



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Attn:
The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
The U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

From:
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Washington, DC 20037

Dear Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas:

ZERO TO THREE applauds the President's establishment of the Interagency Task Force on the reunification of families separated at the border and commends your leadership in moving its work forward. As an organization committed to both the physical and mental health, and the overall well-being of all infants and toddlers, this matter is of utmost importance to ZERO TO THREE. Over the past several years, we have expressed our concerns about the impact of separations and other treatment of migrant families on the social-emotional development of young children. We are writing to urge the Task Force to address these impacts both for children who hopefully will be reunited with their parents as well as those who have experienced traumatic treatment at the United States border under recent policies.

Specifically, we recommend that the Task Force work with infant and early childhood mental health experts during and after the reunification process, where young children are involved, and in other activities to address the needs of very young children whose experiences with the immigration system may have caused trauma. We believe attention to these experiences must go beyond reunification of children who remain separated, as critically important as that work is. We urge the Task Force to the extent possible to examine and seek to address the impacts of any separation, family detention, placement in congregate care, or other negative experiences to which young children may have been subjected. Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) experts have specialized knowledge about the mental health needs of very young children and supporting their critical relationships with trusted adults. This expertise should be brought in to help support the families separated at the border.

Founded more than 40 years ago, ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life. We translate the science of early childhood development into useful knowledge and strategies for parents, practitioners, and policymakers, with unique expertise in IECMH. We work to ensure that babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and healthy development.



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Immigration policy changes over the past several years have exacted an emotional and physical toll on young children caught up in them. As the Task Force begins the important work of reuniting families separated at the border and examining other impacts on families from immigration policies overall, ZERO TO THREE reiterates what decades of childhood trauma research clearly spell out about its impacts on young children: separating children from their family members or trusted adults, holding children in detention centers, stripping families' of their rights to basic needs, and any other policy that deprives children- U.S. citizen or not—of the opportunity to thrive is not in the best interest of our society. The ramifications of such policies are persistent and could lead to lifelong individual and societal harm.

All children that were involuntarily separated from their caregivers at the border experienced trauma, and infants and toddlers are no exception. The science of child development tells us that very young children—infants and toddlers in particular—are at significant risk of carrying that trauma with them throughout the remainder of their lives, leading to developmental, social-emotional, and health concerns. ZERO TO THREE urges the Task Force to keep these babies and toddlers and their families top of mind as they will have specialized needs in order to truly heal from the trauma that our nation inflicted on them.

Why Should the Task Force Pay Particular Attention to Babies and Toddlers?

There is a common misconception that babies are too young to be affected by the events around them – that they do not notice when they are separated from their parents or held in detention centers. In truth, at the very foundation of babies' development, intense trauma almost inevitably creates physiological damage to their brains, and emotional damage that they will carry into the future.

The research is clear - babies develop and learn within the context of their earliest relationships and experiences with the trusted adults around them. The essential role of close relationships in early development means babies are affected by the emotional well-being of their caregivers and families. These experiences and relationships influence the foundational brain architecture on which all later learning will rest.

Infants and toddlers who do not receive the positive experiences they need for strong development in the first few years of life, who are stripped of the protective relationships and environments that can buffer them from adverse experiences, can rapidly fall behind. **This is precisely the situation in which very young children at the border find themselves: the actions of representatives of the United States government have placed their early development and long-term well-being at grave risk.**



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Young Children Who Have Been Held in Detention and/or Have Been Separated from their Families Need Access to Voluntary Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services and Support.

While the rapid development of infants and toddlers makes them particularly vulnerable to trauma, families offer an essential buffer to those experiences. When children are separated from their parents after crossing the border, that primary bond is severed. This causes stress hormones to flood babies' brains, disrupting their neurological circuitry in ways that profoundly affect their short- and long-term physical and emotional health, and their ability to form relationships and learn. That trauma is compounded when children are placed in the care of strangers untrained to care for young children, either older children or adults who are ill-equipped to protect them, much less nurture their healthy development. The Task Force is a praiseworthy first step towards healing the trauma, but there is more work to be done.

Decades of psychological and brain research have demonstrated that adverse experiences during the first three years, including forced parental separation and placement in incarceration-like settings, can have profound immediate and long-term harm on child development. In the short-term, children may experience anxiety, depression, and self-regulatory issues, including sleeplessness or eating issues. Over time, they may show regression in behavior and cognition, and demonstrate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

This type of trauma, particularly when not addressed by an experienced and trusted clinician, has severe implications for both physical and emotional health over time, increasing young children's risk for learning difficulties, problems forming relationships, and adult health issues. Caregivers, who are also deeply psychologically and physiologically impacted by their recent experiences, also need support to provide their children with the care they need. When families have been separated, reunification itself may be difficult, as separated young children do not have the capacity to understand what has transpired and may feel abandoned by their parents. This is complex work, requiring a focus on both parent and child, and requiring specialized expertise and developmentally appropriate, evidence-based support. Infant and early childhood mental health professionals across the United States are able to help, but they need pathways to families. Unlike with older children in Office of Refugee and Resettlement custody, who are afforded mental health services only when they exhibit signs of distress, it should be assumed that any young child who has been detained with family members or separated from them has experienced trauma. That child's care should be guided by an understanding of infant and early childhood mental health, and observation by a trained specialist should be the rule rather than the exception.



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In closing, we believe the Task Force can be a catalyst to help redress some of the unnecessary harm to young children resulting from immigration policies during the past few years. We urge you to work with infant and early childhood mental health experts during and after the reunification process and to seek their advice on how to remedy past trauma young children have experienced in this situation, other immigration policies and actions that disrupted their security within their families, and immigration policies related to families going forward.

Please use ZERO TO THREE as a resource to ensure that strong social and emotional support is available for very young children and their families throughout, and after, the reunification process.

Thank you for your commitment to infants, toddlers, and their families.

Sincerely,

Myra Jones-Taylor, Ph.D.

Chief Policy Officer

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CC: [Secretary Antony Blinken,
Acting Secretary Norris Cochran, and
Acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson]