Approximately 2% of people are born with variations in their chromosomes, genitals, or internal organs like testes or ovaries. “Intersex” is an umbrella term for people with those variations. Some intersex children undergo irreversible, medically unnecessary surgeries to “normalize” their bodies without their consent and without the full understanding of their families. The consequences are devastating: individuals forced to undergo these procedures have endured lifelong infertility, intense pain, loss of sensitivity, and psychological trauma.

In October of 2017, the Department of State condemned these procedures, noting that “[t]hese interventions jeopardize [intersex people’s] physical integrity and ability to live freely.” Three former Surgeons General of the United States have called for an end to the procedures, as have countless organizations representing intersex people and their families. Legislative leadership on this issue is long overdue.

Protecting Health

Decisions about surgeries that are necessary for a person’s health should, of course, be made in consultation with family and physicians. But there are no demonstrated risks to delaying elective surgeries on children born with variations in sex characteristics until that person is old enough to make decisions about their body. In fact, performing these elective procedures introduces the risk of irreversible damage. Some individuals report pain so severe they cannot endure routine gynecological exams. According to a report from Human Rights Watch, people subjected to these procedures can experience lifelong infertility, pain during intercourse, incontinence, and require multiple corrective surgeries.

Respecting Autonomy

Initially, these procedures were assumed to be justified by the idea that children who are not forcibly operated upon would feel uncomfortable with their bodies. However, we now know that this is not true. Instead, individuals who have undergone these procedures report intense shame and lifelong psychological trauma. Additionally, a significant percentage of children operated on will actually develop a gender identity different than the sex they have been assigned through the surgery. Medical decisions can be safely made when the individuals who will experience the consequences of those decisions are able to weigh in on whether they desire any interventions at all.

Empowering Families

While intentions may be good, rushing to “fix” a child’s body when in reality nothing is broken does more harm than good. Families lack access to full information and are asked to make irreversible decisions that, unbeknownst to them, can cause their children lifelong pain and trauma. As one mother of intersex daughters wrote, “you have potentially done something catastrophic that cannot be reversed.” No family should have to endure the devastating consequences of a high-risk procedure performed without their child’s consent.