

“War, changes your life forever!”

Having the stability that you once knew disrupted by war, changes your life forever. The realization that you have to choose what to pack before you flee for your and your family’s safety. Should you pack an extra set of clothing, or would you rather carry a photo album with many cherished memories. Should you bring your child’s stroller, or would you rather carry her to make sure she is safe, right in your arms? And is she actually safe? What does safety mean? Is it that she survived the war and managed to flee? Or is it that you, as a parent, managed to protect her from seeing and witnessing traumatizing scenes on the way? So how does it feel for Ukrainian mothers and children arriving at Amsterdam Central Station? Does their arrival mark the end of a horrible phase, or is it the beginning of a new challenge. One that parents might not know how to manage?

When people become refugees, they don’t do that overnight. It’s a process encompassing multiple phases, each of which casts different stressors on families and their children.

The most impactful stressors that refugee families experience are: financial and material stressors, family separations, and loss of status. The most detrimental of all is when families live in uncertainty, usually while displaced. When they do not know how the future might look like, and when they do not know when they can be reunited with their family once more. Think of the Ukrainian families that have to be separated as the mother flees with the children, in search for safety, and the father stays behind, to fight for his country. In such situations, mothers could feel worn out and emotionally exhausted, which often relates to more hostility and harshness, and less warmth, affection and support when dealing with their children.

Boothby and colleagues (2006) pose a legitimate question asking whether it is the exposure to war-related incidents per se that is responsible for how war-affected children adapt, or whether children’s adaptation is a function of how much support they receive before, during, and after the incident. So while war-related incidents can be rather traumatizing for children, it also causes new stressors and aggravates existing ones which could negatively impact children’s adaptation. Research has investigated other groups of war-affected populations in the past, for example, from Afghanistan, Croatia, Israel, Northern Ireland, Palestine, and Syria, just to name a few. Such research tells us that war has a direct and negative impact on children’s development. It also tells us that war has an indirect impact on children, as it negatively influences parent-child interactions. In a [meta-analysis](#) using world-wide data, we found that the more parents are exposed to war, the less warmth, affection and support they show their children, and the more hostile, and punitive their interactions with their children become. Reduced warmth and increased harshness relate to more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, anxiety, social problems, externalizing behavior, and less positive outcomes in children.

This means that a supportive family environment is a key protective factor, and a hostile family environment is a risk factor for children growing up in such dire conditions.

What can we do?

- **Mental health care.** Refugee parents and children are a vulnerable population, which has been through multiple adversities, in their homelands and on the way to the Netherlands. Once relocated, they struggle with adjusting to a new environment and learning a new language, possibly while fighting mental health problems. Mental health care that is not an extra burden is vital for a speedy recovery. The newly launched [national website](#) which directs Ukrainian refugees to different kinds of support, including free mental health care, in English, is a great initiative. We hope that more clinicians join the initiative, possibly providing mental health care in languages accessible to Ukrainian children.
- **Daily stress.** In our research, we zoomed into refugees' daily lives, measuring daily stressors (e.g., difficulties with everyday life such as language), 10 times a day for 15 days. We found that, above and beyond the impact of war trauma, stressors in daily life, negatively impact what we call "parental self-efficacy" and "parental autonomy support." Parental self-efficacy is that feeling that parents have telling them they can successfully parent their children up to their aspirations. In a nutshell, by zooming into the micro-experiences in the daily lives of refugee families we learn that refugee families value giving their adolescents autonomy. Yet, the more daily stressors they experienced in the day, the less able they are to listen to their adolescents, take their perspective, and allow them to make their own decisions, partly because they feel less confident as parents.
- **Support with parenting.** Families need parenting support to offer more warmth to their children and reduce their punishment, hostility and harshness along different phases of the refugee process (namely, during war exposure and while displaced). Children also would benefit from supporting their families in providing adequate supervision and monitoring of their children's whereabouts, particularly while living in camp sites.
- **Strength-based approach.** In resettlement, families often struggle with "a loss of status" and being called "a refugee." Listening to families and helping them uncover their strengths, and feeding that back to them, has been shown to boost their resilience. Look for the people behind a refugee label, listen to their experiences, and to their successes. Paraphrase that and feed it back to them. This has been shown to strengthen their resilience.
- **Teachers.** Your role is vital. Offering a listening ear, encouraging inclusion of refugee children in social circles, and respecting their experiences, and their languages can go a long way in making them feel welcomed and connected to their new "home".

While there is no one way to alleviate the stress that refugee parents and children might face, every little thing counts. Together, we can create a brighter future for children who were forced out of their countries, their schools, their neighborhoods, and their friend groups. Let's help them create a life!

#### Scientific References

- Boothby, N., Strang, A., & Wessells, M. G. (2006). *A world turned upside down: Social ecological approaches to children in war zones*. Kumarian Press.
- Eltanamly, H., Leijten, P., Jak, S., & Overbeek, G. (2021). Parenting in times of war: A meta-analysis and qualitative synthesis of war exposure, parenting, and child adjustment. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 22*(1), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838019833001>