

# Harms of Removal Across Stages of Child Development

## Infants (0-1 years old)

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*The below information was created for use by court systems to identify, assess and mitigate the potential harmful impacts to children that result from forced separation of children from their family of origin by child welfare. This information SHOULD NOT be used to assess the developmental capabilities of a child, nor should it be used to draw any inferences about the safety of the child in the care of their parents or the ability of the parents to safely care for their child. Further, the information below is NOT intended for use in arguments that seek to delay family reunification or justify continued placement in out-of-home care.*

### Developmental Milestones<sup>1</sup>

In the first year, babies learn to focus their vision, reach out, explore, and learn about the things that are around them. Cognitive development means the learning process of memory, language, thinking, and reasoning. Learning language is more than making sounds (“babble”), or saying “ma-ma” and “da-da”. Listening, understanding, and knowing the names of people and things are all a part of language development. During this stage, babies also are developing bonds of love and trust with their parents and others as part of social and emotional development. The way parents cuddle, hold, and play with their baby will set the basis for how they will interact with them and others.



Center for Disease Control (2021). *Positive Parenting Tips: Infants (0-1 year of age)*  
<https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/infants.html>

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## Harms of Removal

### Physical Development

Physical development in infants involves many changes and milestones from birth to about one year of age. During this time, they grow a lot, often doubling their birth weight by around five months. Babies are born with several natural reflexes, like sucking and grasping. At first, their movements are jerky and uncoordinated, but by about four months, they start to grasp objects and bring their hands to their mouths. They use their five senses to begin understanding and interacting with the world around them. Though

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<sup>1</sup> Developmental milestones are things most children can do by a certain age. Children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, behave, and move (like crawling, walking, or jumping). Developmental milestones are things most children (75% or more) can do by a certain age. [National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/infants.html)

babies are born with all five senses, some are not fully developed yet. Here's a summary of sensory development in infants:

- **Vision:** Newborns see best at about 8 to 12 inches away. They are attracted to high-contrast patterns and human faces. Their vision improves over the first few months, and by around eight months, it is almost as good as an adult's. **Babies quickly learn to recognize their parents' faces.**<sup>1</sup>
- **Hearing:** Infants are able to recognize familiar sounds before they are even born – around the third trimester. After birth, babies connect these sounds to the people who provide care and love. **Newborns prefer their mother's voice over another female's voice, even if saying the same words.**<sup>2</sup> They are often calmed by soft sounds and can be startled by loud noises. An infant can tell the difference between very similar sounds as early as one month old and can distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar voices even earlier.
- **Touch:** Touch is crucial for infants. Right after birth, a newborn is sensitive to touch and temperature and is also highly sensitive to pain.<sup>3</sup> They are comforted by the gentle touch of familiar adults.
- **Smell:** Babies are born with a very keen sense of smell. In the womb, they breathe in their mother's amniotic fluid, which helps them become familiar with her scent. Newborns prefer the smell of their mothers. A six-day-old infant is more likely to turn toward its own mother's breast pad than to another mother's.<sup>4</sup> **Infants can tell they are in a new place when it smells different.**
- **Taste:** Infants develop taste buds in the womb and absorb the flavors of their mother's food during pregnancy through amniotic fluid.<sup>5</sup> Babies prefer sweet tastes over sour or bitter ones. They also show a **strong preference for breastfeeding, especially their mother's milk**, and prefer it over formula or a bottle if they are breastfed first.



Specific harms of removal that infants may experience in physical development include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Toxic Stress:** Infants are very sensitive to things in their environment, like faces, smells, sounds, and temperature. Sudden changes to a new environment can be especially stressful for them. When there are changes in daily routines, such as switching caregivers, it can disrupt the development of basic skills like sequencing and understanding cause-and-effect. **This disruption can make infants feel unsafe and insecure.** Additionally, the stress is worsened by the sudden loss of their parents, whom they see as necessary for survival. **Although infants may not understand the separation, they react to the break in the parent relationship.** They might become fussier, more irritable, or listless and may have trouble sleeping and feeding.<sup>6</sup>

When infants are stressed, their brains produce high levels of stress hormones like cortisol. If these hormones are produced in high amounts over a long period (toxic

stress), they can significantly harm development. These chemicals reduce the benefits infants get from bonding hormones like oxytocin.<sup>7</sup> The brain's biochemical environment during critical development stages can permanently affect its structure and function.

A poor biochemical environment can lead to less desirable emotional, behavioral, and intellectual abilities for the rest of a child's life.<sup>8</sup> Toxic stress can have both immediate and long-lasting consequences, especially when it is cumulative, such as separation from parents after adverse experiences at home that brought the family to the attention of child welfare. **Unfortunately, a historical lack of education and understanding of the impacts of trauma has led both the child welfare system and courts to underestimate the serious impact of toxic stress caused by parental loss from sudden forced separation.** Here are some known harmful effects of toxic stress on an infant's developing brain and nervous system:

- Changes in brain chemistry, anatomy, and gene expression.<sup>9</sup>
- Lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health, including alcoholism, depression, heart disease, and diabetes.<sup>10</sup>
- Adverse health effects that may not manifest until adulthood, such as maladaptive coping skills, poor stress management, unhealthy lifestyles, mental illness, and physical disease.<sup>11</sup>

**Breastfeeding:** Breastfeeding has many health benefits for infants, protecting them against various short-term and long-term illnesses.<sup>12</sup> However, **when infants are removed from their parents, it can create significant barriers to breastfeeding.** In such cases, infants are often switched to formula, which lacks the same essential nutrients of breast milk. Even when there are concerns about substance use exposure through breast milk, there are effective harm reduction strategies to make breastfeeding safe.<sup>13</sup>



**Physical Affection:** Touch is a primary sense, and in early infancy, it may be the most important one. Infants usually seek as much physical contact with another person as possible. When held, they often snuggle into your neck and mold themselves to you. This position is calming for them and allows infants to get to know their parents by associating touch, voice, sight, and smell with the person holding them.<sup>14</sup> **Removal is incredibly disruptive to any established pattern of parent-child physical affection.** A lack of physical touch can be very detrimental to healthy development in infancy. For example, studies on children in orphanages have shown higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol due to the lack of physical contact.<sup>15</sup>

**Maltreatment in Foster Care:** Foster care is meant to provide a safe and caring environment for children who have been taken from their biological families because of abuse or neglect. However, it's important to recognize that abuse can still happen within the foster care system. This kind of abuse is especially harmful because it happens to children who are already vulnerable and in need of protection. Abuse in foster care can lead to long-term problems, affecting a child's behavior, emotional well-being, learning,

and ability to form healthy relationships. Pre-verbal children, who are unable to express themselves verbally, face heightened vulnerability in foster care.

While our understanding of the abuse and neglect that occurs in foster care is relatively limited, one prominent study of foster children in Oregon and Washington State found that nearly **one third reported experiencing maltreatment** by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that this reporting included both reported and substantiated reports of abuse and/or neglect. Similarly, a separate study by Johns Hopkins University found that children who are in foster care are **four times more likely to be sexually abused** than other children not in this setting<sup>17</sup>, however this study was not specific to the infant age group.

## Emotional Development

Emotional development in infants involves gradually learning to express and experience emotions, bond with their parents, and develop a sense of security. This development is closely connected to their interactions and relationships with their family. Infants develop trust and security through consistent and responsive caregiving. When their needs for food, comfort, and warmth are met, they start to feel safe and secure. Since infants have limited ability to self-soothe, they rely heavily on their parents to help regulate their emotions. They express basic emotions through facial expressions and primarily use crying to communicate their needs and feelings.

**Loss of Perceived Safety:** From birth, infants are aware of changes in their environment and rely on familiar people to regulate their emotions. Their world depends on predictability, and any changes can make them feel insecure. Infants develop a trust that parents will care for them and keep them safe – even if not done perfectly. This bonding process forms the foundation of every other developmental task across the human lifespan. Sudden changes in environment and routine can make infants feel unsafe, even if they are actually safe. This abrupt change disrupts this bonding cycle which can result in lifelong attachment issues.



When removed from their parents, infants lose the presence of the people who provide them comfort. They need familiar adults to feel secure, even in situations of abuse and neglect. When separated from their mothers, infants show anxious behaviors, including calling out and actively searching.<sup>18</sup> **This can worsen the distress infants experience during normal developmental phases**, such as the "Period of PURPLE Crying" where babies will cry inconsolably. This period typically occurs between two weeks and three to four months of age and is characterized by persistent and often unexplained crying.<sup>19</sup>

The child welfare system has traditionally relied on reports from the out-of-home caregiver to assess child wellbeing, which is typically from the lens of how convenient (or inconvenient) the behaviors of the child are for the caregiver. Courts often hear that infants are "thriving" and "happy" after being put into out-of-home placement, and attribute later emerging negative behaviors to the maltreatment experienced in their



biological family. This one-sided perspective makes it easy to assume that children are “doing well” in out-of-home care. **The fact is that infants SHOULD experience some level of distress upon forced family separation, and an absence of distress should be closely examined as it may be indicative of emerging attachment issues.**

If a child needs to be removed, providing safe opportunities for frequent, meaningful family time visitation in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting possible is a major way that court systems can help support the emotional regulation of infants, along with encouraging and supporting consistent contact with other non-caregiving adults in the child’s life. However, even the highest quality family time possible does NOT completely mitigate the harms of removal.

**Ambiguity in Roles and Relationships:** Infancy is when children start to form a foundational understanding of their place in their family and community. Being removed from their home disrupts this process and can confuse their sense of self. It can also make it hard for them to understand “stranger danger” and creates challenges when they have to move between different households with varying rules, expectations, communication styles, and relationship structures, including increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

**Attachment Disorders:** When infants do not form an attachment relationship with a familiar adult, they are at risk of developing an Attachment Disorder, leading to significant emotional, behavioral, and social challenges. Examples of attachment disorders include Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) and Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder (DSED). These disorders often arise from inadequate care in infancy, such as growing up in situations of abuse, neglect, or separation from primary caregivers.<sup>20</sup> They hinder the formation of secure emotional bonds, impacting the ability to form and maintain relationships throughout life, and have long-lasting effects on emotional and social well-being.

## Social Development

Social development in infants involves the early stages of forming relationships and understanding their social environment. A key developmental task during infancy is establishing trust through personal attachments. Infants learn through these relationships. Parents’ responsive behaviors, such as smiling, talking, and mimicking facial expressions, help newborns start to understand social cues. These early social experiences and interactions with parents lay the foundation for an infant’s later understanding of trust, communication, and relationships.



**Contrary to traditional beliefs, newborns do have a relationship with their parents and experience harm when separated from their family.** Infants possess complex groups of *mirror neurons* that let them imitate what they see, hear, and feel modelled by their parents. These mirror neurons are active from birth and allow infants to learn actions such as eating and speaking. Mirror neurons are also thought to be the building blocks of empathy. This allows infants to sense and respond to their parents’ emotions, often becoming calm when their parents are calm and

distressed when their parents are upset. They recognize and are calmed by familiar faces, and being close to their parents helps newborns feel secure and connected, which is essential for social development.

Specific harms to social development that infants may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Disruption of Foundational Relationships:** The relationships formed in infancy are essential for laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and growth. These foundational relationships are critical for a child's future development, health, and well-being.<sup>21</sup>

**Every baby has an inherent need for the caregiving environment provided by their biological parent(s). When the environment is determined to be unsafe it is the system's responsibility to offer resources and supports to ensure the safety of the caregiving environment.** The sudden absence of these foundational relationships in infancy can significantly impact a child's social development and learning in the following ways:

- **Parents:** The parent-child bond is a special relationship that develops over time through shared experiences, trust, and love. This bond is very hard to replace or replicate, even in infancy. This bond begins in the womb, as fetuses show a preference for their mother's scents and sounds. During birth, infants are primed by hormones to be awake for a short time to allow initial bonding with their parents. Bonding during infancy releases chemicals in the child's body that help shape the brain for positive behaviors and lasting attachments.<sup>22</sup> **If an infant is removed from their parents, it disrupts this process and can have a major impact on their ability to form attachments throughout their life.**

Newborn attachment to their mother often feels built-in, but **bonding with fathers (or non-birthing parent) is also incredibly important for child development.** The earliest days of life are crucial for forming this bond and the stronger this attachment is, the sooner newborns will recognize and respond to their father. As soon as a baby is born, fathers can deepen this bonding process with skin-to-skin contact. When dads hold babies' skin-to-skin, it provides both dad and baby with mood-boosting hormones that increase the parent-baby bond, helps fathers better understand the needs of the infant, and can help the baby feel soothed.<sup>23</sup> **Removal in infancy greatly disrupts this bonding which can have life-long detrimental impacts on the father-child relationship.**

- **Siblings:** Being removed from home due to abuse or neglect not only separates children from their parents but can also disrupt or end their relationships with siblings. Siblings are important in helping children understand others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and beliefs.



- **Secondary Relational Connections:** These are strong emotional bonds that children form with non-parental caregivers beyond their primary relationships. This includes extended family, close friends, pets, daycare staff, medical or dental providers, and other trusted adults. When an infant is removed from their home or family situation, it's more than simply removal from their parents – **they**

**are removed from their entire world.** These secondary connections are vital for nurturing a child's sense of security and emotional stability in social interactions.

**“Breaking” Attachment Myth:** The idea that an infant must “break” their attachment with their biological family in order to attach to the family providing out-of-home care is a myth. **This misbelief is extremely harmful to children and families, and encourages direct or indirect sabotage by out-of-home caregivers to further disrupt or even sever the child’s attachment with their biological family.** Breaking one attachment to form a new one contradicts attachment theory. It is well-established within infant mental health circles that attachment is additive, not zero-sum game. Research shows that maintaining meaningful connections with biological families is essential for children’s wellbeing, even when they are in out-of-home care.<sup>24</sup>

**Cultural & Community Fragmentation:** Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in binding communities together and shaping a child’s sense of identity and belonging, which are key to their social development. **When children are taken away from their homes, they often leave behind their cultural roots,** entering new environments with unfamiliar values and traditions. This disruption can harm community unity by limiting children’s chances for meaningful social interactions, involvement, and education within their own cultural community. Being unable to relate to the cultural values and partake in the traditions observed by their family of origin shapes a child’s perception of their cultural heritage and sense of community belonging.

## Cognitive Development

Cognitive development in infancy involves the growth of a baby’s ability to think, understand, and interact with their surroundings. Infants become curious about their environment and start exploring it. They learn through trial and error, which helps them understand cause-and-effect relationships and build problem-solving skills.<sup>25</sup> Infants also learn by watching and copying the actions and expressions of others. In the first



few months, their short-term memory starts to develop and improve quickly, allowing them to remember familiar faces, voices, objects, and simple routines. They begin to understand object permanence—the idea that objects still exist even when they can't be seen, heard, or touched—which makes games like peek-a-boo fun for them. They also start categorizing objects by similarities and differences, such as sorting shapes or colors.

**Perinatal Brain Change:** During pregnancy and the early postpartum period, mothers experience significant changes in their brains. These changes help them become more attuned to their babies and better at recognizing potential threats. They are designed to support bonding and caregiving for their infants.<sup>26</sup> **Early separation disrupts this important bonding process.** Bonding with other caregivers, like fathers, siblings, relatives, and close family friends, also plays a big role in a child's cognitive and emotional development. These interactions offer varied experiences that help shape the brain and influence its growth. **It is critical to the healthy development of infants that**

**the system help provide safe access to this bonding experience with both parents.**

**Object Permanence:** As part of normal development, infants learn that separations from their parents are not permanent. Young infants don't understand the passage of time, so they may think that when a parent leaves the room, they are gone forever. They haven't yet developed the concept of object permanence—the idea that something still exists even when it's not visible. **Because of this, infants can become anxious and fearful when a parent is out of sight, leading to separation anxiety**, which usually peaks between 10 and 18 months. Their lack of understanding about object permanence makes being separated from their parents particularly stressful, especially since they don't grasp the reason for the separation.

**Child welfare court systems have often struggled to understand that this distress is due to separation anxiety, sometimes mistakenly linking these behaviors to the trauma of abuse or neglect the child experienced with their parents.** Separation anxiety is NOT a valid reason to reduce the frequency or duration of family visits. In fact, the best way to ease the distress of young children with separation anxiety is through consistent, high-quality time spent with their family.

**Racial Identity Formation:** While infants don't explicitly understand race, their experiences and interactions with their family and their environment are important in shaping their racial awareness. Infants start to form implicit biases based on their exposure to different racial and ethnic groups. Between 6 and 12 months old, babies may show a preference for people who are of the same racial group as themselves.<sup>27</sup>

*Genetic mirroring* is when people see traits similar to their own in those around them, usually in their biological family. For infants placed in foster families of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, **the lack of genetic mirroring can make it harder for them to understand and accept their own racial identity.** Young children look to their family members to understand who they are and to feel a sense of stability and continuity. When they are removed from their family, they can feel isolated or alienated, especially if they don't see similarities between themselves and their foster family.<sup>28,29</sup> **An absence or lack of genetic mirroring in infancy can lead to development of racial biases towards self and the biological family**, which is extremely harmful to developing a strong sense of self and self-esteem. This is reminiscent of the intergenerational damage caused by Native American boarding schools.



## Language Development

Language development in infancy is a gradual process where babies learn to communicate. They pick up language through interactions with their family. Even before they can talk, infants start practicing communication by taking turns—like cooing in response to a parent's speech and pausing for a reply.

In the first three months, infants usually begin making cooing sounds, like “oo” and “ah,” which are their first vocalizations. Next, they start babbling, which helps them practice



the sounds and rhythms of their language. Infants listen carefully to speech, can tell different sounds apart, and start connecting words with familiar objects and people.

Language development in infancy depends on several factors, such as how much and how well parents talk to the baby, the baby's hearing ability, and their natural curiosity and desire to communicate.

**Acquisition of Native Language:** Infants learn basic language skills mainly by being exposed to and interacting with familiar adults, so parent-child interactions are key for language development. Between six and nine months, infants start to prefer listening to their native language.<sup>30</sup> They quickly lose the ability to recognize sounds that are not part of the language they hear around them.<sup>31</sup> **If an infant is placed in an out-of-home setting with caregivers who speak a different language, it greatly limits their chances to learn and become proficient in their native language.**

It is important for professionals within the child dependency system to acknowledge the historical context of the impacts that child separation policies have had on inter-generational Native language acquisition. One of the starkest examples of these policies is the U.S. government's purposeful separation of families to forcibly acculturate Native American children in state- or church-run boarding schools, which ultimately led to the disappearance of many Native American language groups and to radical changes in the groups that survived.

*This guide was created through the cross-system work of the [Family Well-Being Community Collaborative's \(FWCC\)](#) Harm of Removal Workgroup.*

## ENDNOTES

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