

Q&A: The psychological consequences of political violence

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Thousands have been killed in the Israel-Hamas war since Oct. 7. And

watching, and experiencing, all of this violence unfold are Palestinian and Israeli children.

Researchers Rowell Huesmann and Eric Dubow of the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research have studied the effects of exposure to [political conflict](#) and war violence in Israeli and Palestinian [children](#) since 2007. They followed 1,500 kids in three different ethnic subgroups: Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians from both Gaza and the West Bank.

The children (8-year-olds, 11-year-olds and 14-year-olds) were interviewed by Huesmann, Dubow and colleagues in annual waves the first three years, and then a final time four years after the third interview. The researchers found among both Israeli and Palestinian kids, exposure to ethnic political violence is related to aggression, desensitization and post-traumatic stress symptoms in both groups of children.

"The more the kids were exposed over the first three years, the more aggressive they were. The aggression we initially measured was toward one's own peers," Dubow said. "It's this idea we're always talking about, which is that exposure to violence, and in this case it was definitely political violence, leads kids to have a certain way of thinking about aggression and violence.

"It leads to normative beliefs that it's OK—it's sanctioned by the highest levels of society, by your government. It leads kids, when they start to think about how to solve situations, to come up with aggressive solutions to problems, and it leads them to become emotionally callous to violence, desensitized."

Huesmann and Dubow speak about the effect of ethnic political violence on both Palestinian and Israeli children, and how these children might be

helped.

What is the psychological effect of viewing and experiencing this kind of violence at young ages?

Huesmann: I have a paper in which I called violence a [contagious disease](#). It's more easily caught than most contagious diseases because you don't need to be next to the person to catch it, and a mask won't prevent it. You just need to observe it in person, in the media, in your family and in your peers. It has the effect of promoting violence because of several factors: emotional and cognitive.

On the cognitive level, people are great imitators. They see how people deal with problems aggressively, and they imitate it. They encode what we call a "script" for solving a problem that way. And also, particularly children are learning what's normative, what we call normative beliefs. They see a lot of violence and they begin to believe it's normative, it's natural and it's OK. Emotionally, if they're exposed to a lot of violence, generally their [emotional reaction](#) to violence diminishes.

When you apply this to war violence, what we find is that kids exposed to war violence tend to become more aggressive. We see not just aggression against the outgroup. It's aggression against peers in your own group, too, and that makes complete psychological sense because you're learning the scripts for how to respond to problems. It's not surprising that you might aggress against your own peers.

Dubow: There's very little opportunity for interaction between in-groups and out-groups in this case because Israeli kids rarely interact with Palestinian kids. Now, Israeli Jewish kids may interact with Arab Jewish kids. Within Israel, like Haifa for example, it's pretty mixed between Israeli Arab and Israeli Jews. But from what I understand, the school

system is segregated, so even there you wouldn't get peers who are from different groups.

What are the post-traumatic symptoms of children who experience and witness this violence?

Dubow: They reexperience the event. In this case, they may have nightmares, intrusive thoughts during the day about the violence they've seen. They may have physiological reactions—they may startle at noises or at anything that might remind them of the violence. They might have sleep problems. Those are some of the hallmark symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Huesmann: The trauma here is exposure to violence. From a psychological perspective, we would call them internalizing symptoms—anxiety, depression and so on. When you look at Israeli and Palestinian kids now, they are both undoubtedly experiencing a lot of these things. The severity of the violence they encounter and the extent to which it's close to them, seeing family members killed and seeing people tortured and mutilated, or seeing media exposures—it's going to make it much worse.

What were the long-term effects of exposure to political violence?

Dubow: We published a paper recently where we found that exposure to political violence in early adolescence predicted support for engaging in political and violent political demonstrations, as well as their actual participation in violent political demonstrations. This was true for both Palestinian and Israeli children.

Huesmann: One of the most interesting findings for us as psychologists

is that kids who already had a less emotional reaction to violence, it didn't create as much anxiety in them. These kids were also more likely, when they were exposed to violence, to learn a lot of aggressive scripts and aggressive behaviors and so on. Kids who experience a lot of anxiety when exposed to violence were less likely to learn aggressive scripts and behaviors.

In that study, we took a completely different measure of exposure to violence. It had nothing to do with war. We showed them a violent film and assessed their emotional cognitive reaction to it using the electrodermal response. If you're anxious or aroused, you sweat more. With electrodes, you can detect that. We measured that, and also asked them what emotion they were experiencing. The kids who were more emotional and showed more arousal and anxiety to the clip were more likely to display serious post-traumatic stress symptoms from war violence. This was within both Israeli and Palestinian children.

Are children likely to become aggressive after being exposed to political violence?

Dubow: We found that there's not a lot of overlap between aggression and post-traumatic stress. Certain children could have both symptoms of aggression and post-traumatic stress, but there's not a lot of overlap.

Huesmann: The correlation between post-traumatic stress symptoms and aggression afterwards is significant, but pretty low. Some kids who are exposed to violence are more likely to become aggressive. Some kids who are exposed to political violence are more likely to show post-traumatic stress symptoms. That's when we started thinking, "Well, what might distinguish those kids who react differently to exposure to ethnic political violence?"

One of those factors appears to be their characteristic arousal. When they see violence, how do they feel? How emotionally aroused do they get? Most of us have really strong, negative reactions when we see violence. We're highly sensitized to what we see, and we react emotionally. Other kids, when they see violence, aren't so emotionally aroused. It just doesn't affect them the same way. They might find it amusing or exciting, not disgusting.

The kids who seem to become highly emotionally aroused are the ones who are more likely to show post-traumatic stress symptoms because it really bothers them. The kids who have become desensitized and don't show this anxious arousal are more likely to imitate what they see, and more likely to, in the future, behave aggressively because thinking about behaving aggressively and violently does not produce a negative reaction in them.

You can be pretty sure that the young Hamas men who committed these terrible atrocities on the Israeli children and women were really very desensitized by their long exposure to violence, and became callous, unemotional youth. It's an inevitable psychology.

What could help children recover—as much as they are able to—from witnessing such violence?

Huesmann: Generally, harsh physical punishment by parents is associated with kids becoming more aggressive—probably, because when you're being punished, that may stop you from doing something right then, but you're also learning the script for how you control other people using physical aggression.

Dubow: One thing we find is that exposure to ethnic political violence is associated with more parental depression and more harsh interpersonal

violence between parents. This in turn relates to their harsh punishment of a child. We're going to do some analyses now to see if that then relates to aggression and [violence](#) four years later in the child.

We also show that there's protective effects of certain types of parenting, even in the conditions of exposure to [political violence](#). And one of the protective effects is parents who don't show harshness. They just don't use harsh discipline, but instead they use more cognitive and consistent discipline that's nonphysical.

I'm working on a project with colleagues from the University of Notre Dame. We are interested in testing an intervention for adolescents and their families in Gaza and the West Bank to enhance communication skills, as well as the adolescents' feelings of emotional security within the family. And what's really sort of interesting about that now, is that as we've seen on the news, some of the parents in Gaza—and in Israel—are talking about how their kids may not feel that the parents can keep them safe in this environment.

It's really shattering the [kids'](#) emotional security In the family. How can the family protect them? We think this intervention is going to be even more important when this conflict abates. But a lot of the buildings where researchers were doing the intervention have been destroyed.

Provided by University of Michigan

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