

Extract from

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Trauma and resilient functioning among Syrian refugee children

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Intervention in the Context of Syrian Refugee Children

There are some efforts in testing interventions in the context of Syrian refugees in Turkey. However, there has been little work done specifically for children. To my knowledge, only two intervention studies were conducted on Syrian refugee children in Turkey so far. The first intervention study examines an art therapy intervention on PTSD, depression, and anxiety problems, conducted by Ugurlu, Akca, and Acarturk (2016). Sixty-four Syrian refugee children (29 girls, 34 boys), aged 7 to 12, residing in Istanbul, were examined. Assessments included measures of stressful and traumatic life events, PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Following the base-line assessment, licensed art therapists delivered a 5-day art therapy program of three daily consecutive sessions, consisting of music, dance/movement, and visual art (i.e., drawing).

In addition, the sessions incorporated an evidence-based program, the Skills for Psychological Recovery (Berkowitz et al., 2010), toward building skills for problem solving, emotion regulation, engagement in positive activities, and healthy social relationships.

Visual art sessions aimed at developing skills for expressing emotions, emotional integration, self-confidence, problem solving, and stress regulation.

Music therapy sessions aimed at promoting motor skills, concentration, awareness, sensory skills, and social bonding.

Dance therapy sessions aimed at improving body awareness, sense of being in the moment, self-awareness, self-regulation, relaxation, and playfulness.

Cultural sensitivity was pursued via Syrian volunteer interpreters who received a 1-day training prior to all assessment procedures and intervention sessions carried out in Arabic with their help

Posttreatment assessments demonstrated significant improvements in children's symptoms of trauma, depression, and trait anxiety symptoms compared to baseline assessments.

The second intervention study conducted with Syrian refugee children in Turkey is an evaluation of a school-based, teacher-led, culturally adaptive cognitive behavior therapy program aimed at alleviating emotional distress and supporting the psychological functioning of Syrian children (Gormeze et al., 2017).

Arabic-speaking teachers, trained and supervised by the study team, delivered the program at a school (Temporary Education Center) in Istanbul, for the duration of eight weekly sessions. Each group consisted of 8 to 10 students and two teachers.

The sessions lasted about 70–90 minutes and were videotaped to test the fidelity of the intervention to the original program.

The sample consisted of 32 children, aged 10 to 15 (mean \bar{M} 12.4), who were mostly females (12 males, 20 females), and was randomly selected from the school population of 113. None of the children were unaccompanied minors. The program was developed using cognitive behaviour therapy techniques to target stress, anxiety, and trauma. The pretest versus posttest comparisons were made utilizing self-report questionnaires previously validated in Arabic to measure child posttraumatic stress reaction, child anxiety, and overall functioning.

Aside from testing the modalities with Syrian refugee children, intervention studies provide useful descriptive information. In this particular study (Gormez et al., 2017), overall, **all children reported having been exposed to or having witnessed traumatic events. About 75% of them experienced a war-related killing of a loved one, 88.7% of them left one or more loved ones in Syria, and 46.7% of them witnessed, and 32.3% directly experienced, torture or cruelty. Fifty-four percent of the children witnessed wounded people or dead bodies. They reported currently experiencing significant posttraumatic stress, and other behavioral and emotional problems. As a potential root of these problems, findings revealed poor adjustment in general.**

A majority of children (90%) could not speak the local language, Turkish. In addition, two-thirds of them reported poor satisfaction with the living conditions.

The posttest evaluation revealed a significant reduction in emotional and trauma-related symptoms consistent with what the intervention was specifically targeting. Statistically significant differences were found in anxiety, traumatic stress (especially in intrusive and arousal symptoms), and emotional problems (Gormez et al., 2017). No significant change was observed in the total score, and the subcategories of conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, or prosocial behavior. These studies by Ugurlu et al. (2016) and Gormez et al. (2017) are important as there are only a few studies that systematically evaluate the evidence base of interventions in the context of Syrian refugee children residing in Turkey. The strengths of the study by Gormez et al. (2017) included selection of participants through computerized randomization, intensive training of the facilitators of the intervention (teachers), and fidelity checks based on video records of each session. However, both studies have a number of limitations such as small sample sizes, lack of control groups, and lack of follow-up evaluations to assess long-term effectiveness. The study relied solely upon self-report questionnaires, whereas the study by Ugurlu et al. (2016) relied solely on parent report when assessing children's posttrauma issues. In addition, in the study by Ugurlu et al. (2016), at posttreatment the researchers were able to follow up only about half of the children originally assessed at baseline, due to the lack of available Arabic interpreters (as a justification, the children who were tested after the treatment were randomly selected from the overall sample). In addition, none of the intervention programs included parents actively, which is a major constraint considering the pivotal role parents play in children's psycho-social adjustment. In general, interventions with Syrian refugee children do not target parenting as a critical predictor of child adjustment. Parents or caregivers are paramount in supporting children's functioning during times of stress. Developing and implementing effective interventions to help parents and caregivers support their children effectively should be a priority for Syrian refugee children and across the refugee contexts globally (Williams, 2010). In addition, interventions with Syrian refugee children (including those that are implemented in the field without being documented by research), predominantly targeted school-age children, partly due to their accessibility via the school infrastructure. Unfortunately, Syrian refugee children who are in early childhood or infancy are neglected, at a very foundational time of their development. Another important point is to broaden the scope of intervention by going beyond the tendency of only

focusing on trauma. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in approaches that incorporate not only trauma-focused but also other types of modalities such as play-based, narrative exposure, creative-expressive, cognitive-behavioral, grief-focused, and interpersonal (Jordans, Tol, Komproe, & deJong, 2009). Not all modalities will be useful for all children. Modalities need to be tailored to the developmental level, needs, and capacities of the targeted children. Thus, a framework that incorporates various mechanisms of change is useful and needs to be disseminated to existing infrastructures such as school systems that reach communities. Recent randomized control trials conducted in Jordan reveal promising sustained effects of psychosocial group interventions, delivered by trained lay coaches, for Syrian refugee adolescents (Panter-Brick et al., 2018). Finally, it should be noted that the way interventions are delivered would vary from one country to the next.

In low-income or middle-income countries, the mismatch between the number of refugees and the available resources is a serious problem. There are efforts to fill this gap through the help of nongovernmental organizations, which greatly differ in their approach to intervention and their infrastructure. Recommendations for intervention and policy practices should differ depending on the balance or lack thereof between the number of refugee children and the availability of resources. For example, group interventions would be more cost-effective compared to individual-based interventions such as those designed for the school context (Tol et al., 2008). As demonstrated by the study by Gormez et al. (2017), **trained school teachers can be a useful alternative to professionals delivering interventions.**

Reflections for Future Research

The existing literature has long acknowledged the significance of cultural processes in the development of psychopathology, yet the empirical study of these cultural influences is still quite limited (Garcia Coll, Akerman, & Cicchetti, 2000). Likewise, despite growing interest, there is little systematic data on Syrian refugee children's development and mental health. The existing body of research has problems such as poor design, small samples, ethnocentric models, and inadequate cultural and developmental sensitivity. In this section, I will discuss such theoretical and methodological problems of the existing literature and will suggest guidelines for future research.

Need for a focus on resilience

Rather than focusing merely on measures of symptomatology, both research and screening of Syrian refugee children should adopt a resilience approach and focus on the positive adaptation and competence of the child. The literature predominantly adopts a deficit model regarding Syrian refugee children. Most research overlooks Syrian children's strength and resilience in the face of adversity, whereas it emphasizes negative developmental outcomes such as behaviour problems. There has been more attention to risk factors and stressors compared to protective factors in the context of Syrian refugee children's development. Moderators and mediators of the impact of war on refugee-related stress were also largely unattended. Understanding what fosters Syrian children's resilience, including protective factors, moderators, and mediators, is a critical task for identifying intervention targets.

Etc.

Comments

A valuable and interesting paper for anyone concerned about the situation of displaced and traumatized children and youths.

It endorses policies and actions taken in Austrian schools at the height of the refugee crisis 2017ff.

See also http://pro-education.org/en_GB/grafische-novelle/ (English)

<http://pro-education.org/grafische-novelle/> (German)