



“OR WHATEVER...”: ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY MEANS PROFOUND TRAUMA FOR CHILDREN

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Today, in Brownsville, Texas, there are nearly 1,500 boys housed in a former WalMart. It has been converted into temporary shelter for children removed from their migrant parents who crossed the border from Mexico—either legally seeking asylum or illegally seeking a better life. These boys, age 10 to 17, have less than 40 square feet of living space each, sleeping on dormitory cots, eating institutional food. They have no idea how long they will be there. And most have no way to communicate with their parents, who have been jailed by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Where is the justice in this?

The California Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Association represents the 44 local CASA programs in our state: private, nonprofit organizations managing 8,000 trained volunteers who advocate for 13,000 foster children in court, in the classroom, and in the community. These caring men and women are the children’s “voice,” working one-on-one with them to make sure they know they are not alone.

Our network believes in compassionate care for all children who are taken from their families. We cannot accept what the Federal government is now doing to migrant boys and girls along the southern border of the United States. According to the Department of Homeland Security, 1,995 minors were separated from 1,940 adults from April 19 through May 31. These children are being ripped from their loving mothers and fathers. Recently, it was reported that an infant was literally taken by U.S. Border Patrol officers while breastfeeding, the mother put into jail and the baby into a shelter.

We know from decades of research and experience that separating children from parents, even for their safety or security, causes great trauma and harm to a child. Imagine being forcibly removed from your home, the police putting you in a police car. Imagine being taken to a strange place, often in the middle of the night, leaving behind your siblings, your room, your toys, your pet. Imagine being forced to live with strangers with no explanation why, in a prisonlike institutional setting.

The resulting psychological damage to a child can be devastating and lifelong, even when the removal from family was to protect the child. In the case of these migrant children, however, this trauma is compounded by the fact that most of them have loving parents. Their parents love their children enough to make the harrowing journey north to escape the danger and violence in

their home countries. These parents are just trying to find a better life for them. The children are terrified, traumatized, and grief-stricken when they are suddenly left alone.

Who are these families entering our country? According to government data, many are seeking legal asylum, coming from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala as they flee drug cartels, gang violence, and domestic abuse. Up until now, there was a well-defined legal process to seek asylum. But in May, Attorney General Sessions pledged to separate families that are detained crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, regardless of whether or not they entered the country intending to seek asylum. On May 11, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly was asked in an NPR interview if he thought it was “cruel and heartless” for U.S. border officials to take an immigrant child away from his or her mother. “I wouldn’t put it quite that way,” Kelly said. “The children will be taken care of — put into foster care ... or whatever.”

“Or whatever.” Those two words speak volumes to anyone who has ever witnessed the foster care system or seen the impact of family separation on vulnerable children. In the case of the children of asylum-seekers and immigrants, the “whatever” is now the nightmare of being herded into overcrowded shelters with thousands of children in a strange, new country. “Whatever” means suddenly being with strangers who may not speak their language, sleeping on temporary cots in warehouse rooms with other children, eating unfamiliar food, separated from siblings and friends.

We hear about heart-wrenching goodbyes and parents’ agonizing uncertainty about whether they will ever see their children again. Families sometimes don’t have any way to communicate with each other for days, weeks, even months. Parents may be jailed in San Diego while their child is taken to a shelter in Texas. Some parents don’t even know where their children are—nor does the government.

There is much research on this kind of trauma and the lasting effects it has on children. There is absolutely no question that removing children from their parents, even for good cause such as the child’s own safety, sometimes causes lifelong trauma to the child. For example, foster youth are significantly more likely to drop out of high school, be homeless, or develop serious mental and physical illnesses. Our government speaks vaguely about “finding foster homes” for the migrant children. However, there is already a serious shortage of foster parents throughout the United States, not nearly enough even for children in foster care. It is unrealistic to expect there will be foster families available for thousands of migrant children who are now living in temporary shelters.

It is the mission of California CASA to ensure the safety and well-being of all children, and we strongly oppose the Federal government’s current “Zero Tolerance” policies that separate migrant children from their parents at the U.S./Mexico border. This is a damaging, immoral, anti-family policy that is harming children. We encourage every citizen to stand up for these voiceless, vulnerable children, and to contact their state and local legislators to oppose our government’s purposeful infliction of trauma on innocent boys and girls.