



Multicultural Development Institute, Inc.

"Bridging the Cultural Gap through Education and Training"

www.multiculturaldevelopment.com

June 23, 2018

How the policy of separation is affecting the 2,300 for life

By Pierluigi Mancini PhD

pierluigi@eldoctormancini.com

When a parent can meet the child's emotional needs, the child gets the message that the world is a safe place and other people can be trusted. The child feels secure that they can count on their parent and it is that relationship that establishes the foundation for the development of emotional skills and sets the stage for future relationships. A secure parent-child attachment leaves that child free to explore the world and engage with others. It is by that child receiving validation that the world is safe and reliable that helps him or her develop the ability to manage their emotions. Right now, these 2,300 children do not have the presence of their parents which threatens the foundation of their emotional development.

The brain fully develops from conception until about the mid 20's when the frontal lobe completes its development. During this time, a child also develops his or her emotional response to the world. Physical and emotional development are key in a person's ability to function in the world, through these they learn how to navigate education, socialization and the ability to become successful members of society.

Prolonged separation of children from their parents will affect the development of skills necessary for emotional competence including the awareness of their own emotional state, the ability to understand the emotions of other people, learning the vocabulary of emotion and expression of emotion, capacity to be empathetic and sympathetic, ability to realize that their inner emotional state does not need to correspond to the outer expression and the capacity to cope with aversive or distressing emotions. (Saarni, 2000.)

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development has eight distinct stages, taking in five stages up to the age of 18 years and three further stages beyond, well into adulthood. I want to highlight two stages that I believe are being tragically interrupted by the separation of children from their parents causing potential irreversible damage that will create long term negative effects in the development of these children's ability to cope in the world.

Erikson's very first stage is "Trust vs. Mistrust". During this stage the child is uncertain about the world in which they live. To resolve these feelings of uncertainty the child looks towards their primary caregiver for stability and consistency of care. For the past few weeks these children have not had their primary caregiver present, instead they have had armed guards and adults they do not know and with whom they have no emotional connection as the people telling them what to do and not to do.

If the care the child receives is consistent, predictable and reliable, they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened.

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of hope. By developing a sense of trust, the child can have hope that as new crises arise, there is a real possibility that other people will be there as a source of support. The current situation is obviously affecting this stage since it is stealing all hope from these children.

Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear. When someone is raised living in fear they develop conditions that affect their ability to build or develop relationships.

"Industry versus inferiority" is the fourth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. The stage occurs during childhood between the ages of five and twelve. Children are at the stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums, to do things on their own. Teachers begin to take an important role in the child's life as they teach the child specific skills. It is at this stage that the child's peer group will gain greater significance and will become a major source of the child's self-esteem.

The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies that are valued by society and begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments. If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they begin to feel industrious and feel confident in their ability to achieve goals.

If this initiative is not encouraged, if it is restricted by parents or teacher, then the child begins to feel inferior, doubting his own abilities and therefore may not reach his or her potential.

If the child cannot develop the specific skill they feel society is demanding (e.g. being athletic) then they may develop a sense of inferiority. Some failure may be necessary so that the child can develop some modesty. Yet again, a balance between competence and modesty is necessary. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of competence.

It is this stage that I feel will cause the most harm to the 2,300 Latino children being held without their parents. It is a tragic consequence of the policy of separating children from their families that will have life long effects in the lives of these children as they grow into adulthood with limited abilities to become providers for their families. These children are not able to develop a sense of pride, they are not being encouraged, they

are not being allowed to feel industrious or confident in their ability to achieve goals. In other words, they are being conditioned to be sub-servient, to be locked up, to be treated as criminals. Unfortunately, it is not the first time the United States behaves this way.

Separating children from their parents in such a violent, public, shameful way is traumatic.

According to Cook, (Cook, et al, 2005) exposure to chronic, prolonged traumatic experiences has the potential to alter children's brains, which may cause longer-term effects in areas such as:

- **Attachment:** Trouble with relationships, boundaries, empathy, and social isolation
- **Physical Health:** Impaired sensorimotor development, coordination problems, increased medical problems, and somatic symptoms
- **Emotional Regulation:** Difficulty identifying or labeling feelings and communicating needs
- **Dissociation:** Altered states of consciousness, amnesia, impaired memory
- **Cognitive Ability:** Problems with focus, learning, processing new information, language development, planning and orientation to time and space
- **Self-Concept:** Lack of consistent sense of self, body image issues, low self-esteem, shame and guilt
- **Behavioral Control:** Difficulty controlling impulses, oppositional behavior, aggression, disrupted sleep and eating patterns, trauma re-enactment

So, as we thank Ivanka and Melania for intervening and helping change the policy of separating families recently, the work is not done. We must act quickly to reunite the 2,300 children who are still separated from their parents. Every minute that goes by will cause further damage to the emotional development of these children, a life-long price to pay for something they had nothing to do with in the first place.

References:

Saarni C. Emotional Development in Childhood. In: Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters RDeV, eds. Lewis M, topic ed. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development [online]. <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/emotions/according-experts/emotional-development-childhood>. Published September 2011. Accessed June 21, 2018.

Cook, A., Spinazzola, P., Ford, J., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., Cloitre, M., et al. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Annals*, 35(5), 390-398.