



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

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

Dear Secretary Nielsen:

On behalf of ZERO TO THREE, I urge you to abandon your recent policy of referring all persons crossing the United States border without documentation to the Department of Justice for federal prosecution on criminal charges. This policy, combined with the “zero-tolerance” prosecution policy recently announced by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, will result in many more children being separated from primary caregivers, with long-term consequences for their health and development. While we abhor the practice of separating children of any age from their parents, we are especially concerned about the impact on babies at a time of life when their rapid development makes them particularly vulnerable to adverse experiences. We strongly recommend a policy that emphasizes keeping families intact, absent a substantiated finding of abuse or neglect and of danger to the child of remaining in the parent’s custody.

Founded 40 years ago, ZERO TO THREE is a nonprofit organization that works to ensure that babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Research and clinical experience demonstrate that the earliest relationships and experiences a child has with parents and other caregivers dramatically influences brain development, social-emotional and cognitive skills, and future health and success in school and life. We translate this science of early development for practitioners, parents, and policy makers.

There is an unfortunate and common misconception that children are not harmed by experiences when they are very young, particularly before they can remember them. But science shows that this is patently untrue--young children are profoundly affected by experiences in the first years of life. We know that in the first months and years of life, babies discover the world through experiences with parents and other caregivers and that these early relationships shape how a child learns and grows. Research clearly shows that babies and toddlers who develop secure relationships during the first years form a strong foundation for their cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and moral development. These secure relationships also serve as a buffer from the toxic effects of stress and trauma, such as that likely experienced by families as they travel to our border.

The science also confirms that deprivation of a consistent caregiver, such as through forced separation, undermines children’s growth and development. To understand the critical nature of this connection, I strongly encourage you to watch the “Still Face” experiment, which dramatically demonstrates how much a baby’s well-being relies on responsive caregiving from parents. (Available at <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/379-connecting-with-babies>) In the case of infants and toddlers accompanying parents to the U.S., the migration to a new country has already been stressful. Separating children and caregivers under these circumstances would deprive children of the relationships that foster resilience, creating trauma that can have long-term impacts on social-emotional health. Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders can follow, even in very young children.

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Administration officials are defending this new policy by stating that children separated from parents will be placed in foster care. Such statements betray not only a disregard for the developmental needs of children, but also an ignorance of the conditions in the type of foster care in which they likely would be placed. The children usually would be placed with contractors through the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). These placements likely would be even less prepared than the traditional child welfare system, itself woefully inadequate, to address the needs of young children. Infants and toddlers in foster care often experience frequent placement changes or lack a consistent caregiver at a time when the need to bond with one caring adult is paramount for their healthy development. They grieve over the loss of an adult whom they are beginning to trust and then must attempt to form an attachment to yet another stranger. Eventually, they lose the ability to create that bond of trust, with consequences lasting into adulthood.

In short, as a result of this new policy, babies who had healthy attachments to their parents will be damaged by the forced separation from these trusted adults and further by placement in a system that is unlikely to provide even a semblance of the relationship they have been forced to forego. Removing a child suddenly, without warning or preparation, by law enforcement or other professionals without specialized training in infant and early childhood mental health, and placing them in institutional care—of which the dangers to child development are well documented—amounts to child maltreatment.

The record of HHS in caring for immigrant children is alarming. Reports indicate that HHS has lost nearly 1,500 children placed in its charge, possibly even to sex trafficking. Clearly, the system for caring for children removed from their families' care is broken and cannot handle an even larger caseload.

As an organization whose mission is to ensure that all babies have a strong start in life, ZERO TO THREE relies on the science of early development to support a range of policies that promote strong bonds between children and their caregivers and therefore the solid emotional foundations needed for future health and success in life. We strongly oppose policies that do the exact opposite: take children with close bonds to their parents away from their source of security and place them in a system that lacks the capacity to nurture them and meet their needs for healthy development. A policy that removes immigrant children from their families to punish parents, with a complete disregard for the devastating consequences for the children, must be stopped. We urge you to ensure that children and parents remain together in environments that enable them to function as a family and preserve their close, protective ties.

Sincerely,

Matthew E. Melmed  
Executive Director