

Inter-generational Trauma: Legacies of Separating Children and Families

Following the lead of historians and sociologists, contextual and ecological models are also beginning to incorporate long-standing and ongoing historical events that create “inter-generational or transgenerational trauma”-- when untreated trauma-related stress experienced by survivors is passed on to second and subsequent generations. Black and indigenous people can trace these histories back 400 years to slavery and genocide, and immigrants who have also lived in this country for hundreds of years, have endured wave after wave of anti-immigrant sentiment and policy. Many groups can also follow these historical events to the present day, where they are being subjected to ongoing traumatic events, for example, events that have separated children from their families and cultural traditions, like mass incarceration, forced residential boarding schools, and detention and deportation. Current societal forces can also be seen as contributing to cultural genocide, for example, when historical Black neighborhoods are broken up by gentrification, sacred Indigenous lands are destroyed by extraction industries, and children are prevented from speaking their native languages in public school.

For developmentalists, these policies and practices (many of which were/are legal) are especially alarming, given everything we know about the centrality of parents, families, and cultural traditions to children’s survival and healthy development. We encourage you to learn more about these painful events. They are not only a part of all of our history, but also part of our current lives. By learning more, we can work together to help children and communities heal, and to stop/prevent such traumatic events from happening again.

- Wawahte: Stories of Residential School Survivors
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGrJNUCQ-r4>
- The effects of mass incarceration on children and families
<https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/broken-hearts-and-broken-homes-how-mass-incarceration-impacts-children-and-families-may/>
<https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/>
- Separating families at the border
<https://www.srcd.org/event/webinar-science-childhood-trauma-and-family-separation>
<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/08/us-immigration-policy-has-traumatized-children-for-nearly-100-years/567479/>