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### When the village gets bombed

*Parenting in the aftermath of war and refuge*

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## SUMMARY

For as long as historians have kept record of human history, war was part of people's lives. The year (2020) marks 75 years since the end of the second World War, but war-related violence is still a reality in many countries across the globe. Over the past year, there have been over 90,000 war-related events resulting in more than 100,000 deaths worldwide. And the face of war has changed. Fighting forces no longer confine themselves to the battlefield, rather, residential areas and civilians often find themselves under attack. Homes, schools, places of worship, and hospitals are no longer safe, but are targeted by fighting forces. Villages get bombed.

When villages get bombed people experience multiple forms of stress. Parents have to struggle with providing safety for themselves and their children. The normal stressors of everyday parenting are replaced by the more urgent need to make sure they and their children survive. Parents no longer worry whether they will bring their children to school on time, but whether their children will actually come back home from school, alive. Parents who were normally attuned to their children and could provide adequate caregiving might have little mental capacity to do so, under such stressful conditions. And parents might also be in a constant state of hyperarousal, which could make it more difficult for them to regulate their own emotions, and those of their children's. In such conditions, parents might be at risk of responding to normal struggles of everyday parenting in a more hostile manner. They could therefore be more likely to snap out at a child, instead of taking the time to listen to them and attend to their needs.

When villages get bombed people might be forced to flee their neighborhoods. It could be that their own homes or their children's schools get bombed, or simply that the risk for their safety is so high. In such conditions families could move in with extended family members, sometimes the grandparents. This could add an extra stressor on families where their discipline could be overruled by the grandparents, and they might feel they cannot parent their children up to their expectations. Families sometimes move from house to house hoping it is a temporary situation before life can return back to normal, only to realize that they need to flee their countries, for their own and their children's safety. The iconic picture of three-

year old Alan Kurdi washed ashore is so telling of the hopelessness that many refugees experience. “No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land” as poet Warsan Shire says. Fleeing one’s own country comes along with multiple hardships, such as risking one’s own life, being separated from one’s children, and knocking doors of foreign countries in search for asylum.

By the end of 2015 there were close to 3 million people applying for asylum in Europe. A sigh of relief is the first reaction that people express after months of waiting for a decision. Families reunite. Many people recall scenes from airports with a parent waiting for their partner and children anxiously wondering if their children would even recognize them. Families reunite and start a new phase. A new phase where parents might struggle that their certificates are no longer recognized, and therefore, tend to work in lower positions in comparisons to their occupations in their homelands. A new phase marked by a need to acculturate to a new culture, learn its rules, and language. Things, that children tend to do at a faster rate than their parents. A new phase where parents might need to rely on their children as cultural and linguistic translators, threatening parental authority, and therefore their sense of efficacy as parents. A new phase with stressors which could affect parents and their children.

Most of the research examining the different ways that experiences of war and refuge could cast their effects on children focuses, understandably, on mental health problems, such as trauma. In 2010, Miller and Rasmussen made the call for researchers to examine multiple aspects of children’s ecology, including parenting, highlighting the role of proximal factors that could aggravate, or be aggravated by, the stress of war and refuge. The central questions of this dissertation are, therefore, how does war cast its effects on children through parenting behavior; and what shapes parenting behavior in refugee families?

To answer these questions we carried out a series of studies. First, we reviewed, summarized, and synthesized prior research on parenting in times of war (Chapter 2). Second, we conducted in depth interviews with recently resettled refugee parents in the Netherlands to explore whether they perceived their parenting to have changed along the road to refuge, and if so, how (Chapter

3). Third, we dug deeper into the lives of refugee parents in the Netherlands to examine how post-migration stressors shaped their parenting behavior, in daily life. We were interested in testing whether parents granted their children less autonomy the more they had experienced post-migration stress, because they felt less efficacious about themselves (Chapter 4). Finally, we tested the viability of strengthening parental self-efficacy in refugee families, and whether that would make refugee parents more resilient when confronted with post-migration stressors, in daily life (Chapter 5). We discussed our findings in Chapter 6 and made concrete suggestions for advancing the research on refugee parenting.

In Chapter 2 we investigated whether war exposure casts its effects on children through parenting practices. More specifically, we investigated which aspects of child adjustment develop through which parenting practices, in times of war. We used meta-analytic structural equation modeling, which is a powerful statistical technique that allowed us to conclude that war casts its adverse effects on children (more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression and anxiety, social and, externalizing problems, and less positive outcomes) through reduced parental warmth and increased parental harshness, and not through behavioral control. While the effect sizes were small, there was a dose-response relation. That is, the more families are exposed to war, the more likely they are to show less warmth towards their children and the more likely they are to engage in parenting characterized by hostility, verbal, or physical aggression, which relate to negative child outcomes. However, more war exposure was not related to parents' ability to monitor their children's activities and whereabouts, yet such practices were protective for children, in times of war. In this study, we also explored when and why parenting might change as a result of war exposure.

A synthesis of the qualitative research on war-affected families nuanced this dose-response ratio suggesting that how parenting gets affected by war might also depend on the nature of the exposure. For example, families in displacement (e.g., refugee camp settings) were more hostile and less warm towards their children while families living under threat (i.e., they still had access to their financial and material resources albeit the stress of war) showed more warmth towards their



children. These findings imply that it is not only a dose-response ratio (i.e., how much) but also what families have experienced (i.e., nature of traumatic exposure) that played a vital role in shaping parenting in times of war.

In Chapter 3 we explored how refugee parents perceived their parenting to have changed along the different phases of the refugee process. The refugee process refers to the different phases that families pass through until they become refugees, namely, pre-war times, during war-exposure, while on flight (i.e., moving between houses within one's country in search for safety), in displacement (e.g., in refugee camp settings), and after resettlement, for example, in the Netherlands. In order to comprehensively understand how the process of becoming a refugee forms interactions between parents and children, we must consider stressors experienced by refugee families along the entire refugee process. If perceived changes in parenting are due to provisional stressors in specific phases, parenting might change if some of those stressors were relieved. It is therefore central to discern the accumulation and dissipation of stressors in different phases to understand how refuge and resettlement shape parenting, according to parents' perceptions.

To do that we used in-depth interviews with refugee parents, where each parent was interviewed twice, asking parents about the stressors they experienced in certain phases and how they viewed that these stressors impacted their parenting. Stories of parenting during war, flight and in displacement were marked with a fair degree of homogeneity between families. Synthesizing parents' narratives suggested that, shortage of finance, co-housing, role-strain, family separations, and loss of status seemed to influence parenting in rather similar ways among parents. Families had to focus on survival, where they prioritized things such as care-taking activities, leaving little room for individual differences in parenting. Parents viewed that their active engagement and monitoring of their children dropped steadily and picked up again in resettlement. Parents also viewed harshness to have increased steadily reaching a peak in displacement, to drop once again in resettlement. In resettlement stories of parenting were much more different between families. Recovering from emotional exhaustion and parental

self-efficacy could be used to understand the divergent accounts of parenting among refugee parents in resettlement. To illustrate, some parents relied on their resources (e.g., English proficiency) to acquire new skills (e.g., learning Dutch). This afforded them an opportunity to experience success and mastery over their new environments, possibly strengthening their sense of efficacy and speeding up their recovery from emotional exhaustion. Those parents seemed to engage in parenting characterized by warmth and involvement (e.g., playing with their children) and to rely on communication and discussion to manage their children's behavior.

Parental self-efficacy, therefore, seems central in the lives of refugee families. When parents live in countries where they do not fully grasp their cultures, norms, and values, they might question whether they can indeed parent their children up to their standards. This could be even more difficult when coupled with parenting a child who is transitioning into adolescence—a phase that generally induces reductions in parental self-efficacy in many parents. This means that refugee parents possibly suffer a double risk to how competent they feel and therefore struggle with how much autonomy they should foster in their children. In Chapter 4, we investigated whether parental self-efficacy played a pivotal role in shaping parenting behavior among refugee parents, above and beyond the impact of war trauma. Using experience sampling method—a novel study design in parenting research—we followed refugee parents for around a week. Each day refugee parents were asked to respond to questions about momentary experiences of post-migration stress, parental self-efficacy, and to report how much autonomy they were granting their children, ten times a day. Using a novel and powerful statistical technique—dynamic structural equation modeling—allowing us to analyze such complex data while taking trauma-symptoms into account—we tested our theory. First, we were able to conclude that parental self-efficacy played a pivotal role in the relation between post-migration stress and parental autonomy support. In other words, the more parents felt they were being treated as outsiders and the more they longed for their home countries the less they felt that they were capable at parenting their children up to their aspirations. This, in

turn, translated into giving children less room to express their opinions and to decide things for themselves, i.e., children were granted less autonomy. Second, in a more stringent test we also allowed current experiences of post-migration stress (and not only previous ones) to relate to how much autonomy parents granted their children. In this more stringent test we found that current levels of post-migration stress were more important than stress experienced earlier. Current post-migration stressors were more strongly related to parents' ability to grant their children autonomy than stressors experienced earlier. We also found that when parents granted their children autonomy they felt more efficacious at a later timepoint, and not the other way around. These findings answer to calls by social scientist to explore the role of proximal stressors on the well-being of war-affected populations and show that post-migration stress plays a key role in the lives of refugee families, above and beyond the impact of war trauma.

Due to the importance of parental self-efficacy in the lives of refugee families, we devoted Chapter 5 to it with two specific aims. First, we wanted to test whether we can strengthen parental self-efficacy in refugee families. Second, we wanted to test whether a brief-focused intervention can make refugee parents' self-efficacy less vulnerable to negative contextual factors (i.e., post-migration stressors). We used a well-powered experiment with a brief intervention where refugee parents were given tailored feedback on their parenting. In this brief intervention we used stories about positive parenting—which the parents had shared in an earlier interview—to show them how their positive parenting behavior had a positive impact on their children. This brief intervention increased parental self-efficacy in refugee families and made parental self-efficacy less vulnerable to contextual factors (i.e., post-migration stress). In other words, it is not only that the average level of parental self-efficacy was higher post-intervention, it also no longer fluctuated together with fluctuations in post-migration stress. These findings imply that while parental self-efficacy is context-dependent, it can be made less responsive to negative stimuli. Our findings also expand previous work by showing how protective factors such as positive parenting episodes, can be used with at-risk families, to strengthen them. Understanding how to support



vulnerable populations, particularly, from a strength-based approach allows them to capitalize on their own strengths to build resilience.

Altogether, the findings from the present dissertation show that parenting is one way through which war affects children, and that, above and beyond the impact of war trauma, the stressors that refugee parents deal with on a day-to-day basis shape the way they think about themselves as parents and the way they actually 'do' their parenting. We demonstrated that using a strength-based approach—where we help parents draw the connection between their positive parenting behavior and the positive impact it can have on their children—can contribute to parents' sense of efficacy, and make this efficacy more sturdy in the face of day-to-day post-migration stressors in refugee families.

While we have proposed that parental self-efficacy plays a key role in shaping parenting behavior, future research can explore factors that shape parental self-efficacy among refugee parents. In addition, future research can look into factors that would strengthen or weaken the relation between day-to-day stressors and parental self-efficacy. Such knowledge can help the design of interventions for specific groups of refugees, based on their unique characteristics. The more research that builds up investigating such pathways, the easier it will get to support groups of people that have been exposed to multiple forms of extreme adversity. Hopefully, such work would allow us to better answer the question: *When the village gets bombed, how do you raise a child?*