



Australian Association for  
Infant Mental Health Inc.

## Indefinite immigration detention is detrimental to the health and development of infants, AAIMHI says

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### Media statement

11 November 2015

In its recently released position paper, leading infant advocacy organisation the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. (AAIMHI) recommended the immediate release of infants and their parents from detention.

“Infancy (0-3 years) is a critical period in psychosocial development, and due to their particular vulnerability, infants in detention are at significant risk of immediate and long-term negative health outcomes,” AAIMHI National President Sally Watson said.

“There is a great deal of research telling us that for infants to be healthy, they need to be cared for in a safe, secure and emotionally reliable environment, preferably with their parents. When parents themselves do not feel safe and secure it is difficult for them to provide the emotional reliability that might otherwise protect their infants from less than ideal living conditions,” Ms Watson added.

“For those parents and infants who happen to be seeking asylum in Australia the situation is particularly difficult, due to the humiliating and uncomfortable, jail-like conditions of detention facilities,” Ms Watson said.

What was intended by the Australian Government to deter would-be asylum seekers is putting infants and their parents at risk of psychiatric disorders.

“Research has told us for some time that there are increased levels of psychological morbidity, developmental delays and emotional disturbance among children and infants in detention,” Ms Watson said.

“One study showed a threefold increase in the likelihood of an adult developing a psychiatric disorder subsequent to detention but for infants, the likelihood was tenfold,” Ms Watson added.

Security measures prevent independent access and assessment of the mental health of infants in detention and health workers employed by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) risk jail if they speak publicly.

At 30 September 2015, there were 113 children (aged under 18 years) in mainland detention facilities, and another 92 in Nauru.<sup>i</sup>

DIBP statistics do not differentiate infants from older children and adolescents, suggesting a lack of understanding about the particular vulnerabilities of infants, and children at other stages of development.

There is a known lack of specialist parent-infant clinical support for new parents and infants in the detention system and AAIMHI understands that DIBP has not employed any workers with training or qualifications in the area of infant mental health.

“We are sending infants to offshore detention facilities in locations where, according to the World Health Organization, infant and maternal mortality rates are high, without providing adequate care,” Ms Watson said.

Australian Association for Infant Mental Health

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INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

Observational and anecdotal data obtained by AAIMHI indicate an increase in behaviour of detained infants consistent with disturbed social and emotional development.

This data also shows that depression of one or both parents, combined with inadequate clean, safe floor space, means that some infants spend long periods in their prams, with little opportunity for play. Play is critical for their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

“When parents feel powerless to change their situation, as asylum seekers detained in on and offshore facilities do, it is almost impossible for them to provide the emotional reliability their infants need,” Ms Watson said.

To ensure optimal health of infants among asylum seekers, AAIMHI also recommends the release of pregnant women and their partners into the community, so they can receive appropriate care before and after birth.

AAIMHI’s full Position Paper on Infants in Immigration is available on the [AAIMHI website](#).

This media statement cites figures from the Australian Government: [Immigration detention and community statistics summary, 30 September 2015](#)

#### **More information**

Contact AAIMHI National President Sally Watson on 0411 377 347.

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<sup>i</sup> [Immigration detention and community statistics summary, 30 September 2015](#)