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for Social Policy Studies in Israel

Young Children and Their Parents During the War

Dana Shay, Yael Navon, Carmel Blank, and Yossi Shavit

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Introduction

The events of October 7 and the ensuing war left the State of Israel deeply wounded, and their impact extended to children as well. At first glance, one might assume that young children are unable to fully comprehend the situation and are therefore unaffected by the events. However, research demonstrates that exposure to wartime events in early childhood negatively impacts children's well-being and overall development (Sadeh et al., 2008; Torche & Shwed, 2015). Early childhood is a period of rapid development during which children are particularly sensitive to environmental influences. Consequently, disruptions caused by exposure to emergencies and stress, especially under conditions of family instability, can lead to long-term adverse effects (Bailey et al., 2001; Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). This chapter focuses on examining the emotional, behavioral, and developmental status of Israeli

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children in early childhood during the war. It also explores the emotional well-being and functioning of their parents, as well as the factors that may explain both the children's and the parents' conditions.

Literature review

Prolonged exposure to combat events constitutes a significant stressor and has widespread negative effects on children's well-being as well as their physical and mental health (Catani, 2018; Greene et al., 2018; Torche & Shwed, 2015). One of the primary consequences is a substantial increase in levels of psychological distress among populations exposed to such events (Besser et al., 2009; Bleich et al., 2003; Dar & Deb, 2022). As will be discussed later, high levels of parental stress can lead to impaired parenting patterns and adverse outcomes for young children (Imran et al., 2021).

Stress and distress among parents and their impact on family life

High levels of stress resulting from challenging circumstances can lead to negative outcomes such as depression (Yang et al., 2015), anxiety (Daviu et al., 2019), obesity (Tomiyama, 2019), and more. Prolonged stress may develop into distress. Among parents, elevated stress levels can adversely affect parenting patterns and the family environment. Studies show that parents experiencing high levels of stress or parental distress exhibit less warmth and more rigidity toward their children (Eltanamly et al., 2021; McRae et al., 2021), demonstrate less emotional presence during interactions with their children (Cohen & Shulman, 2019), struggle to provide necessary support (Spinelli et al., 2020), and report higher incidences of yelling and domestic violence (Imran et al., 2021).

As a result, high stress levels exact a heavy toll on young children. This is particularly true for children in early childhood, a period of rapid brain development that is especially sensitive to environmental stressors (Boyce, 2014; Lupien et al., 2009; Shavit et al., 2018). Research in the field of environmental epigenetics shows that children whose parents experience extreme stress levels may suffer negative physical, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (Bowers & Yehuda, 2016; Lappé & Jeffries Hein, 2021). High parental stress or distress has been linked

to various issues in children, including emotional difficulties and hyperactivity (Romero et al., 2020; Sanner & Neece, 2018), sleep disturbances (Martin et al., 2019), and obesity (Jang et al., 2019). Thus, high levels of parental stress or distress have extensive adverse effects on their young children.

Exposure to wartime events and their impact on children

As noted, exposure to wartime events is a significant stressor. It is therefore unsurprising that research reveals a range of negative outcomes among children growing up during periods of war. For example, studies have shown that exposure to wartime events, which involves heightened stress, leads to low birth weight. This phenomenon was observed in Israel during the Second Lebanon War (Torche & Shwed, 2015), in Spain during the 1980s and 1990s at the height of Basque terrorist activity (Quintana-Domeque & Ródenas-Serrano, 2017), and in 53 developing countries engaged in armed conflicts (Le & Nguyen, 2020). A study conducted in Israel found that increased exposure of mothers and children aged one to three to stressful events, such as wars and terrorist attacks, is associated with decreased emotional availability of mothers to their children. It also revealed that the less emotionally available a mother is, or the higher her stress levels, the more likely she is to report behavioral problems in her child (Cohen & Shulman, 2019). In Israel, Lebanon, and the United States, exposure to terrorism and wartime events has been linked to heightened anxiety, dependent behavior, and sleep problems among young children (Finklestein, 2016; Klein et al., 2009; Zahr, 1996). Furthermore, a negative correlation has been found between children's exposure to wartime events and their academic achievements (Husain et al., 2008; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003).

In addition to the direct negative effects of war on parents and children, daily routines are often disrupted by the closure of early childhood education and care frameworks. The importance of these frameworks to parents — allowing them to maintain both their daily work routines and their children's general well-being — has been demonstrated in numerous studies (e.g., Blanden et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2022). When the education system is shut down, parents tend to report higher levels of distress and an increase in negative interactions with their children (Blank & Shchory, 2024). Moreover, the closure

of educational frameworks may result in heightened difficulties for children, manifested in tantrums, fear, anxiety, crying, and dependency (Blank & Shchory, 2024; Egan et al., 2021).

Young children during the October 2023 War: A status report

The war that began over a year ago is clearly not a short-term event but, rather, a prolonged crisis with far-reaching implications for the State of Israel and its residents, including young children and their healthy development. The war has impacted the lives of children who have been affected by direct physical harm to themselves or their immediate families. However, its developmental repercussions extend to a much broader population of young children. These effects stem from environmental factors that generate high levels of stress among children and parents, thereby undermining the positive stimuli essential for proper development during this critical period of life. We address some of these factors and the changes observed in the months since the war began.

During the attack on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war, dozens of children lost their parents. By the end of February 2024, the National Insurance Institute had recognized over 7,000 children under the age of seven as victims of hostile acts (Israel National Council for the Child, 2023).[1] Beyond such extreme events, most Israeli children have been exposed to alerts, civil defense sirens, and the sounds of explosions throughout the war months (Taub Center, 2023). Residents of towns near the borders were evacuated, but in some conflict zones, residents — including children — remained and were exposed to frequent alerts, civil defense sirens, and explosions.

At the start of the war, residents of communities near the Gaza border and northern conflict zones were evacuated. In February, the IDF and the Ministry of Defense announced that it was safe to return to most Gaza border communities. However, due to the ongoing conflict and extensive destruction in some communities, many families have not returned to their homes,

1 During routine times, the recognition process requires applying through the Ministry of Defense. However, since October 7, the need to apply has been canceled, and recognition of those hospitalized due to an attack or terrorist incident is carried out proactively by the National Insurance Institute (National Insurance Institute, 2024).

even in areas deemed safe. Tensions along the Northern border escalated throughout the war, and 43 Northern communities within 0–3.5 kilometers of the border remained evacuated for many months under government orders. These communities comprise approximately 67,000 residents, including nearly 5,000 children under the age of six.

In total, more than 13,000 children aged 0–6 are registered in the population registry as residents of communities evacuated since October 7: 62% of these children are registered in Gaza border communities and 38% (about 5,000 children) are from evacuated Northern communities.

The war has also required extensive mobilization of reservists. By January 2024, approximately 300,000 reservists had been called up, about 120,000 of whom are parents.[2] About 12% of those mobilized are parents of children under the age of nine. As a result, the impact on families has been significant, with many children having to adapt to the absence of a parent due to military service.

Thus, beyond the macro-level effects of the war on Israeli society, welfare, and economy, the ongoing conflict profoundly disrupts the lives of a great number of families, including those with young children. Hundreds of children have been orphaned, thousands have been physically or emotionally injured, displaced from their homes, or subjected to constant threat. Additionally, tens of thousands of children must adjust to a reality in which one parent is serving in the military, reducing their physical presence at home and often causing significant changes in daily routines. Beyond the direct physical and psychological harm, broader populations are affected by prolonged stress, including environmental tensions from alerts, civil defense sirens, and explosions. This situation underscores the need for special attention to children and focused rehabilitation efforts to address the war's impact on their development and well-being.

2 See the IDF Spokesperson's website.

Findings from the Taub Center's Longitudinal Survey

To examine the status of young children in Israel and their parents during the war, the Taub Center's Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality conducted an online survey among parents of children aged 0–6. The survey was conducted in two waves: the first wave, in January 2024, included 1,199 Jewish parents (either the mother or the father); the second wave, in July 2024, included 804 Jewish respondents who had participated in the first wave (approximately 67% of the initial respondents) and 151 Arab parents.[3] Altogether, 1,350 parents of young children responded to the survey. The survey relied on self-reported data from parents about their own condition and that of their young children during the war. Its purpose was to assess the emotional, behavioral, and developmental status of young children during this period, as well as the emotional state of their parents, and to examine various factors that might explain the findings. This document presents preliminary results from the second wave of the survey and compares them to the results from the first wave, highlighting changes in the condition of children and their parents between January and July 2024. The review focuses on two phenomena unique to the war: the military service of one of the child's parents and the displacement of families (evacuation). For findings from the first wave of the survey, see Blank et al. (2024).

The data were collected via an online survey conducted by the New Wave Research company using the iPanel platform. The sample included an oversampling of parents from Gaza border communities and northern conflict zones (as defined by Home Front Command). In the first wave, 117 parents from these communities were included. From other regions of the country, parents were sampled based on quotas reflecting the distribution of education levels and religiosity in the general population, as captured in surveys by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. It is important to note that the sample does not reflect the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) population, as participation rates of this group in online panels are very low.

3 In the first wave of the survey, due to methodological challenges, data were not collected from the Arab population in Israel, which limits our ability to generalize these findings to all population groups in the country. In the second wave of the survey, conducted in July 2024, data were collected from parents of young children in the Arab population as well. In January 2025, a third wave of data collection is planned with this sample, including parents from the Arab population.

In the first wave, participants were asked about their exposure to war-related events, such as evacuation from their place of residence, one parent's military reserve duty since the war began, physical or emotional injury to a family member, or the loss of a close relative or friend.

The study assessed children's emotional and behavioral difficulties using multiple measures, repeated in both survey waves. ***Emotional and behavioral challenges*** were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a validated and reliable tool commonly used in research on children (Goodman, 1997; Goodman et al., 2000). The SDQ comprises 25 items designed to evaluate children aged two and older across five subscales (each containing five items):

1. ***Emotional symptoms*** (e.g., worries or sadness)
2. ***Behavioral problems*** (e.g., anger or arguments)
3. ***Hyperactivity and attention difficulties*** (e.g., restlessness or distractions)
4. ***Peer problems*** (e.g., loneliness or bullying)
5. ***Prosocial behavior*** (e.g., helping a friend in distress).

Each item is rated on a scale of 0 to 2, with 0 meaning "not true," 1 meaning "somewhat true," and 2 meaning "certainly true." Scores for each subscale range from 0 to 10, based on the sum of responses to the relevant items. For this report, the analysis focuses on an aggregate measure of children's difficulties derived from the first four subscales, with scores ranging from 0 to 40, where higher scores indicate more severe difficulties.

In addition to this general measure, the survey also assessed changes in specific difficulties during the war through direct questions about ***emotional and behavioral regression*** in children, such as increased bedwetting, fear of sudden noises, tantrums, or difficulty falling asleep. In the first wave, parents were asked whether these behaviors had become more or less frequent since the war began three months earlier. The second wave repeated these questions, asking parents to compare current behaviors to those three months prior. This index allows for examining changes in children's behavior relative to the period preceding the war and identifying whether their emotional state has worsened or improved. Responses were coded on a 1-to-5 scale, with higher scores indicating a greater increase in negative behaviors and more severe regression.

To understand the war's impact on children's daily lives, the first wave of the survey also asked parents ***how long their children's educational frameworks had been closed***. As noted, the cessation of educational activities can significantly disrupt children's lives, as these frameworks often provide stability, a routine, and emotional support for many.

Recognizing the direct influence of parents' emotional state on their children's well-being, the survey also examined ***parental emotional health*** during the war. In the first wave, parents' emotional state was measured using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS), a validated self-report tool (Norton, 2007). This scale comprises 21 items divided into three subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress, with each subscale assessed via seven items. Parents were asked about their emotional state during the month preceding the survey, with responses scored from 0 ("never") to 3 ("always"). The total score for each sub-index is calculated as the sum of the seven statements, multiplied by 2, resulting in an overall range from 0 to 42. The combined total range for all three sub-indices together is from 0 to 126.

To minimize respondent burden, the second wave used a shortened version of the DASS, selecting the three items with the highest factor loadings for each subscale. In the shortened version, scores for each subscale ranged from 0 to 18 (calculated as the sum of three items multiplied by 2), with a total range of 0 to 54 for all three subscales combined. A correlation of $r = 0.68$ was found between the total scores of the DASS-21 scale in the first wave and the scores of the shortened DASS scale in the second wave. This finding indicates a moderate-to-strong relationship, supporting the use of the shortened scale for comparisons between the two waves while maintaining some similarity to the original structure. Therefore, in instances in the current study where the DASS-21 index was compared across the two waves, the comparison is based on the use of the shortened index, meaning reliance on a total of nine items for both waves.

In addition, parents were asked to compare their current state to their condition before October 7, evaluating whether their ***functioning in various aspects of daily life*** had improved or deteriorated. This measure used a 1-to-5 scale, with 1 indicating "much worse," 5 indicating "much better," and 3 a self-evaluation of no change in functioning. The aspects of functioning that respondents were asked to rate included: functioning at work or in their studies, level of patience with children, ability to concentrate, and peace of mind. This index is designed

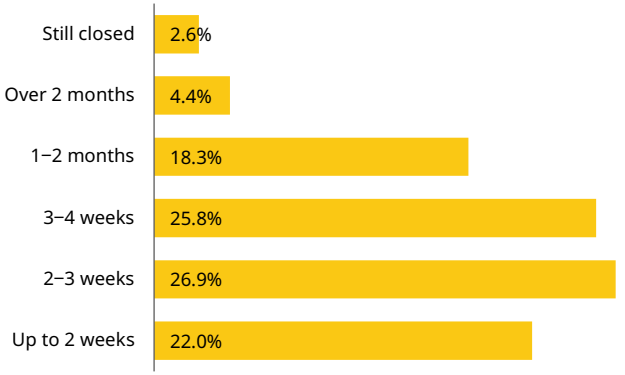
to assess, based on parents' self-evaluation, whether their daily functioning improved or deteriorated as a result of the war.

The survey also collected ***socio-demographic information about families***, including parental education, the family's economic status before and after the outbreak of the war, place of residence, family size, marital status, and more.

The prolonged closure of educational frameworks intensifies difficulties among children

Beyond exposure to civil defense sirens, alerts, and the sounds of explosions, the daily routines of many families with young children were disrupted due to the extended closure of educational frameworks. On Sunday, October 8, 2023, the education system ceased operations due to the outbreak of war, security concerns, and restrictions imposed on the population. Physical attendance in educational institutions began to gradually resume during that month, depending on the security zones and the guidelines issued by the Home Front Command for each area (Weisblau, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the duration of closures of educational frameworks for children aged 0–6 since the start of the war, as reported by parents in January 2024. The data shows that for the vast majority of families (approximately 75%), educational frameworks were closed for up to one month: 22% of families reported closures of up to two weeks, about 27% reported closures of two to three weeks, and approximately 26% reported closures of three to four weeks. One-quarter of families reported more prolonged closures: 18% noted closures lasting one to two months, and about 7% reported closures of over two months or that the framework was still closed at the time of the survey. As noted, the prolonged closure of educational frameworks can present significant challenges for families with young children (Blank & Shchory, 2024). When these frameworks are closed for extended periods, parents are forced to find alternative childcare solutions or are unable to continue working, which may place additional burdens on them and further disrupt daily life. Long-term closures make it particularly difficult for parents to balance work and childcare, especially for those who lack alternative care frameworks, family support, or other assistance.

Figure 1. Duration of educational framework closures at the start of the war, January 2024



Note: Based on parents' reports in the survey.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

A stable routine provides children with security and structure, which also benefits their parents. Studies indicate that the closure of early childhood educational frameworks is linked to various behavioral problems in children and to behavioral regression (e.g., Blank & Shchory, 2024). The findings in Figure 2 illustrate the relationship between the duration of educational framework closures at the start of the war and the average level of difficulties experienced by children, as reported by their parents using the SDQ questionnaire in the first wave of the survey.[4] Overall, the data reveal a trend of increasing average difficulty levels in children as the duration of educational closures lengthens. The most significant difficulties were observed among children whose educational frameworks were closed for periods ranging from three weeks to two months. However, for children whose frameworks remained closed for more than two

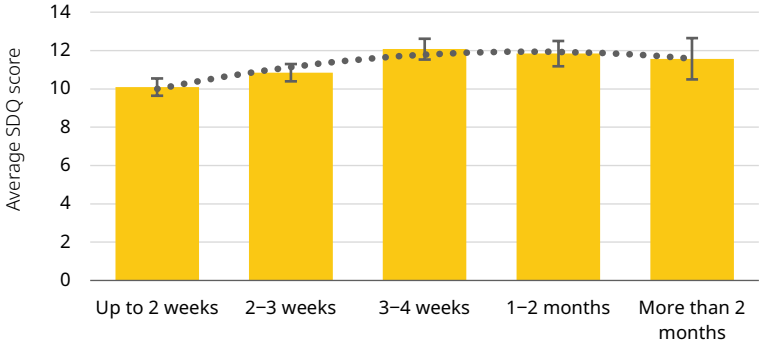
4 The dashed line in Figures 2 and 3 represents the second-degree polynomial trend, which describes the relationship between the variables. This line illustrates the changes in the data in a quadratic manner, enabling the identification of complex trends such as accelerating or decelerating rates of change. In this figure, as well as in the following ones, the vertical lines at the tops of the bars represent 95% confidence intervals for each group. These lines provide a measure of how much the group's mean might deviate from the true population mean. Non-overlapping lines indicate a clear and statistically significant difference between the groups.

months, a slight change in trend is noticeable, showing a moderate decline in average difficulties. This change may indicate an adaptive process among children to the new circumstances they encountered.

Nonetheless, the statistically significant positive correlation ($p \leq 0.05$) between the duration of educational framework closures and children's emotional and behavioral difficulties highlights the challenges posed by disrupted routines and the absence of stability, security, and the educational and social support provided by such frameworks, particularly during emergencies.

Similar findings were observed when examining the relationship between the duration of educational closures and children's emotional and behavioral regression. Parents were asked whether, since the start of the war, there were changes in the frequency of behaviors such as startling at sudden noises, difficulty separating, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, restlessness, hypervigilance, impatience, or unprovoked tantrums. The findings in Figure 3 are quite similar to those in Figure 2, showing a clear and significant trend ($p \leq 0.01$) of worsening emotional and behavioral regression as the duration of educational closures increases. These findings suggest that prolonged closures of educational frameworks not only contribute to general difficulties in children (SDQ measure) but also result in significant regression in their behavior and ability to cope with daily situations.

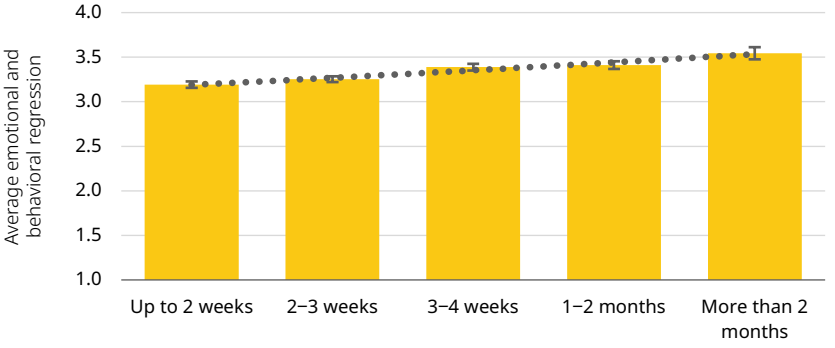
Figure 2. Average SDQ score for children's difficulties and problematic behaviors by duration of educational framework closures at the start of the war, January 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Figure 3. Average emotional and behavioral regression in children, by duration of educational framework closures at the start of the war, January 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

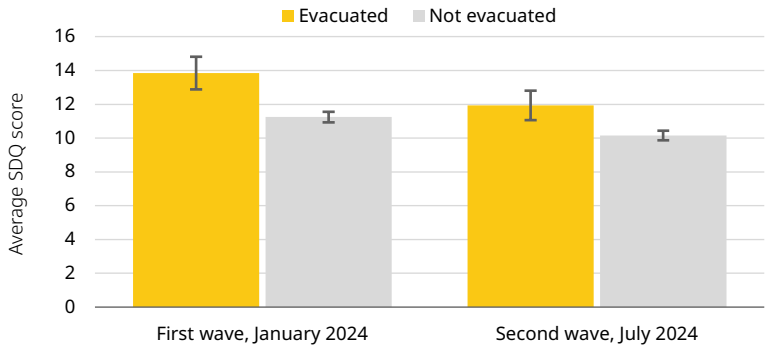
Children evacuated from their homes continue to experience greater emotional and behavioral difficulties, even over time

As a result of the war, many families in the Gaza border area and along the Northern border were forced to leave their homes and relocate to temporary accommodations. This evacuation process introduced new experiences of instability and insecurity, placing families in unfamiliar environments. These changes disrupted daily routines and exposed children to stress and emotional challenges they had not previously encountered (Rabinowitz, 2024). Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between evacuation from home due to the war and the SDQ scores for children's emotional and behavioral difficulties, as measured in January 2024 and July 2024. The data in the figure pertain to children whose parents participated in both survey waves (N = 804). As shown, ***children evacuated from their homes due to the war experienced higher levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties than did children who were not evacuated***, both in January and July 2024.[5] However, a significant decrease in SDQ scores was observed between the two data collection waves, suggesting that over time, some degree of recovery may have occurred, and the children's emotional and behavioral difficulties lessened. Despite this improvement, the differences in SDQ scores between the evacuated and non-evacuated groups remained statistically significant. In other words, while there was some improvement in the children's emotional state, the findings indicate a persistent association between evacuation and a deterioration in children's emotional and behavioral conditions over time. This insight highlights the importance of rehabilitation and emotional support programs to help children cope with the long-term effects of evacuation.[6]

5 As noted, the survey is based on parents' self-reports regarding their own situation and that of their children. Self-reported data means that the information relies on the parents' personal assessments of their condition and that of their children. Such assessments may be influenced by their mental state, which could bias the way they report, potentially leading to an overestimation or underestimation of the extent of the psychological and physical impacts.

6 We also examined the differences between evacuees who had returned to their homes by July 2024 and those who had not yet returned. It was found that children who were still displaced as of July 2024 experienced, on average, more difficulties than those who had been evacuated at the start of the war but returned to their homes between January and July 2024. However, it should be noted that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, likely due to the small number of cases of returnees in the sample (22 cases).

Figure 4. Average SDQ score for children's emotional and behavioral difficulties by evacuation from home due to the war, January and July 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

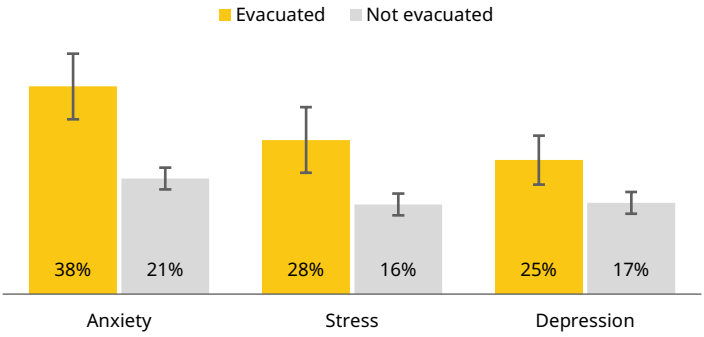
Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Parents evacuated from their homes experience more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress

The findings in Figure 5 present the DASS-21 index for symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among parents of young children in January 2024, focusing on the highest severity levels of these symptoms (severe or very severe). As noted, the DASS-21 scale consists of 21 items measuring depression, anxiety, and stress, with defined thresholds indicating normal and severe ranges for each condition. Severity levels are categorized as normal, mild, moderate, severe, and very severe. These thresholds help distinguish between levels of severity and identify particularly severe cases. Among parents evacuated from their homes due to the war, 38% reported severe or very severe ***anxiety*** levels, compared to 21% of parents who were not evacuated. Similarly, 28% of evacuated parents reported severe or very severe ***stress*** levels, compared to 16% among non-evacuated parents. Furthermore, 25% of evacuated parents reported severe or very severe ***depression*** levels, compared to 17% of non-evacuated parents. These findings underscore the significant impact

of evacuation on the mental well-being of parents and reveal that evacuated parents experience more severe emotional symptoms than those who were not displaced from their homes.

Figure 5. Distribution of severe or very severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21) among parents of young children by evacuation from home, January 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

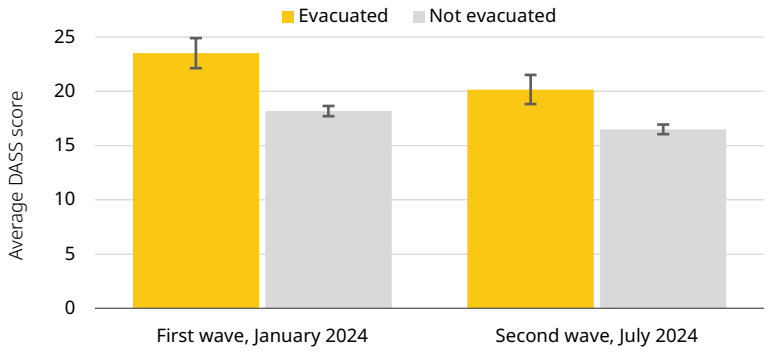
Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

The findings in Figure 6 present the average score on the shortened DASS-21 scale, which measures symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress combined among parents of young children, as recorded in January 2024 and July 2024, by whether or not they were evacuated from their homes due to the war.[7] The figure includes only parents who participated in both survey waves, allowing us to examine changes in their condition over time. The results indicate that both

7 As noted, in the second wave of the survey, to avoid burdening respondents with an overly long questionnaire, we used a shortened version of the DASS questionnaire. From the seven items measuring each type of difficulty (depression, anxiety, and stress), three items with the highest factor loadings in a factor analysis were selected. Therefore, in Figure 7, we compare the DASS index between the two waves of the survey using the shortened index for both waves.

in January and in July, parents who were evacuated reported a higher average level of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms than did parents who were not evacuated. The average difference between the groups is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$). Similar to the results shown for the SDQ index (Figure 4), a comparison between the January 2024 and July 2024 measurements reveals a significant decline in the overall DASS-21 scores for both evacuated and non-evacuated parents. This trend suggests some reduction in stress levels among parents of young children over time. However, even after this decline, stress levels among evacuated parents remained significantly higher than those of non-evacuated parents. These findings highlight the relationship between evacuation and parents' stress levels over time. Despite the significant reduction in stress levels between the first and second survey waves, the gap between evacuated and non-evacuated parents remained statistically significant.[8]

Figure 6. Average DASS score for symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among parents of young children by evacuation from home due to the war, January and July 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

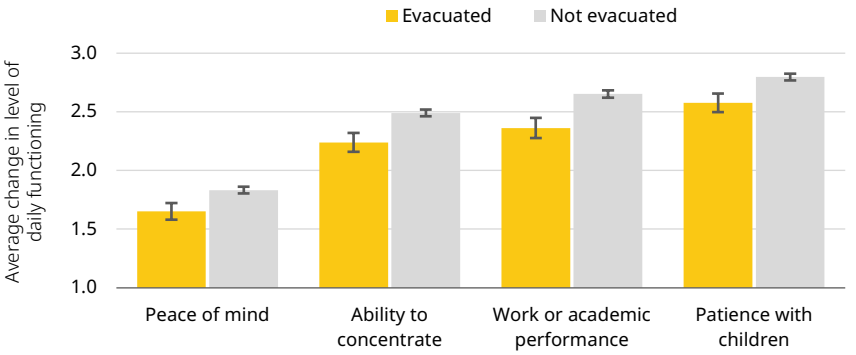
Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

8 We also examined the differences between evacuees who had returned to their homes by July 2024 and those who had not yet returned. It was found that parents who were still displaced as of July 2024 experienced, on average, more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress than did evacuees who returned to their homes between January and July 2024. However, it should be noted that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant, likely due to the small number of returnees in the sample (22 cases).

Parents evacuated from their homes reported a decline in daily functioning

Evacuation from one's home, especially if prolonged, can impact parents' daily functioning. Survey participants were asked to compare their condition before October 7, 2023, to their condition at the time of the survey and to evaluate whether their functioning in various areas had improved or deteriorated. The areas examined included patience with children, work or academic performance, ability to concentrate, and peace of mind. Responses were rated on a scale from 1 ("much worse") to 5 ("much better"), with 3 indicating "no change in functioning." Figure 7 shows that parents evacuated from their homes reported significantly greater declines in daily functioning across all areas than did parents who were not evacuated. In all four areas, the average functioning level of evacuated parents was statistically significantly lower ($p \leq 0.05$) than that of non-evacuated parents. The decline in functioning demonstrates that evacuation not only affects parents' mental well-being but also their ability to handle daily demands, including the challenges of parenting.[9]

Figure 7. Average change in daily functioning of parents of young children by evacuation from home due to the war, January 2024



Notes: Response scale ranges from 1 ("much worse") to 5 ("much better"), with 3 indicating "no change." Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center for Initiative on Early Childhood

9 This figure is presented only for measurements conducted during the first wave, in January 2024. Due to space constraints, these questions were not repeated in the second wave.

SPOTLIGHT

Evacuated Children and Their Families: Educational Frameworks for Evacuees from Kibbutz Be'eri

Yaara Shilo and Yulie Khromchenko

On the morning of October 8, 2023, as the news of the disaster and the prospect of mass evacuations unfolded, we immediately understood the need to act urgently. We drove to the Dead Sea to help establish a safe space for children and families evacuated from Kibbutz Be'eri. Upon arriving at the David Hotel, we were greeted by a noisy and crowded lobby. Children and parents, tired and confused, sat amidst piles of personal belongings.

We saw frightened children — some clinging to their parents, others quietly crying. The atmosphere was one of uncertainty. Kind-hearted volunteers tried to cheer the children with pancakes, ice cream, and chocolate, creating small moments of joy but also contributing to restlessness and hyperactivity. For some children,

and disturbing. From our past experience at Early Starters[10] in setting up safe spaces for children — such as during the war in Ukraine — we knew that location and atmosphere were critical factors. We began gathering the children from the lobby into a quiet and organized space tailored to their emotional needs. The children had arrived at different times — some immediately after evacuation, others later, depending on their families' circumstances. As the space stabilized, the children began to open up. They started playing, forming connections, and finding moments of genuine calm. The parents, still in shock from the traumatic events and the evacuation, found the space we created to be a source of calm, support, and comfort. It became not only a safe haven but also a shared space where children and parents could process their difficult experiences together and create a new routine amid the chaos.

One moment stands out: a young boy who had refrained from speaking for two days suddenly began playing with other children. It was a touching moment that demonstrated how children start to heal through play and the structured routines we established for them. Later, we set up additional spaces in other hotels in the area, and the experience we gained made the process smoother. We recruited a professional staff and volunteers, with the key recruitment criterion being stability.

10 ***Early Starters International*** is a humanitarian organization specializing in aiding young children in crisis areas. With years of experience working with children in emergency situations, the organization focuses on developing unique trauma-focused programs for parents and children, training staff, and collaborating with local and international partners. Since the events of October 7, 2023, the organization has established 17 safe spaces in Israel for children affected by the conflict, helping them cope with trauma and return to normal lives.

The team had to commit to staying for an extended period to provide children and their parents with the sense of security they so desperately needed. The feedback from families was deeply moving and reinforced our understanding that what we created was exactly what the children and parents needed: a safe space with familiar faces, professional staff, and just the right level of stimulation.

Principles for creating a safe space for early childhood

The creation of child-friendly spaces is a widely recognized humanitarian approach to supporting young children during crises. These spaces provide children with emotional and social support essential for their healthy development. The creation of safe spaces is guided by several core principles:

1. ***Safe physical space:*** A stable and accessible area that children can return to, day after day, providing them with a routine and sense of security. This stable environment allows children to choose from a variety of activities, fostering a sense of competence and control in their lives (Grotberg, 1995; Lahad, 1999).
2. ***Adaptation for early childhood:*** The space includes designated areas for various activities — construction, art, reading, imaginative play, and rest — designed to suit young children's needs and encourage cognitive, motor, and social development. A thoughtfully designed environment enables children to feel safe and free to explore the world around them.
3. ***Presence of a significant adult:*** A trauma-aware adult with a consistent presence provides emotional security and support during challenging situations (Bowlby, 1979). Establishing a positive relationship with this adult helps children develop emotional regulation skills and cope with anxiety.

4. ***Sense of belonging:*** The space offers children opportunities to form meaningful social connections within a supportive group. This collective experience helps children navigate the crisis together and fosters emotional resilience.

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Yulie Khromchenco oversees the activities of Early Starters International in Eastern Europe, where she is responsible for developing and implementing innovative programs to promote the development of young children. In addition, as Director of Content and Training, she leads the development of educational materials and trains professionals in the field.

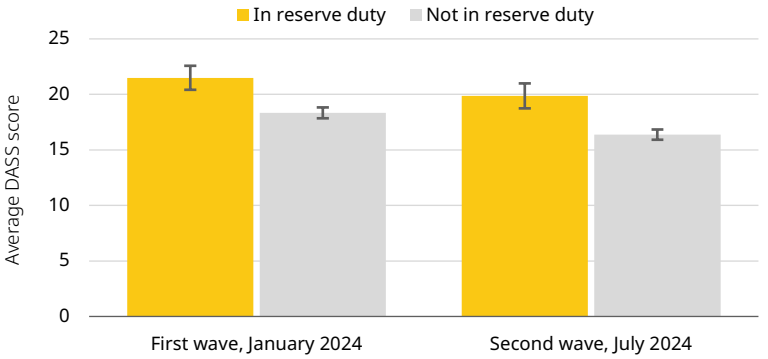
Parents whose spouses served in reserve duty during the war reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress

The reserve duty of a spouse can be a significant source of stress for parents, particularly during war. Understanding how this affects parents' well-being is essential for tailoring the support needed by them and their families. The findings in Figure 8 present the overall stress levels of parents of young children (based on the DASS-21 scale), categorized by whether the respondent's spouse was called for reserve duty during the war. Parents were asked if their spouse had been mobilized for reserve duty since the start of the war. The data includes only those respondents who participated in both waves of the survey (N = 804). In the first survey wave (January 2024), parents whose spouses served in reserve duty at any point since the war began reported higher average levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms than did parents whose spouses were not mobilized (a statistically significant difference at $p \leq 0.01$). Six months later (July 2024),

the results were similar: parents whose spouses served in reserve duty reported higher average levels of these symptoms than parents whose spouses were not mobilized, with the difference again statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$).

At first glance, there appears to be a slight decline in general psychological distress among parents between the two survey waves. To test whether this decline was statistically significant, separate t-tests were conducted for parents whose spouses served in reserve duty and for those whose spouses did not serve. For parents whose spouses were not in reserve duty during the war, a significant reduction in DASS scores was observed between the first and second survey waves (an average difference of 1.88 points on the scale, $p \leq 0.01$). This finding indicates a notable improvement in the mental health of these parents over time. In contrast, for parents whose spouses were mobilized for reserve duty at any point since the start of the war, no significant reduction in DASS scores was observed between the two waves (an average difference of 1.78 points on the scale, $p > 0.05$). This result may point to a persistent negative impact of reserve duty on the well-being of the parent remaining at home, even after the duty has ended. These findings underscore the ongoing need for emotional support for parents in such situations, emphasizing the prolonged challenges posed by a spouse's reserve service.

Figure 8. Average DASS score for symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among parents of young children by spousal reserve duty, January and July 2024



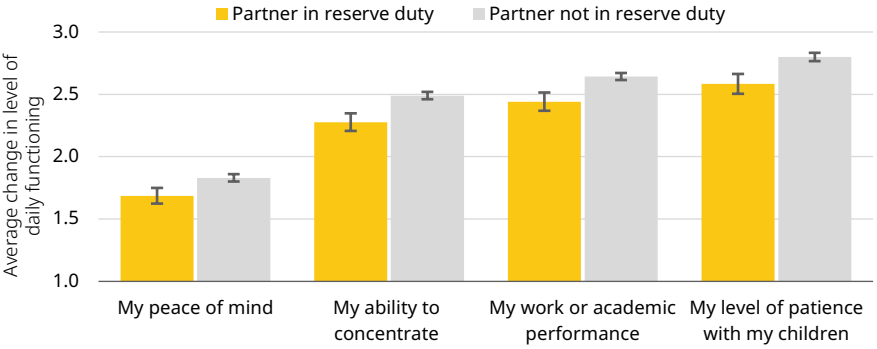
Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Reserve duty of one parent is associated with reduced functioning of the parent at home

To assess the impact of one parent's reserve duty on the functioning of the spouse who remained at home, the first wave of the survey included four indicators: patience with children, work or academic performance, ability to concentrate, and peace of mind. Responses were rated on a scale from 1 ("much worse") to 5 ("much better"), with 3 indicating "no change in functioning." The findings in Figure 9 show that parents whose spouse served in reserve duty reported decreased functioning across all measured indicators than did parents whose spouse was not mobilized. The most significant declines were observed in work or study performance, patience with children, and the ability to concentrate. The differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$). A significant difference was also found in the level of peace of mind, with parents whose spouses served in reserve duty reporting lower levels of peace of mind ($p \leq 0.05$). These findings suggest a negative correlation between one parent's reserve duty and the functioning of the parent remaining at home, with deterioration observed across all measured indicators. A decline in areas such as patience with children and concentration points to a potential reduction in the quality of life for the parent and a diminished ability to manage daily life effectively. This deterioration may also affect family dynamics. Moreover, reduced patience and difficulty coping with children may contribute to behavioral problems and higher stress levels among the children.

Figure 9. Average reduction in daily functioning of parents of young children by spousal reserve duty, January 2024



Notes: Response scale ranges from 1 ("much worse") to 5 ("much better"), with 3 indicating "no change." Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

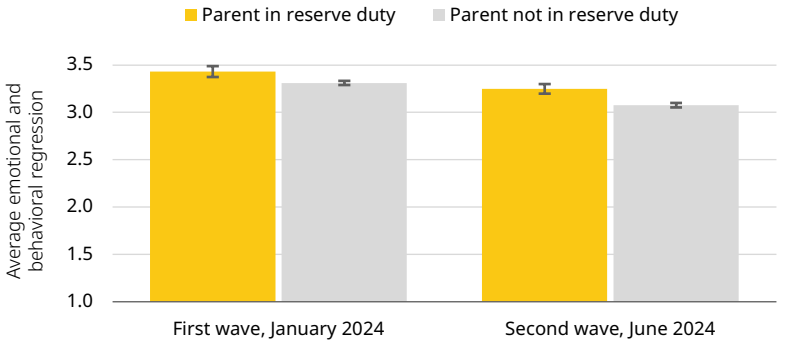
Parental reserve duty is associated with emotional and behavioral regression in children

Given the association between one parent's reserve military service and the psychological distress of the other parent, it is crucial to examine whether reserve service also affects the emotional state of children. Parental stress resulting from military service may influence the behavior and emotions of their children. Therefore, we examined the relationship between one parent's reserve service and the extent of children's emotional and behavioral regression, as measured in both survey waves. As previously noted, children's emotional and behavioral regression includes phenomena such as being startled by sudden noises, tantrums, or difficulty falling asleep (see details above). Figure 10 shows that ***children with one parent called up for reserve duty during the war experienced, on average, more severe emotional and behavioral regression than did children whose parents did not serve in the reserves***. This difference was statistically significant in both survey waves, in January and July 2024 ($p = 0.01$).

Between January and July, a decline in emotional and behavioral regression was observed among all children. However, while the decline among children of non-serving parents was statistically significant, no significant improvement was found among children of reserve-serving parents.

It is important to note that we lack data on the parents' reserve service status at the time of completing the questionnaire. That is, we do not know whether the service was still ongoing or had already ended at that time. It is reasonable to assume that in January 2024, a larger proportion of parents were still serving in the reserves, while by July 2024, many had already completed their service. The fact that no significant improvement was observed in the regression index of children of reserve-serving parents, even though many parents had probably returned to their families by July, underscores the persistent challenges faced by these children. This finding suggests that even after a parent returns home, the recovery process may be slow.

Figure 10. Average emotional and behavioral regression in young children by parental reserve duty, January and July 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

The average emotional and behavioral regression of children evacuated from their homes is more severe

To examine the relationship between family evacuation, parental reserve duty, and the emotional state of young children during the war, we conducted three linear regressions (OLS) presented in Table 1. These regressions predict the degree of children's emotional and behavioral regression as measured in January 2024. In the first regression model (Model 1), we controlled for family evacuation from home due to the war, one parent's reserve duty, and various family background variables, including family income level, parental education level, gender of the responding parent, gender and age of the children, parents' marital status (divorced/married), and changes in parental daily functioning (a value lower than 3 indicates greater emotional or behavior regression relative to 3 months prior and a higher value indicates an improvement). The results indicate that evacuation from home is positively and statistically significantly associated with the degree of children's emotional and behavioral regression ($b = 0.12$, $p \leq 0.05$). In other words, ***young children evacuated from their homes due to the war experienced more severe average emotional and behavioral regression than children who were not evacuated***, even when controlling for the independent variables listed above. Additionally, the findings show that improvement in parental functioning is significantly associated with an improvement in the child's degree of regression.

Table 1. OLS Linear Regression Model predicting emotional and behavioral regression in young children, January 2024

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Evacuated from home	**0.12***	**0.13***	**0.08***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
One parent in reserve duty	0.03	0.21*	0.16
	(0.03)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Family income	-0.02	-0.01	-0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Parents' education level	**0.03***	**0.03***	**0.04***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Gender of survey respondent (woman = 1)	0.02	0.03	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Gender of child (girl = 1)	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Child's age	**0.05***	**0.05***	**0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Parent status divorced/separated/single (married = 1)	0.05	0.05	0.05
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Change in parental functioning	**-0.24***	**-0.24***	**-0.14***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
One parent in reserve duty * family income		**-0.06***	-0.05
		(0.03)	(0.03)
Parental distress (DASS-21)			**0.01***
			(0.00)
Constant	3.62*	3.63*	3.11
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.10)
Number of observations	1,133	1,133	1,133
R^2	0.15	0.16	0.22

Note: Standard deviation appears in parentheses.

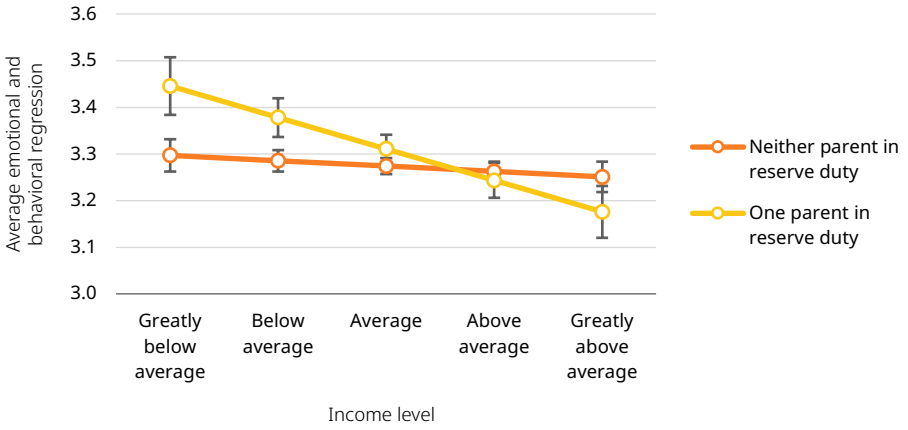
Significance level: *p ≤ 0.05.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Emotional and behavioral regression is more severe among children of reservists in low-income families

In the second regression model presented in Table 1, we added an interaction variable between family income level and one parent's reserve duty. This interaction indicates that the relationship between reserve duty and children's emotional and behavioral regression varies according to family income level ($b = -0.06$, $p \leq 0.05$). Figure 11 illustrates the relationships between children's emotional and behavioral regression and family income level, distinguishing between children whose parents served in reserve duty and those whose parents did not. The relationships are based on estimates from Model 2 in the table. The figure shows that emotional regression among children of reservists decreases as family income increases. Among children whose parents did not serve in reserve duty, there is no statistically significant relationship between family income level and the degree of their emotional regression. In low-income families, children of reservists exhibit relatively severe emotional regression than did children whose parents did not serve. In contrast, for children in families with average or above-average income, the difference in emotional and behavioral regression between those whose parents served in reserve duty and those whose parents did not, is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that ***reserve duty of one parent disproportionately affects the emotional state of children in low-income families***. This emphasizes the importance of providing support to families with a reservist parent, particularly in low socio-economic strata. It is likely that such families have fewer resources to cope with the effects of the war, potentially exacerbating the emotional and behavioral challenges faced by their children.

Figure 11. Relationship between parental reserve duty and children's emotional and behavioral regression by family income level, January 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Parental psychological distress as a mediating factor between evacuation and children's emotional regression

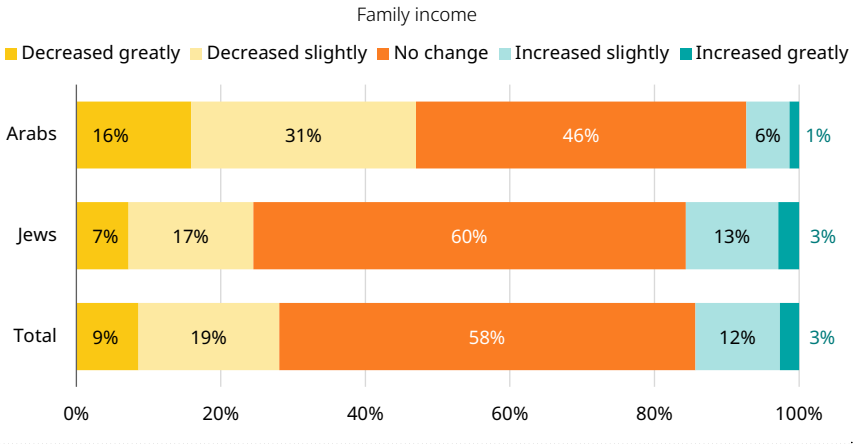
In the third regression model presented in Table 1, we included the DASS-21 index, which measures symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in the responding parent. As shown, controlling for this variable reduces the coefficient for evacuation from home to some extent and greatly reduces (to the point of non-significance) the coefficient for one parent's reserve duty. In contrast, a significant positive relationship is observed between parental psychological distress (as measured by the DASS-21 index) and children's emotional difficulties ($b = 0.10$, $p \leq 0.01$). In other words, ***children's emotional difficulties increase as the level of parental psychological distress rises***. Thus, it appears that parental distress serves as a mediating factor explaining the relationship between evacuation or reserve duty and children's emotional

regression. These two factors (evacuation and reserve duty) contribute to worsening the parents' psychological state, which, in turn, exacerbates the children's emotional difficulties. It is also noteworthy that the coefficient for changes in parental functioning remains significant in Model 3, although controlling for parental psychological distress nearly halves its value. This suggests that different aspects of parental challenges — both functional and psychological — together contribute to children's difficulties. Including parental psychological distress as a variable in the model increases the R^2 from 0.15 in Model 1 to 0.22 in Model 3, representing a 47% improvement in the model's explanatory power. This indicates that parental psychological distress accounts for a substantial portion of the variance in children's emotional and behavioral regression, beyond the other variables in the model. These findings highlight the need for interventions that help parents cope with their psychological distress, thereby laying the foundation for improving the emotional well-being of their children.

Arab parents experienced greater economic decline due to the war than did Jewish parents

To provide a broader perspective on the war's impact on families with young children in Israel, we examined their economic status. The findings clearly show that the effects of the war are not limited to evacuation or reserve duty but also include significant economic hardships. In the survey conducted in July 2024, respondents were asked about changes in their family income since January 2024. The data in Figure 12 reveals that many families experienced a notable decline in income. Among the entire sample, 9% of families reported a significant decrease in income, while 19% reported a slight decrease. However, the economic impact was more severe among Arab families than among Jewish families. Among the 804 Jewish families surveyed, 7% reported a significant decrease in income, and 17% reported a slight decrease, bringing the total proportion of Jewish families reporting any income decline to 24%. In contrast, among the 151 Arab families surveyed, 16% reported a significant decrease in income, and 31% reported a slight decrease, with the total proportion of Arab families reporting any income decline reaching 47%. The disparities between these groups highlight the unique vulnerability of Arab families during the war. These findings suggest that the economic impacts on Arab families were significantly more severe, extending beyond the direct effects of the security situation in the country.

Figure 12. Changes in family income since January 2024, by sector



Note: Based on parents' reports in the survey.

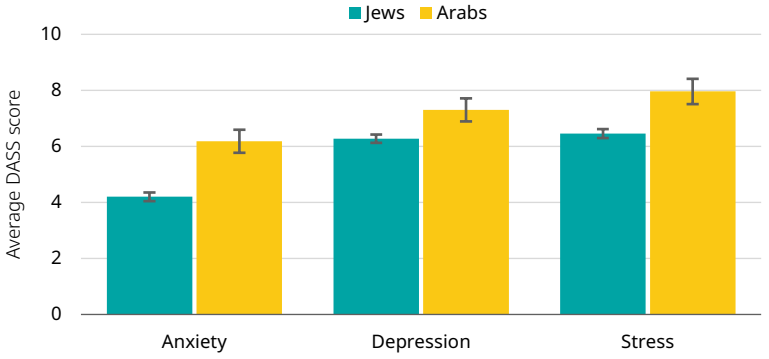
Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Levels of psychological distress of Arab parents was higher than among Jewish parents

The survey also examined the mental health of parents of young children during the war, comparing Jewish and Arab parents. As shown in Figure 13, Arab parents reported higher average levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms (based on the DASS-21 index) than did Jewish parents. These differences were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$). These findings align with research conducted by Clalit Health Services, which observed a significant increase in the consumption of antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, sleeping pills, and narcotic pain mediation during the first six months of the war. Among the Arab population, the consumption of pain medication quadrupled, compared to a three-fold increase in the general population (Knowledge and Information Center, 2024). However, additional factors, such as the ongoing rise in homicide rates within the Arab population (Weiner et al., 2024) and fluctuations in employment rates (Debowy et al., 2023), may have also contributed to the complex mental health situation of Arab parents, beyond the war itself.

The Arab population in Israel already faces greater economic and social challenges, including higher levels of violence and a lower sense of personal security. Thus, it is important to avoid attributing the high levels of psychological distress observed among Arab parents solely to the war. Nevertheless, the elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress reported by parents of young children in the Arab community underscore the need to tailor mental health support to the unique needs of this population.

Figure 13. Average DASS score for symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among parents of young children by sector, July 2024



Notes: Based on parents' reports in the survey. The I-bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Shay, Navon, Blank, and Shavit, Taub Center | Data: Longitudinal Survey of the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood

Summary and conclusions

The events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war have had far-reaching effects on Israeli society, including on young children. As part of a survey conducted by the Taub Center Initiative on Early Childhood Development and Inequality, the impact of the war on young children and their parents was examined. The survey explored the emotional, behavioral, and developmental state of young children, as well as the emotional state of their parents. It investigated the effects of evacuation from home, the closure of educational frameworks, and the reserve duty service of one parent.

Key findings

1. ***Impact of educational framework closures on children.*** Survey findings indicate that most children's educational frameworks were closed for up to one month. The longer these frameworks remained closed, the greater the increase in children's difficulties and problematic behaviors. Steps should be considered to ensure the continuity of educational frameworks during emergencies or to provide alternative educational programs to minimize emotional harm to children.

2. ***Impact of evacuation on children and parents.*** Children and parents evacuated from their homes due to the war experienced greater difficulties than did those who were not evacuated, and these difficulties persisted for more than six months after the war began. Most of the evacuated families, especially those from the North, continue to face uncertainty, which may exact an even greater toll on them and their children as the displacement period continues to lengthen. It is essential to maintain emotional support systems at all evacuation centers, including parental guidance programs, and to extend such support to displaced families dispersed across various communities rather than being part of unified, evacuated communities. Additionally, support systems and early childhood educators in local authorities receiving displaced families should be equipped to continue providing a supportive environment.

3. ***Impact of spousal reserve duty.*** Parents whose spouse served in reserve duty during the war faced greater emotional difficulties, and their children exhibited higher levels of distress, even after some parents had returned home from service. These findings highlight the critical importance of support systems — both institutional and community-based — for families of reservists. Psychological support and continuous follow-up for these families should be made available, especially at the local government level, which often maintains closer ties with residents than national-level agencies like the Ministry of Defense.
4. ***The Arab population in Israel.*** Arab parents faced particularly severe challenges during the war. The survey findings reveal higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among Arab parents than among Jewish parents, as well as greater economic harm during the first half of 2024. Tailored support programs should be considered for this population, focusing on economic assistance and psychological counseling services, to address their unique difficulties and ensure equitable access to support.

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate the significant impact of the events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent war on young children and their parents. These results underscore the need for a comprehensive and sensitive response to these effects, with a focus on psychological, educational, and social support to mitigate the negative consequences and assist the most vulnerable populations.

It is important to note that the current study did not have baseline data on the emotional and behavioral state of children and parents before the war began. Such data are crucial for a robust comparison between the pre-war and current states. Given this limitation and its implications, we recommend systematically and regularly collecting data from a representative sample of children and parents, including information on their emotional and social well-being. Such datasets would enable more accurate comparisons during emergencies and better assessments of the long-term effects of crises.

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