

The psychological impact of early life stress and parental separation

26 June 2018, by Melissa De Witte

In recent months, more than 2,000 migrant children have been separated from their families at the United States/Mexico border. Questions about the policy, including how it affects the children's well-being, has led to a suspension of the practice.

For these children, family separation is an additional trauma to an already adverse experience in their home environments and a long, difficult journey to the United States, according to Stanford psychology Professor Ian H. Gotlib. Even after families are reunited, the uncertainty surrounding these [parents'](#) lives could exacerbate feelings of anguish, despair, guilt, blame and depression – negative emotions that disrupt how they learn life skills.

Gotlib's research shows that [early life stress](#) is a significant risk factor for depression and suicidal behaviors. His work has also examined how early life stress affects brain development. His research has also looked at treatments of depression and how to reduce young children's risk of developing depression.

Gotlib is the David Starr Jordan Professor in the Department of Psychology in the Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences. He is a member of Stanford Bio-X, the Child Health Research Institute and the Stanford Neurosciences Institute. He is also the director of the Stanford Neurodevelopment, Affect and Psychopathology Laboratory.

Stanford News Service talked with Gotlib about the impact of early life stress on children's [psychological well-being](#).

One of your research projects examines early life stress. What are the psychological effects of separating children from their parents?

While we do not explicitly study the effects of separating children from their parents in our

laboratory, we nevertheless know from decades of research that children, and younger children in particular, depend on and need their parents for their own emotional well-being.

In providing a supportive and nurturing relationship, parents play a critical role in promoting their children's healthy development. They also protect their children from the psychological consequences of significant stress by buffering them from the effects of traumas and helping them to regulate their emotions.

Obviously, separation from parents is traumatic; it both removes children's most important protection and generates a new trauma. Indeed, in studies of institutionalized children, such separation has been found to disrupt normal child development and to have long-term negative consequences for their psychological and physical health. In our own research, we are documenting that early [adverse experiences](#) have detrimental behavioral and biological consequences for children and adolescents years later.

How does early-life stress affect psychological well-being, both in the short and long term?

Early life stress is consistently associated with behavioral problems in children, with symptoms of psychopathology, and with psychological and physical disorders. It is clear that early life stress can have both immediate and long-lasting consequences, particularly when it is severe and cumulative, as in the case of separation from parents following what might be years of adverse experiences in their home environments and a long, arduous journey to the United States.

We and others have demonstrated that in response to traumas and adverse experiences similar to separation from parents, children secrete high levels of the [stress hormone cortisol](#). This elevated cortisol has negative effects on brain structure and

connectivity, slowing neuronal growth and reducing volumes of critical brain structures like the hippocampus and affecting brain regions involved in effective emotion regulation. Not surprisingly, research has also demonstrated adverse effects of early trauma on children's psychological functioning, including higher rates of depression, anxiety and "externalizing," or acting-out, behaviors.

stressors and regulating their emotions appropriately. This is a vicious cycle that we must try to end.

Provided by Stanford University

Family separation is one of many stressful experiences of a migrant experience. What can be done to mitigate the effects of stress in childhood?

Obviously, reuniting the migrant children with their parents is an essential first step for mitigating the effects of the stress they have experienced. Certainly, their struggle will not be over, but they are far more likely to then have dedicated and attentive parents who provide nurturance and safety. Research with previously institutionalized children indicates that children can recover from the adverse effects of trauma when they return to family settings.

What psychological effects does family separation have on parents?

Having your child forcibly separated from parents can induce anguish, despair, guilt, blame and depression in the parents – all powerful negative emotions that disrupt how they can learn life skills. This includes how to cope well with adversity, being resilient, not experiencing depression or anxiety.

Unquestionably, for parents, there are few events as traumatic as being separated from their children. Moreover, these emotions are only likely to be exacerbated by the uncertainty surrounding these parents' lives, even after they are reunited with their children.

In our research we have documented powerful negative consequences for children of being raised by parents who are experiencing these [negative emotions](#) deeply and for a prolonged period of time. Such [children](#) themselves have higher rates of depression and other forms of maladaptive behavior, and have difficulty recovering from

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