

Teaching kids to work through trauma

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A child who grows up in the midst of political conflict, such as war or terrorism, can exhibit severe emotional scars. But certain qualities, which psychologists call "resilience factors," can help overcome this adversity.

Prof. Michelle Slone of Tel Aviv University's Department of Psychology has now developed a program to help children develop these [resilience](#) factors and avoid the psychological disabilities that may arise from [stress](#). Her method — and her inspiring results — were recently described in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* and *International Journal of Behavioral Development*.

A lesson plan for resilience

Because children are surprisingly resilient, if given the proper tools, they can move past traumatic experiences more easily than adults.

Prof. Slone studied children who underwent daily rocket attacks from Gaza or other forms of political violence. She compared children who appeared more well-adjusted to those who exhibited more severe psychological trauma, and determined which qualities made the difference. With the results of this research, she developed a series of workshops to enhance those elements that helped children deal with the stress of conflict.

After the workshops, children who attended were better able to stand up in front of their peers and candidly discuss their anxieties about the

conflict they experienced, engaging with the group to form strategies for dealing with problems that arose. This exercise dramatically improved their psychological healing process, she says.

A four-fold approach

For her workshops, Prof. Slone identified four of the most important resilience factors: mobilizing appropriate support; attributing meaning to the traumatic experience; developing self-efficacy and problem-solving skills; and improving self-esteem. Next, she developed a school-based intervention program to help students develop and utilize the desired qualities. She and her fellow researchers created a workbook for each factor, she explains, and held training sessions with teachers. Through a four-to-six week workshop process, the children were led through a variety of activities designed to improve each quality.

Analyzing pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, interviews, and evaluations, Prof. Slone and her fellow researchers determined that in addition to developing the individual resilience factor each workshop focused on, the students displayed less anxiety and aggressive behavior, a better sense of well-being and improved social interaction and academic performance.

Teachers as well as students benefited from the workshops, says Prof. Slone. Prior to implementing this program, teachers had no method for talking to their students about the traumatic symptoms they observed. Teachers reported that the workshops enhanced their ability to help their students with difficult issues, and even improved class and school morale.

Helping children around the world

Although the program would need to be modified to account for cultural differences, says Prof. Slone, similar programs can be introduced in schools internationally. She believes that her workshops give teachers the tools they need to communicate with their students about difficult issues, and allow children to better psychologically handle the traumas to which they may have been exposed. This could help children deal with the effects of events such as 9/11 or the London Underground bombings.

The first step, explains Prof. Slone, is to determine what resilience factors benefit the children in a given society or culture. Once these factors are identified, the workshops can be adapted to help foster these particular factors. "This type of secondary intervention has the potential to be effective for a wide variety of trauma exposure," she says. "And it is possible to enhance resilience factors in large populations of [children](#). They're lessons that can last a lifetime."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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