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## The Gap In Our Social Conscience Is The Size Of Other People's Children

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My 3-year-old son is playing by my feet on the floor; running toy trucks up the length of my legs. He's laughing and simulating car crashes while I'm staring at pictures of toddlers crying as Border Patrol Officers prepare to forcefully separate them from their parents. Like parents across the country, I am horrified by the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" immigration policy. I also know why it's happening: these children are someone else's. People in the government, from President Trump on down, have deemed these babies and kids "not our children." Now, under the guise of safety, compassion, and an answer to forced separation, Trump is attempting to convince the American people that indefinite detention of migrant families will somehow solve this crisis. And we're buying it.

But this is entirely a crisis of the administration's own making, according to Alex Nowrasteh, senior immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute. Amid a growing outcry, on May 20 Trump signed an executive order reversing the very policy his administration enacted (something he previously claimed he didn't have the power to do) in order to keep migrant children and their families together. "An executive order is fine, but he could have just given them guidance or instruction in another form if he wanted to," Nowrasteh tells Romper. "He could have called them up on the phone and told them to."

So, how did it come to this?

Immigrants from Central America continue to attempt the dangerous crossing to escape violence in their home countries, religious and political persecution, to reunite with family in the U.S., and for economic reasons. Every government grapples with this reality, but the Trump administration is the first office to use a "zero-tolerance" policy previously deemed "inhumane" and off the table by the Bush and Obama governments

Nowrasteh explains that the current administration has changed the criteria for asylum, turning away those fleeing gang and/or domestic violence, while simultaneously pledging to prosecute 100 percent of the individuals who cross the border illegally. This created a trap, according to

Nowrasteh, in which asylum seekers felt like they had no other choice but to enter the country unlawfully. "Asylum seekers who would have gone to the border and ask did so, were rejected, found out that the government was changing the asylum criteria, realized that they didn't have much time to ask for asylum, realized that if they entered the United States illegally and then asked they might have a shot," he says. "But by doing that they opened themselves up to prosecution, family separation, and removal."

While the argument that deterring immigration is important for the sake of our families' safety is powerful, no previous American president was willing to separate migrant children from *their* families in order to do it. Then Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the Trump administration would enact that "zero tolerance policy" for individuals who cross the border "illegally" during a press conference at the U.S.-Mexico border near San Diego on May 7. "Failure to enforce our duly enacted laws would be an affront to the American people," Sessions said, as reported by The Hill. Sessions is a father of three — two daughters and a son.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended the new policy by ignoring a reporter's call for empathy and saying, "It's not a policy change to enforce the law. That's been this administration's policy since the day we got here." Sanders also has three children — two sons and a daughter.

President Donald Trump has blamed Democrats for his policy, saying via twitter "they want open borders, which breeds horrible crime." Trump is a father of five — three sons and two daughters.

The idea that migrants are breaking the law — and, as a result, deserve to be punished — is an idea that allows many Americans to make peace with the harm that our government is inflicting on families... but it is false. Having an undocumented status is not, in and of itself, an illegal act, but opens migrants up to prosecution under the Trump Administration's interpretation of the law. "The act of entering the country without inspection, entering at a non-point of entry, is an illegal act," Andrés Lemons, an immigration attorney in New York City, tells Romper. "But once you're here and you're here without permission, undocumented, it is not. It's not against criminal law to be here without permission."

Prosecuting immigrants and refugees is certainly not an imperative, nor an effective means of deterrence. However, crossing the border leaves families vulnerable to the inhumane tactics now practiced by the government: children cannot be detained in a federal detention facility; under the Trump administration's brutal interpretation of bits of case law, they are therefore allowed to be separated from their parents. "According to the Flores Settlement, because the parents are federal custody they're no longer under the care and supervision of the parents, so they're considered unaccompanied minors," Lemons says. "And there's a whole other set of laws on what to do with unaccompanied minors." President Trump has now ordered Sessions to change the Flores Settlement, allowing migrant children to be detained indefinitely alongside their parents.

This sounds unconscionable... unless you are some of our grandparents, some of our aunts, some of our fellow parents who believe that this is the "only way" to deal with immigration. That

\*some\* suffering must be tolerated to prevent further suffering, to prevent families risking their lives crossing the desert.

It seems unfathomable... until you realize that according to a weekly Gallup poll, Trump's approval rating has jumped to 45 percent following the implementation of his new policy. It's now the highest it has ever been since his first week in public office.

It's astounding, until you remember that Trump ran on an ostensibly anti-immigrant platform, ignoring that the U.S. takes in far fewer refugees by head of population than many poor countries. Until you recall the way we, as parents, often look at our children and say they're the most important thing to us. That if there was a choice between them and someone else, there would be no choice. And, currently, the administration is attempting to convince us all that it's either our children, or the children locked in cages.

It's abhorrent, until you remember that this country has a tainted history of abusing and ignoring children of color — from the eradication of millions of indigenous people to slavery to the establishment of Japanese Internment Camps during WWII to abandoning Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria to leaving families in Flint, Michigan without water to claiming 12-year-old unarmed black boys who "looked 20" should have known better before playing in a park.

Maybe we don't want to admit that this has always been America, and the atrocities we read about as children in history books are the very same atrocities our children are in danger of accepting as normal.

**EVEN IF THIS BREAKS OUR HEARTS, IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO SAY, 'AS A PARENT THIS DISGUSTS ME,' AND CALL IT A DAY.**

Then again, maybe it's because, as parents, we look at our children and know, in our bones, that they matter more to us than anyone else's. That this is bad, but *phewf*, at least it's not us. And that our daily responsibilities and the stressors of parenthood have convinced us we have to exist in perpetual triage mode: we deal with what we can deal with, and more often than not that doesn't extend beyond our immediate family.

Coming under intense criticism, the Trump administration's defense of their new policy has been everything from outright denial, to lying about what is "required by law," to using the Biblical scripture, to blaming Democrats.

But it's vital that we continue to pay attention to fact. Because even if this breaks our hearts it is not enough to say, "As a parent this disgusts me," and call it a day. The children in cages do not notice if you change your Facebook status to #FamiliesBelongTogether and place a temporary border around your profile picture. It is not enough for me to sit on the couch and read report after report, only to look at my son and force the images of someone forcefully taking him away from me out of my mind. This policy has been allowed to reach implementation because those of us with families are buying into the notion that this policy is somehow for our children's benefit, or because we are so preoccupied with our own kids and other issues that affect us. *But this is happening.*

A reported 2,235 children being forcefully separated from their parents from May 5 to June 9, per a count kept by the Senate Judiciary Committee. That's 70 children a day. *This is happening.*

A Texas detention officer was charged with "super aggravated sexual assault" of a 4-year-old girl, after blackmailing her mother into keeping the abuse a secret. *This is happening.*

Children wailing in cages, curling up in the fetal position, and reportedly trying to commit suicide. *This is happening.*

A 10-year-old girl with Down syndrome was forcefully separated from her mother. *This is happening.*

A father died by suicide after Border Patrol Agents took his son away. *This is happening.*

The Trump administration is building a "tent city" at the border to house even more migrant children separated from their families. *This is happening.*

The U.S. government doesn't have plan as to how separated children will be safely returned to their parents.

*This is happening.*

As a mother, I feel the rage, and the ache, and the overwhelming emotion that threatens to break me as I read more and more about these children and the abuse the United States government is voluntarily subjecting them to. But empathy devoid of action will not stop those in power from separating children under the guise of public safety. Our bleeding hearts will not stop the dissemination of misinformation that leads so many people to argue that these families somehow "deserve" to be detained indefinitely, or that this policy is somehow "protecting our children." The ache in our gut, ignited only by the intrinsic need to protect *our* kids at any cost, will not protect the terrified kids being housed in abandoned Walmart warehouses.

But taking a stand, regardless of political affiliation, and condemning the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy, can. Because while Trump's unnecessary executive order has halted the forceful separation of migrant children from their parents, currently the U.S government has no plan on reunifying them. And now, as the "zero tolerance" policy remains, the Trump administration plans to detain immigrant families together for as long as is deemed necessary.

We must face what is currently happening across our country with the same fervor and determination that so many of us have faced parenthood — an adrenalized resolution that both overwhelms us and motivates us — if we are to see it end. Because while there are parents in the White House responsible for this humanitarian crisis, it can be parents outside of the White House who put an end to it.