

POSITION PAPER OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALASIA ON THE CONTINUING DETENTION OF REFUGEES

The Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Association of Australasia (PPAA) opposes the detention of children and adults in Nauru, Manus Island and on the mainland of Australia. The PPAA notes that detention of children contravenes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the detention of people seeking asylum contravenes the Refugee Convention. Both of these were signed by Australia in 1990.

The members of our association are highly trained clinicians in the area of Mental Health. Members of the association are child and adult psychotherapists who work to promote the psychological health and wellbeing of adults, children and families. Their extensive training, clinical experience and understanding of developmental research means that psychotherapists are acutely aware of the devastating impact of environmental stress, especially prolonged or repeated trauma on the development of the child and that it has long lasting effects which continue into adulthood; and on the mental health of adults. Detention is a particularly damaging cause of this kind of trauma.

Infants and children in detention

The PPAA is unequivocal in its opposition to asylum seekers – whether single adults, families or children - being held in detention or detention-like environments and calls for an end to this harmful practice.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (signed by Australia in 1990)

- The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all decisions that affect them.
- Children who come to a country as refugees should have the same rights as children who are born in that country.
- Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence abuse and neglect.

Refugee Convention (signed by Australia in 1990)

- People seeking asylum must not be discriminated against.
- People seeking asylum must not be penalised for the way in which they have managed to reach a country for refuge.
- People seeking asylum must not be returned to a place where they fear threats to their lives or freedom.

Extensive research in the field of child development has consistently shown that to optimise the physical and mental health outcomes of maturation children need a safe and nurturing environment, one which fosters the child's capacity for creative play, exploration, growth and learning. Parents play a very important part in facilitating these conditions for their children and a child's wellbeing is intimately connected to their parents' capacity to hold their needs in mind. Traumatized parents almost invariably mean traumatized children because of the great constraints on the resources the children can draw on. Parents, as a result of harsh external circumstances beyond their control, may become severely compromised in their availability to their children when both parents and children are traumatized as a consequence of living in detention. A child who witnesses their parent in a traumatized state may acutely feel their parent's suffering thereby exacerbating suffering on both sides.

Due to their developmental vulnerability, children rely on outside sources for their protection and care. Detention or a detention-like environment has been found to place children at significant risk. It has been well documented that children forced to live in such depriving environments suffer direct and vicarious trauma. In such harsh environments children are exposed to the distress and suffering of their mothers, fathers, family members and others; to violence, abuse, social and cultural isolation; to anxieties stemming from facing an uncertain future. Reports of children in detention show that the prevalence of emotional and behavioural disorders is high. Living in detention-like conditions exacerbates the impact of previous trauma and in and of itself is a source of ongoing trauma for both children and adults. It is likely that all people held in the detention on Manus, Nauru and Australia will suffer the consequences in terms of ongoing mental and physical health problems for a long time. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014; Mares and Jureidini, 2012).

Adults

The severely deleterious impact on the mental health of adult asylum seekers is widely and internationally documented (eg Lawlor and Sher, 2016; Robiant et al 2009) including extreme self-harm, suicide, severe depression, high anxiety and hopelessness. Despite claims that such detention is in the service of preventing deaths at sea, since its consequences are both deleterious to mental health and a severe danger to human life, this end cannot justify these morally and ethically abhorrent means.

“Asylum seekers have always been subject to restrictions, including variably isolated and restrictive accommodation, where their well-being can be protected while their bona fides are established. Only gradually has this decent system been perverted into the current cruel, degrading and punitive system of immigration detention.” (Jureidini, 2016).

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