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Sri Lankan children affected by war, tsunami, daily stressors

Two studies on children in Sri Lanka who survived the 2004 tsunami and ongoing civil war there found that it's not these stressful events alone that contributed to the youths' psychological health, but also daily stressors like domestic violence that are exacerbated by traumatic events and continue after the disasters. The studies appear in a special section on children and disaster in the July/August 2010 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The first study, by researchers at California State University, Los Angeles, Harvard School of Public Health, and Claremont Graduate University, looked at more than 400 Sri Lankan youths ages 11 to 20 who survived the tsunami. Researchers who work in areas where people have been harmed by disasters often focus solely on the impact of direct exposure to the disaster. This study argues that it's important also to consider the role of everyday stressors that continue after a disaster.

Specifically, the study found that while war and disaster have had a direct effect on the youths' psychological health, poverty, family violence, and lack of safe housing also represent major sources of continuing stress.

"By making sure not to miss the importance of ongoing stressors in youths' daily lives, our study highlights the need for holistic policies and programs that focus on reducing these current stressors," notes Gaithri A. Fernando, associate professor of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles, who led the study.

The second study was conducted by researchers at Bielefeld University, the University of Minnesota, the Vivo Foundation, and the University of Konstanz; Bielefeld University and the University of Konstanz are in Germany. This epidemiological study looked at almost 1,400 Tamil children ages 9 to 15 living at home or in a temporary shelter for refugees. The researchers used data from four cross-sectional studies

done from 2002 to 2006. The data were collected by former teachers trained as counselors to help traumatized children, with supervision by members of the research team.

Children in this study had been affected by both armed conflict and a natural disaster, and many also coped with domestic violence. The researchers sought to determine what happens when risk factors accumulate.

Eighty percent of the children interviewed after the tsunami had been directly affected by the tidal wave, with many telling tales of struggling in the water. Sixty to 90 percent of the children also reported war-related experiences, such as witnessing bombings or seeing dead bodies.

The study found that all of the adverse experiences contributed significantly to the children's difficulties adapting. Particularly stressful were very severe exposure to trauma, loss of family members, and domestic violence.

As a group, children are the most vulnerable to the harmful long-term psychological consequences of violence and destruction. This study can inform those developing programs to help traumatized youngsters.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Vol. 81, Issue 4, Growing Pains: The Impact of Disaster-Related and Daily Stressors on the Psychological and Psychosocial Functioning of Youth in Sri Lanka by Fernando, GA (California State University, Los Angeles), Miller, KE (formerly with Harvard School of Public Health, now with Medicins Sans Frontieres), and Berger, DE (Claremont Graduate University) and Tsunami, War, and Cumulative Risk in the Lives of Sri Lankan Schoolchildren by Catani, C (Bielefeld University), Gewirtz, AH, Wieling, E (University of Minnesota), Schauer, E (The Vivo Foundation), Elbert, T (University of Konstanz), and Neuner, F (Bielefeld University). Copyright 2010 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

