



Help distressed children of war

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As a daughter and sister of active military personnel, I spent some time this Veterans Day reflecting on how the military has directly affected my family's lives. I realized that I often find myself thinking of families in the Middle East, many of them my counterparts with loved ones involved in the conflict and so many more simply innocent bystanders whose homes and lives are ripped apart by the violence. As these women and children make perilous journeys to overflowing refugee camps in a country they do not know, I recognize that I am the privileged one, despite my worried heart praying for the safety of my father and brother.

I sit in my safe and comfortable home, with my son exploring and learning, free from trauma. Their children have seen too much and now live in close quarters amongst strangers, if they are still living at all. According to Catholic Relief Services, being uprooted from home as a young child can have significant negative repercussions on a child's overall development. For example, the chaos and fear associated with life on the move can directly disrupt a child's brain development given that when a child feels unsafe, his or her brain will spend more time focusing on survival, rather than on new areas of growth and exploration.

Children experiencing toxic stress will grow smaller brains with fewer neural connections than children who are not traumatized; they may experience speech or reading delays, and later suffer depression, anxiety and behavioral issues. In addition, migrants often have a lack of adequate nutrient intake and limited access to health care. This can be particularly devastating if children experience these elements during key developmental windows, such as the first years of life.



Studies have found that forced migration during early childhood was significantly associated with poor cognitive well-being later in life.

The United States can help mitigate these effects by integrating Early Childhood Development activities throughout the many international programs that we already fund. In fact, U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, and U.S. Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pennsylvania, have just proposed a bill in the House that will do just that. CRS is a good example of the power of Early Childhood Development programming; its work focuses on providing family support and learning activities for migrant and refugee children to mitigate the impact of the stresses they have faced.

Playing and interacting with caregivers in a nurturing way in a safe space, along with good nutrition, clean water and sanitation, health services and parental support are all components of the Early Childhood Development services for migrant and refugee children. In this way, one can build children's resilience and promote their healing, so that they may achieve their God-given potential. For traumatized children, specialized interventions provided as early as possible are necessary to target the cause of the stress and protect them from its consequences.

The United States should integrate such work into its international humanitarian programs supporting young migrant children and their families. I urge readers to contact their U.S. representative to ask them to co-sponsor the Global Child Thrive Act (H.R. 4864) introduced by Castro and Fitzpatrick.

Link: https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/opinion/letters/article_8deaf92e-0d7f-11ea-801a-7b1c3a7e14a6.html