

*Children's Resilience to Ongoing Terror:
The Contribution of Parental and Child Personal Resources to
the Sense of Coherence, Externalized and Internalized
Affective Responses to Post-Traumatic Symptoms*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research was to examine the contribution of a multidimensional model comprising risk and protection factors at the individual and family level, explaining the emotional resilience and adaptation of children living under recurrent ongoing terror.

The model contained three components:

1. Parental emotional resources: patterns of attachment and disposition.
2. Parental coping resources: sense of coherence and coping style.
3. The child's resources: attachment style and coping methods.

The uniqueness of the model examined is expressed in the factors theoretically defined as resilience factors – emotional resources and internal coping resources, which are available to the individual and aid in the development of a sense of strength and resilience to stressful events. Furthermore, similar to the salutogenic model described in the literature review, the current research considered the population of Sderot and Gaza envelope as, on some level, facing the risks of injuries, hence a substantial portion of the definition of an individual's position on the continuum between injuries – health is phenomenological.

The uniqueness of this approach was manifested in the research in two ways, firstly by the method utilized for identifying the sampling's children, which was not accomplished through therapeutic frameworks but rather by approaching the children in their natural environment, who were required *inter alia*, to self-report regarding the level of harm. This self-report has a distinctive and important significance in understanding the children's coping with stress-provoking situations. The uniqueness and contribution of self-reporting is reflected by one of the major research findings which is the intensity measure of post-traumatic symptoms in children, the rate of which is consistent with the evaluations of researchers in the field and corresponds with those accepted by Israeli literature (for example, Shalev *et al*, 2006, Somer, 2007). Another unique aspect that the research focuses upon is the salutogenic aspect and the protective factors researched in this multidimensional model. The findings of the research demonstrated that these factors could enable children exposed to ongoing stressful situations to demonstrate resilience and cope successfully with the experience of continuing threat to their lives. The variables used in the research as indicators of resilience amongst children were a high sense of coherence, a low score for extroverted and introverted behavioral problems pursuant to Israeli norms and an absence of symptoms parallel to a full diagnosis of post-traumatic syndrome. Moreover, focusing the current research on the identification of the resilient child is consistent with the trend of change with regard to research of children at risk. This change in research

trends fluctuates from detecting the child's injury towards identifying the resilient child and the resources serving him in developing this resilience.

As before-mentioned, the main objective of the model assumed at the base of this work, was to predict the influence of each of the risk and protection factors examined on the adaptation and resilience areas of children, living in ongoing situations of terror and stress. This prediction was made in reliance on models examining the risk and protection factors using a cumulative multi-dimensional model, such as Belsky's ecological model (1984) and the synergistic or multiplicative model. These models examine together several risk and protection factors thus providing a broader picture regarding their overall joint influence rather than if these factors had been researched separately (Cummings *et al.*, 2000; Rutter, 1983; Scharf, 2007). These models demonstrated that the child's adaptation is influenced by the parent's characteristics, the child's characteristics and those of the dyad. The uniqueness of the current research in this context is the exceptional and direct exposure characterizing all the research population that enabled us to perform a natural experiment regarding the reasons leading to the adaptation, resilience and strength of this population.

The research examined the differences in the resilience and adaptation of 4th – 6th grade school children aged 9 to 12 years, 139 boys and 110 girls. The total sampling included 251 father-mother-child families who constituted a sampling of the research that included 753 subjects living in the town of Sderot and additional communities located in the "Gaza envelope" area within firing range of Qassam rockets from Gaza.

The evaluation of the resilience and adaptation of the children included four dimensions:

1. A high score for the sense of coherence.
2. A low score for extroverted behavioral problems (CBCL) pursuant to Israeli norms.
3. A low score for introverted behavioral problems (CBCL) pursuant to Israeli norms.
4. Absence of symptoms corresponding with the diagnosis of post-traumatic syndrome.

The results' analysis was carried out in two phases:

1. Examination of the differences between the children and the parents and examination of the attachments between the model's components by means of univariable, multivariable and correlation analyses.
2. Estimation of the research model by utilizing the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis method.

The findings obtained concerning the attachments between the various variables of the research provide support to Belsky's (1984) ecological model whereby reciprocal relations exist between the parental variables, mothers and fathers, and the child's variables as identified in this research. These variables were found as having mutual contribution in light of their occurrence and existence within a

broad and inclusive matrix. Moreover and pursuant to the ecological model, the psychological and the personality-based variables of the parents were pronounced also in the current research, as contributors to the functioning of their children, their adaptation and resilience to stressful events in view of the ongoing situation and direct exposure to terror and war.

The findings of the research revealed three principal measurements which contributed to the resilience of children living under direct exposure to stressful events:

1. The parental temper and disposition.
2. The high sense of coherence of the fathers and mothers.
3. The passive methods of coping of the parent and avoidance of the child.

It is clear that the principal contribution of the current research is expressed in the focus found with regard to mothers and fathers as key factors in explaining their children's strength, which minimizes the measure of their harm and suffering and alternatively the increase in their difficulties as well. Thus it was found that parental adaptation and even more so parental mediation, determine to a large extent the ability of the child to cope with direct, ongoing and stressful terror events. Moreover, the results of the research indicate more than anything, that the process of processing the stressful events is more significant for the child than the mere exposure itself, that is to say the significance attributed to the event, influenced by the parental coherent variables, their immediate disposition and their passive coping mediate and regulate the adaptation of their children. Consequently they function as a "dam" between the traumatic events and the psychological results among their children. It would seem that the parents' ability to understand the reality and mediate it, assists their children in finding significance in their lives, even in the light of the stressful events, and that this parental mediation significantly contributes to the functioning and emotional welfare of their children, who are exposed over years to potentially traumatic stressful events.

The principal and innovative findings of the current research indicate that the parents' passive style of coping and the child's avoidance are largely responsible for the reduction of the intensity of post-traumatic symptoms and the significant decrease in behavioral problems, both extrovert and introvert types. These findings constitute, to a great extent, the principal innovation of the current research which found that regarding the aspect of ongoing and direct exposure to terror events, the avoidance coping methods specifically have the power to constitute a protective wall between the self and the stressful events. These findings have the ability to clarify the entire significance and complexity of the avoidance styles as coping with constant stressful situations, which constitute, according to the results of the current research, both for the parent and for his children, a protective resource and are not perceived as a risk factor for morbidity which affects their coping and resilience abilities. These findings are consistent with the findings of recent researches which have also pointed out the

avoidance coping and attachment style as a resource, having the power to assist the individual, for beneficial coping and consequently, resistance and resilience to stress events (Ein-Dor, Doron, Solomon, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010; Ein-Dor & Doron, in press).

The information gathered in this research may be of considerable theoretical and clinical value thanks to its ability to help therapists in early interventions with families living in the shadow of ongoing terror. These interventions have the power to intensify and expand the parental coping resources and as a consequence, as transpired in the current research, to contribute to increasing the resilience and resolution of their children.

The focus of the current research on the salutogenic dimension in the context of trauma and stress and its findings aforementioned could provide an encouraging direction which has the power to strengthen the parents and their children living under genuine daily security threat.