**Lasting Effects** **Separation Trauma**

Most of us who have listened to the sound of a detained child wailing for their parent, and seen the photograph of the Honduran girl sobbing in fear as her parent is frisked, have experienced distress, anxiety, and even outrage. This is because humans are wired to attach emotionally to others. Distressed children evoke a caretaking response in most of us, making a crying child hard to ignore. We instinctively want to comfort, and when we can’t we become angry.

Our parents are our first attachment figures, and how safe and secure we felt in these relationships has lasting effects throughout our adulthood. If an adult grew up with an unreliable, narcissistic or absent parent they have difficulties feeling secure and safe in their adult attachment relationships, and tend to suffer from a lowered sense of self worth. Warmth and physical affection in the early years are critical to the development of self-soothing ability and healthy attachments in adulthood.

Research has shown that children in distress need physical comfort. Being held and rocked is a biological need. In some cases, young children who are not hugged and held because they are separated from their parents can die from what has been called anaclitic depression. We hope it is fake news, but if it is true that detained children cannot be hugged and comforted physically, then we are damaging children irreparably. Research on children separated from their parents during World War II revealed that children separated from their parents in the critical period of early childhood, when bonds are developing, go through a number of stages of loss. The first stage is protest evidenced by crying, wailing and begging for the parent, essentially protesting the loss. Vigorous protest is what we hear and see in the children detained at the Mexican border. If the parent initially doesn’t respond to this protest, the child goes into despair, evidencing a sobbing, quieter, less vocal response. If the parent is still not available, the child eventually detaches and evidences the haunted, vacant look seen in war ravaged refugees. Detachment brings relief but it is a sign of severe, sometimes irreversible, trauma. From birth to age three is considered a critical period for attachment, the worst outcomes are seen when a child suffers attachment trauma during these years.

While watching children in anguish is painful, for psychologists it is particularly distressing, as we know that once a child detaches, (in other words, no longer cares) it is hard to recreate the attachment and switch it back on. The resulting detachment has been called “affectionless psychopathology,” that is, an inability to care. Healing such a disorder can take years as the child goes through severe anxiety, anger, clinging and rejecting behavior. Some children will become numb and uncaring, with periods of uncontrollable rage. In certain cases, traumatized children develop serious personality disorders that make it difficult for them to become responsible members of society. Society does not need more people broken in their ability to care for others. While the degree of impact will vary from child to child, most separated children will undoubtedly experience trauma with resulting anxiety, depression and distrust of adults. The effects can last for years and determine how the child relates to loved ones as an adult.

The searing images of children separated from their parents also ruins the reputation of the United States in the eyes of the world. This is part of the reason that, while previous administrations have grappled with the problem of illegal immigration, no previous administration, republican nor democrat, has seriously considered parent-child separations a viable option. Regardless of politics and opinions, we must find a better way to deal with the migrant problem. Furthermore, certain legal precedent reflects the understanding of the harm caused by parent-child separation. There have been divorce cases in which it has been deemed child abuse for one parent to cause a separation between the child and the other parent. Regardless of the reason or entity responsible for a separation, putting a child’s personality structure and ability to form attachment bonds at risk is not just bad for children but for society in the long run. This cannot continue.

SUBMITTED TO UNION-TRIBUNE 6/20/18

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