Trajectories of Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS) after Major War among Palestinian Children: Trauma, Family- and Child-Related Predictors


SUMMARY: 240 Palestinian children and their parents completed assessments of Post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) 3, 5, and 11 months after the war in Gaza. Post-traumatic stress symptoms followed one of three trajectories: recovery (high initial stress followed by a decrease), resistant (low stress across time), and increasing (high initial stress followed by an increase).

KEY FINDINGS
- Three trajectories of symptoms emerged in the Palestinian children and their parents, including recovery (high post-traumatic stress symptoms that decreased over time), resistant (low levels of stress across time), and increasing (high initial stress that increased over time).
- The majority (76%) of participants recovered over time, with equal portions showing low overall stress (12%), or stress that increased over time (12%).
- The evolution and duration of children’s post-traumatic stress symptoms were predicted by children’s cognitive appraisals of the world and themselves, along with their emotion regulation.
- Children showing low overall stress reported more parental love and support and more positive cognitive appraisals of the world and themselves than the other two groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS
Programs could:
- Offer classes to Service members returning from combat deployment that promote positive appraisals of the world and themselves
- Help Service members’ families identify when a Service member is struggling and empower them with information about available resources
- Provide supportive classes for children whose parents return from deployment with mental or physical injuries

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES
Policies could:
- Recommend the development and infrastructure of mentoring programs for Service members
- Allocate funding for parenting courses, with particular attention to parent-child relationships after parental exposure to trauma
- Suggest screening service members for PTSD at multiple points following deployment to track changes in stress symptoms over time

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.
METHODS
- Four government schools were randomly selected from the most war-affected areas.
- Students were randomly selected from the second, fifth, sixth, and eighth grade classes.
- Students were interviewed separately over three time periods (3, 5, and 11 months) following the War on Gaza in 2008-2009 about war trauma and post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Children were asked about their self-appraisals, emotion regulation, parental acceptance, and war trauma experiences.
- Parents separately reported family war trauma exposure and their willingness to serve as an attachment figure for their children.

PARTICIPANTS
- Palestinian school children (N=240) and their parents (N=170).
- The average child age was 11.35 (SD=0.57), with a range of 10-12.
- Family monthly income was less than $260 USD for 60% of families.
- Unemployment was high among fathers (49%), and mothers predominantly worked from home (90%).

LIMITATIONS
- The duration of the study was only 11 months, and therefore does not capture potential longer-term stress responses to wartime exposure.
- The study did not assess trauma exposure from non-war experiences, including family violence.
- Reports of post-traumatic stress symptoms were self-reported by children, and may contain response bias.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
- Future research may include multiple reports of children’s post-traumatic stress symptoms, including reports from teachers and parents.
- Future research may examine change in mental health functioning over time after Service members return from a combat deployment.
- Future research may distinguish between acute and chronic trauma in conceptualizing responses to combat events.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit: https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-works

www.reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu