

An open letter to the parents of children crossing our Southwest border

This year, a record number of children will cross our Southern border illegally into the United States. In the month of May alone, the number of children, unaccompanied by a mother or father, who crossed our southern border reached more than 9,000, bringing the total so far this year to 47,000. The majority of these children come from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, where gang and drug violence terrorize communities. To the parents of these children I have one simple message: Sending your child to travel illegally into the United States is not the solution.

It is dangerous to send a child on the long journey from Central America to the United States. The criminal smuggling networks that you pay to deliver your child to the United States have no regard for his or her safety and well-being – to them, your child is a commodity to be exchanged for a payment. In the hands of smugglers, many children are traumatized and psychologically abused by their journey, or worse, beaten, starved, sexually assaulted or sold into the sex trade; they are exposed to psychological abuse at the hands of criminals. Conditions for an attempt to cross our southern border illegally will become much worse as it gets hotter in July and August.

The long journey is not only dangerous; there are no “permisos,” “permits,” or free passes at the end.

The U.S. Government’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, also called “DACA,” does not apply to a child who crosses the U.S. border illegally today, tomorrow or yesterday. To be eligible for DACA, a child must have been in the United States prior to June 15, 2007 – seven years ago.

Also, the immigration reform legislation now before Congress provides for an earned path to citizenship, but only for certain people who came into this country on or before December 31, 2011 – two and one half years ago. So, let me be clear: There is no path to deferred action or citizenship, or one being contemplated by Congress, for a child who crosses our border illegally today.

Rather, under current U.S. laws and policies, anyone who is apprehended crossing our border illegally is a priority for deportation, regardless of age. That means that if your child is caught crossing the border illegally, he or she will be charged with violating United States immigration laws, and placed in deportation proceedings – a situation no one wants. The document issued to your child is not a “permiso,” but a Notice To Appear in a deportation proceeding before an immigration judge.

As the Secretary of Homeland Security, I have seen first-hand the children at our processing center in Texas. As a father, I have looked into the faces of these children and recognized fear and vulnerability.

The desire to see a child have a better life in the United States is understandable. But, the risks of illegal migration by an unaccompanied child to achieve that dream are far too great, and the “permisos” do not exist.

Jeh C. Johnson
Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security