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AAP a leading voice against separating children, parents at border

by Devin Miller, Washington Correspondent

Over two weeks, 658 children were separated from their parents at the border, according to recent data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

This practice had been carried out informally for months. In early May, however, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced its policy to separate parents and children at the border to deter families from migrating to the United States.

The Academy has been speaking out against this practice since early 2017 when reports emerged that the policy was under consideration. This advocacy has intensified as the policy has taken effect and staggering numbers of children are forcibly separated from their parents.

"Separating children from their parents contradicts everything we stand for as pediatricians - protecting and promoting children's health," AAP President Colleen A. Kraft, M.D., M.B.A., FAAP, said in a press statement. "The new policy is the latest example of harmful actions by the Department of Homeland Security against immigrant families, hindering their right to seek asylum in our country and denying parents the right to remain with their children."

Prior to the announcement, the Academy wrote to the DHS secretary on at least five occasions opposing family separation and outlining its detrimental child health effects.

Pediatricians, including those who have visited the border, continue to share firsthand accounts of children impacted by separation, urging the administration to end the policy immediately.

Dr. Kraft outlined her own experiences in an op-ed published in the *Los Angeles Times*, including the story of a toddler she met at a shelter for unaccompanied children run by the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement. The little girl wanted her mother who was separated from her when they crossed the border and was crying uncontrollably.

Stories like Dr. Kraft's have been echoed in the news by other pediatricians who have witnessed similar effects of separation on immigrant families.

The Academy is undertaking a multipronged approach to oppose the policy of family separation and will sustain these efforts as long as children are being separated from their parents at the border.

Policy of separation

Under the administration's policy, when a parent and child arrive at the border or a port of entry, the parent will be criminally prosecuted for illegal border crossing and placed in a detention center while awaiting a hearing. The child is rendered "unaccompanied" and transferred to the custody of HHS, which is responsible for shelter and care until the child can be placed with a caregiver or sponsor. These HHS-run shelters can be thousands of miles away from where the parent is being detained.

In addition to being harmful to children's health, separating families infringes on the right of immigrant families to seek asylum in the U.S. Many times, parents and children are escaping persecution and violence in their home countries and will qualify for asylum or other protection in the U.S.

Further, separation from parents complicates children's asylum cases as they may be too young or traumatized to provide details of their case or may not know the reasons their parent fled with them. These children, like all



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asylum seekers, have no right to an attorney.

Child health impact of separation

The Academy's opposition to family separation stems from the serious health consequences this practice has on children. Its 2017 policy statement *Detention of Immigrant Children* urges that separation of a parent or primary caregiver from his or her children should never occur, unless there are concerns for the child's safety at the hand of the parent.

Highly stressful experiences, including family separation, can cause irreparable harm to lifelong development by disrupting a child's brain architecture. Toxic stress, which is caused by prolonged exposure to heightened stress, has detrimental short- and long-term health effects.

When children are separated from their parents, it removes the buffer of a supportive adult or caregiver to help mitigate stress and protect against substantial impacts on their health that can contribute to chronic conditions like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and heart disease.

AAP advocacy

The Academy and pediatricians have been at the forefront of opposing the policy of separating children and parents.

The Academy's position and pediatrician perspectives have been featured in news outlets such as the *Washington Post*, ABC News, "PBS NewsHour" and CNN. The Academy continues to pursue a targeted media strategy to amplify the issues.

In addition, letters written by several pediatricians have been published in state and regional newspapers, and members of Congress have cited the Academy's position when outlining their own opposition to the policy.

Recently, the Academy and numerous AAP chapters were among 540 national and state organizations that sent a letter to DHS renewing their demand that the agency end the practice of family separation immediately. The Academy had joined a similar letter in late January, but since then, more than 300 other state and national groups added their support to the call to action.

The Academy also has engaged in grassroots advocacy, mobilizing all AAP members to urge their federal legislators to tell DHS to end the policy immediately. These efforts also included a #ProtectFamilies Day of Action held days before the administration formalized the practice of separation.

The Academy will continue to be a leading voice in opposing any policies that threaten the health of immigrant children and families, including family separation.

For the latest on AAP advocacy to protect immigrant families as well as other federal advocacy priorities, visit the AAP Advocacy Action Center at <https://federaladvocacy.aap.org> (login required). You also can request to become a Key Contact by emailing kids1st@aap.org.

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