

Parenting style reduces kids' distress in war

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Researchers in Israel have surveyed parents and children in a region that recently experienced an armed conflict. They found that maternal authoritativeness and warmth helped to protect against psychological distress and mental health symptoms in children exposed to war.

Growing up in a war zone, children are exposed to dangerous events that threaten their safety and this can cause a variety of psychological symptoms including anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress. These [mental health issues](#) can manifest as internalizing symptoms, such as excessive withdrawal and depression, and externalizing symptoms, such as impulsive or aggressive behavior.

Numerous factors can affect children's resilience or vulnerability to distressing events, and family dynamics such as parenting styles, are a huge influence in their lives. Parenting styles can broadly fall into three categories. A permissive parenting style involves providing a child with lots of support and encouragement, but with very limited discipline. An authoritarian style involves strict discipline and limited [emotional support](#). Finally, an authoritative parenting style combines emotional support with discipline and openness to negotiation. Beyond specific parenting styles, parental warmth, where parents demonstrate love and affection for a child, can also significantly affect children.

"Parenting styles and practices could be a facilitating or damaging factor in children's adjustment to traumatic experiences, and this has not been well studied in the context of armed conflicts," explains [Michelle Slone](#), a researcher at Tel Aviv University.

"We set out to understand the effects of two aspects of parenting on children's mental health and adjustment after exposure to the trauma of war: parenting style and parental warmth," says Slone, who conducted the study, which was [recently published in *Frontiers in Psychology*](#). "The motivation for this study was to trace the most beneficial aspects of parenting that could facilitate and promote children's adjustment and positive development in a dangerous and unstable reality."

The investigators surveyed children (aged 12-14) and their parents, from a southern Israeli city. They conducted the survey shortly after a period

of intense conflict in the region. The surveys included questions to gauge what type of parenting style the parents used, the level of parental warmth, the children's exposure to violent events, and their mental health symptoms, including their overall distress and externalizing or internalizing symptoms.

The researchers found that children with more exposure to traumatic events showed more [mental health](#) symptoms. However, mothers who used an authoritative parenting style protected their children against internalizing and externalizing symptoms in response to traumatic events. Maternal warmth also provided protection against externalizing symptoms. In contrast, the researchers found that maternal permissive or authoritarian parenting styles were associated with more severe internalizing and externalizing symptoms following high exposure to traumatic violence. Surprisingly, the parenting style or parental warmth of the fathers had no effect on their children's response to trauma. Of the primary caregivers in this sample, 88% were women, which may account for their dominant influence on the emotional well-being of the children.

So, how can these results help us to protect children from emotional trauma in war zones? "The study highlights the importance of exerting control and discipline by means of negotiation and dialogue and responding to children with respect, support and affection to ensure their safe passage through traumatic circumstances," says Slone. "Knowledge of these effects can guide psychologists and counselors who are faced with the task of accompanying families through traumatic circumstances and experiences."

More information: Michelle Slone et al, Children Affected by War and Armed Conflict: Parental Protective Factors and Resistance to Mental Health Symptoms, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01397](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01397)

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