# Separating children from their parents is not policy; it's torture

By Dorothy Potter Snyder Guest column

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"Imagine: your 3-year-old, new to the neighborhood, is going to a birthday party. You leave her at the party and you're 30 minutes late picking her up. You find your child sitting on the front porch with the birthday girl, sobbing. What does your child feel like? And why does she feel like that?"

Jan Tedder, nurse, educator and founder of Durham's Hug Your Baby, patiently offered me this scenario to convey a tiny bit of the trauma inflicted bythe Trump administration's institutionalization of approximately 2,300 young children at our nation's southern border, kids enduring so much more than just a late pickup. I called her, hoping she could help me explain to those

who support the policy how even a short separation from those who love them is traumatic to little kids, how extended separation is torture.

”I haven’t been able to stomach looking at the news lately,” she said quietly.

On June 19, President Trump signed an executive order to reverse his own “zero tolerance” policy that resulted in children, some just babies, being separated from their families and detained in cages and makeshift facilities where they continue to be deprived of the touch, love and security they need. Reports that staff working on behalf of the office of Refugee Resettlement are allegedly drugging detained child migrants adds another nightmarish layer to this already horrific situation. Despite the president’s reversal, the trauma continues as DHS scatters kids around the country with no plan to reunite them with their families.These kids think they have been abandoned. And they’re terrified.

Torture is defined by the International Criminal Court as “the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon a person in the custody or under the control of the accused.” The U.S. Government is torturing babies, children and their parents who have come seeking refugee status and are completely at its mercy. This act by our government is illegal and immoral.

In her work as a nurse practitioner, Jan Tedder has seen the damage of institutionalization in orphans adopted from Ukraine, Russia and other Eastern bloc countries: “The basic need for babies and small children to feel secure is an uncompromising need,” she says. “Trauma like this shapes the brain, and not in good ways.

The public and official outrage is loud. The U.S. is bound by the International Refugee Convention, which prohibits expulsions of asylum-seekers and extended detention, though most people understand without legal arguments

that such treatment of families is repugnant and wrong. Still, some in our nation and community defend it as “necessary” How can they? Don’t some of them have children themselves?

Jan sighs. “There are some people who’ve been abused in some way, and this can feel normal to them,” she says. “They think those kids will just have to suck it up and get over it, because that’s what they did.”

As others have, she also points out America’s history of oppressing non-white populations through family separation. “I think it may be a lack of care about people who are different from them. It’s like what we did to African Americans in slavery, to Japanese people, to Native Americans. The use of words like ‘infest’ by the president to refer to these migrants is messaging his base that refugees and their kids are less than human. ‘These people.’ as he often calls them, must not feel as we do because they are not like us.”

As we speak about this, I hear the weariness and sorrow in Jan’s voice, this good woman who’s spent her life trying to better the lives of children, so I end the interview. This awful situation is traumatizing the rest of us, too.

Babies and little children are emotional beings; unable to think in words, they respond to emotions with emotions. Removing them from loved ones is like solitary confinement to them. It’s cruel and inhuman.

The question remains: why are so many Americans OK with that?

*D.P. Snyder lives in Hillsborough.*