Where Is the Outrage Over the Institutionalized Children Denied Adoptive Homes?

By Elizabeth Bartholet, July 18, 2018, Morning Consult

Outrage has been expressed by virtually all commenting on the president’s policy separating migrant children from their parents. Critics have expressed horror at the audios of crying children, and have condemned the harm they will suffer as a result of being torn from parents and placed in institutions or foster homes. This outrage is right. These children will suffer, and innocent children should not be used as pawns in the Administration’s war against immigrants.

This outrage has produced action in the form of an executive order reversing the separation policy, even if it remains uncertain whether all the children who have been separated will be reunited with parents, and whether in the future children will be incarcerated with their parents or suffer some other problematic fate. At least outrage was expressed, and outrage has been productive in changing one horribly inhumane policy.

But where is the outrage at the U.S. government policies requiring that infants and children worldwide be imprisoned in institutions and denied available homes in international adoption? Infants in these institutions learn not to cry, because they know that crying will produce no response from their state “caretakers.” While it is heart-wrenching to see children crying as they are torn away from their parents, this crying at least indicates that the children have developed loving attachments. The science is clear that children who have once developed such attachments and then suffer a breach in the relationship are far better off than children raised in institutions who never develop loving attachments.

Much of the social and brain science cited in the recent migrant child crisis was developed in the context of studying the destructive impact of institutions on infant and child development. This science demonstrates irrefutably that the profound neglect characteristic of institutions damages children’s emotional, intellectual and physical development, year by year, month by month, and indeed day by day. The longer children spend in institutions, the greater the destruction of their human potential.

Our government has been working hard to further this destruction. The Department of State has conspired with other forces to systematically shut down international adoption as an option for institutionalized children, resulting in a drop in the number of such adoptions by 80 percent since 2004. This means almost 20,000 children per year not getting the loving homes they used to find in adoption, and instead condemned to live out their childhoods in institutions, or to die in institutions as a significant percentage do. Even the small numbers now placed internationally have been held in institutions for years as a result of restrictive policies virtually eliminating infant adoption. Yet the evidence is clear that early adoptive placement is directly related to the potential for normal development.
This deliberate policy denying available homes to children in need constitutes one of the major human rights catastrophes of our times. But to date only a relative few are expressing outrage. I work with a child human rights coalition that has introduced federal legislation to change our State Department’s policies and vindicate the child’s human right to family. But so far this legislation has languished with little attention from members of Congress, including those decrying the policy separating migrant children from parents.

The Trump administration has set itself to undo all things Obama. But oddly it has to date opted not to change the State Department adoption policies so desperately in need of change.

Leaders who truly care for children should act now to help both children fleeing to escape brutal violence in their home countries, and children unnecessarily imprisoned in destructive institutions.

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