

First-Ever Study of Autistic Children and their Parents in the Context of War

Disclaimer

The findings reported here are based on data collected from Israeli families. Our efforts to collect data from Arab and Palestinian families in Israel were unsuccessful. Research is needed on the psychological impacts of the war on families, parents, and children in Gaza. We could not conduct such research across the border for obvious reasons.

We hypothesize that the findings reported here are not unique to Israeli children or families but likely reflect the impact of terror and war on children and families in armed conflict or war around in the world. We hope these findings can serve as a reminder to the global community that the impact of war goes beyond the physical and that mental health support must be considered.

Summary

This study, conducted by the Autism Child and Family Lab within the Seymour Fox School of Education at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is the first ever to study the experience of autistic children in the context of war. The research team investigated the impact of the October 7th terrorist attack and ensuing war on autistic and non-autistic children and their parents. These results are from the first data collection point of an ongoing longitudinal study designed to follow these children and families every 2 months until October 7, 2024. These preliminary findings highlight the heightened vulnerability of autistic children and their families to traumatic stress and mental health issues, necessitating specialized support and care.

Initial unpublished follow-up findings were recently presented at the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development and are detailed below.

Team and Acknowledgements

- The published study was led by Shir Rozenblat, Tanya Nitzan, and Tamar Matz Vaisman, doctoral students in the Autism Child and Family Lab in the Seymour Fox School of Education of the Hebrew University, along with Dr. Judah Koller, who directs the lab.
- Collaborators from multiple institutions including the Azrieli National Centre for Autism and Neurodevelopment Research at Ben Gurion University, the Israeli Society for Children and Adults with Autism (ALUT), Bar-Ilan University, and the Hebrew University.

Background

- Countless studies have shown significant negative psychological impacts of war and terrorism on non-autistic children and their parents, including PTSD, behavioral issues, sleep disturbances, and mental health challenges.
- Research shows that autistic children and adults are generally more vulnerable to developing posttraumatic stress in the face of adverse events.
- Independent of war, parents of autistic children exhibit higher levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and health-related issues compared to parents of neurotypical children.
- To date, no study has empirically looked at the experience of autistic children in the context of war.

Current (Published) Study

- With the outbreak of the war, we set out to examine differences in psychological responses to the October 7th attack between autistic and non-autistic children and their parents.

- The Azrieli National Centre for Autism and Neurodevelopment Research had recently completed a study examining emotional well-being in parents of autistic children, which allowed us to compare our parent data to data from an independent cohort collected prior to October 7th.
- We collected data via online surveys within 30 days of the attack, and have continued collecting follow-up data on these families every two months since.

Initial Findings (published)

Sample: 92 families (57 autistic, 35 non-autistic), with children aged 3-17.

Findings:

- The entirety of the sample of children, autistic and non-autistic, was above the clinical cut-off for traumatic stress.
- Older (7-17) autistic and non-autistic children appear to experience higher levels of trauma than younger (3-6) children.
- Across age groups, autistic children displayed significantly higher levels of trauma than their non-autistic peers.
- Parents of autistic children reported extremely high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress post-October 7th.
- Compared with the independent pre-October 7th data, the post-October 7th parents of autistic children showed a 2-4-fold increase in negative emotional states.

Initial Follow-up Findings from Ongoing Data Collection (unpublished; recently presented at the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development)

- Data collection has continued every two months and will carry on until October 7th, 2024 to assess changes in child and parent wellbeing.
- In the months following the attacks, concurrent to the ongoing war, significant improvement has been noted in the wellbeing of autistic and non-autistic children and their parents.
- Despite these improvements, trauma and negative emotional states remain significantly higher among autistic compared to non-autistic children and their parents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Autistic children and their parents are particularly vulnerable to the psychological impacts of war.
- There is need for immediate and specialized care for autistic children and their families.
- It is essential to consider the specific needs of this population in similar conflicts worldwide.

Next Steps

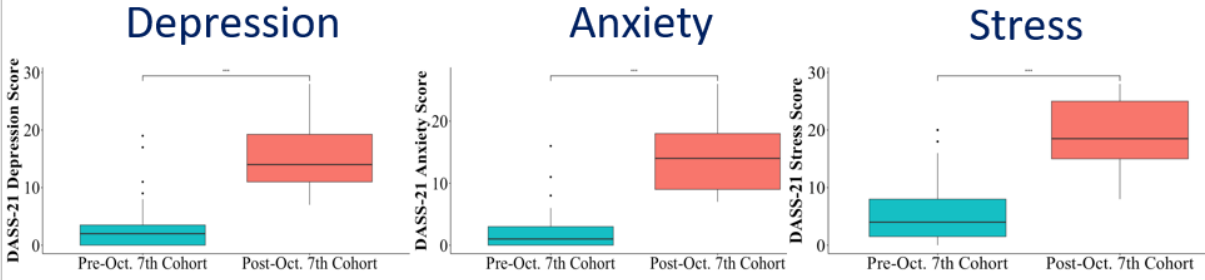
In addition to the ongoing longitudinal study, we have collaborated with Dr. Yonat Rum, also of the Seymour Fox School of Education at the Hebrew University, and conducted a mixed-methods cross-sectional study of a larger sample of parents of autistic children from February to May 2024. In that study we are focusing on child trauma, parental emotional wellbeing, and resilience.

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Pre vs. Post Oct 7th Cohorts – Parental Emotional Wellbeing

	Post-Oct. 7th (n = 57)	Pre-Oct 7th* (n = 55)
Child age, M (SD)	7.02 (3.7)	4.5 (1.02)
Child gender	56.14% males	78.18% males



*Pre-Oct. 7th sample courtesy of the Azrieli National Centre for Neurodevelopment and Autism Research