

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Protecting the Mental Health of Immigrant Children: A Call for Evidence-Based Reform

Approved by the Board of Trustees, December 2025

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“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. . . These are . . . position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects. . .” – *APA Operations Manual*

Issue:

Changes to U.S. immigration policies and enhanced enforcement have led to increased family separations, prolonged detentions, and deportations that impact child and adolescent mental health. These practices expose youth to significant psychological stress and trauma, as well as disrupt critical developmental processes. Children and adolescents impacted by immigration enforcement policies face severe and lasting psychological harm. These practices violate the core principles of child development, trauma-informed care, and human rights. Research shows increased incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety with long term consequences that may be disabling to these children. The American Psychiatric Association affirms that protecting the mental health of immigrant youth requires urgent policy reform centered on family unity, safety, and access to competent care. In 2025, an increasing number of reports have emerged of families being separated during deportation proceedings, including cases where U.S. citizen children were deported with their non-citizen parents without adequate legal process or representation. Some U.S. citizen children have been wrongfully detained or deported to other countries under these circumstances. Further, previous guidance that limited immigration enforcement actions in sensitive locations, such as schools, hospitals, and places of worship, has been revoked. This change has been linked to increased arrests in these areas, affecting children and families. The United Nations Convention on Human Rights and the U.S. constitutional principles call for the humane treatment of immigrants. The resulting harm to mental health and well-being necessitates policy reforms grounded in evidence-based principles of child development and psychiatric care.

It is the position of APA that:

- 1. Immigration policies and practices that negatively impact the mental health and development of children and adolescents are unacceptable. These include:**
 - a. Forcible separation of children from their parents or caregivers;**
 - b. Displacement, return, or retention in a third country without adult protection, access to health care, and/ or a defined pathway to asylum and safety;**
 - c. Prolonged detention in violation of the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement;**
 - d. Other forms of trauma, abuse, or other inhumane treatment of children and migrant families; and**
 - e. Limited or no access to timely, quality medical and mental healthcare for migrant children and families.**
- 2. The APA supports immigration policies and practices that protect immigrant children’s and adolescents’ mental health and development, including:**

- a. **Expeditious reunification of children with community caregivers following forcible separation to avoid further trauma;**
- b. **Timely access to healthcare and legal services;**
- c. **Pathways to seek asylum and safety; Measures to ensure the physical and mental safety and dignity of families fleeing danger;**
- d. **Living in a violence-free environment;**
- e. **Access to evidence-based, trauma-informed, and culturally, linguistically, structurally and developmentally appropriate physical and mental health care services;**
- f. **Best practices in screening, prevention, and early intervention in medical health, mental health, and education; and**
- g. **Measures to help slow the spread of communicable illnesses.**