and adolescents that can profoundly impact their development. Strong scientific evidence shows that toxic stress disrupts the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increases the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years.^{3,4} Studies have shown that children who experience such traumatic events can suffer from symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, have poorer behavioral and educational outcomes, and experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity.

For these reasons, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers noted that detention or the separation of families for purposes of

¹ Cf. <http://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/367115-taking-away-their-children-wont-stop-central-american-border-crossers> , published January 2, 2018.

² See AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, *Detention of Immigrant Children* (2017)

³ AAP Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, *Early Childhood Adversity, Toxic Stress, and the Role of the Pediatrician: Translating Developmental Science into Lifelong Health* (2012)

⁴ See https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/brain_development.pdf

immigration enforcement or management are never in the best interest of children, and must be avoided.⁵ We strongly agree.

Separating children from their families will not deter immigration, but will cause irreparable damage to children. We urge you to reject this proposal.

Sincerely,

Caryl M. Stern
President and CEO
UNICEF USA

Karen Remley, MD, MBA, MPH, FAAP
CEO/EVP
American Academy of Pediatrics

Christine James Brown
President and CEO
Child Welfare League of America

Anne Lynam Goddard
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⁵ *Report of the ICE Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers*, October 7, 2016, p. 5.; <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report/2016/acfrc-report-final-102016.pdf>