**A Pilot Study of the Feasibility and Efficacy of the Early Book-Sharing Parenting Programme among Palestinian Families in the West-Bank**

**Background and study rational**

Early childhood is a critical development stage where the child build new skills through a process of learning and interacting with the external environment ([Shonkoff et al., 2012](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235282732030330X%22%20%5Cl%20%22bib26)). Positive experiences, such as stable and responsive relationship with the primary caregiver, safe and supportive environment, contribute to healthy development in children (Ataullahjan et al., 2020). On the other hand, a robust body of knowledge shows that negative experiences during this period, such as prolonged adversity and child maltreatment, affects mortality, morbidity and physical, health problems among children (Ghanem et al., 2018; Lippard & Nerneroff, 2020; Peterson, Florence & Klevens, 2018; ). Child maltreatment during early childhood is one of the major threats to the optimal development of the child that affects negatively the child' cognitive functioning in addition to the brain's maturation and development (DeBellies et al., 2013; Paul & Singh, 2020; Yingying et al., 2019), in addition to poor parasympathetic regulation and response to tasks among toddlers (Hastings et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been found that negative and aggressive parental practices against young children are associated with wide range of negative consequences on the child behavior and well-being, including internalizing problems (e.g. anxiety and depressive symptoms) (Ridout et al., 2019; Rodman et al., 2019), conduct behaviors, emotional dysregulation and psychopathology (Weissman et al., 2019). A recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that more than 250 million or 43% of children age 5 years or less in the low and middle -income countries could not realize their full development potential as a result of adverse experiences faced by them during early childhood (WHO, 2016), which emphasize the urgent need for developing effective interventions that target young children at risk and their immediate environment.

**Child development and parenting in conflict affected settings**

The Middle East has been an area of unrest for many decades, with long-standing and complex conﬂicts which, in most cases, remain unresolved. Exposure to chronic stress, such as prolonged political violence and conflicts, increase the risk for negative outcomes among children, parents and families (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; MacMillan & Violate, 2008). Previous studies have shown that exposure to chronic stress causes dysfunctional interactions in the family that might increases the likelihood of aggressive parental practices, and the risk for child maltreatment and neglect (Murphy et al., 2017; Saile, Ertl, Neurun, & Catani, 2014; Zamir et al., 2020).

Furthermore, an extensive body of knowledge indicating that living in the context of chronic political violence has wide range of negative consequences and lifelong effects on the child development including mental health issues, poor physical health, behavioral problems and learning difficulties (Ataullahjan et al., 2020; Buccie et al., 2016; Garner, 2013).

The Palestinian population has been exposed to multiple forms of political violence and deprivation for several decades (Khatib, Canetti, & Rubin, 2018). This prolonged political violence adds more stressors on parents and families, which increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Cuartas, Grogan-Kaylor, & Castillo, 2019). The UNICEF reports (www.unicef.org/sop/what-we-do/child-protection) indicated high prevalence of violence against Palestinian children within their communities and families, including domestic violence and harsh corporal punishment, as a result of the ongoing political conflict. A survey conducting among Palestinian families confirming that 93% of children in the West Bank aged 2 to 14 years experienced violent disciplining at home and 23% of children experienced severe physical punishment from their parents (PCBS, 2012). Another study conducted among Palestinian mothers in the West Bank for children between the ages 0-12 showed that 34% of the children were abused by their mothers and the more the parent were exposed to political violence the more they were abusive against their children (Harsha, Lynch, & Giacaman, 2020). Despite the high prevalence of domestic violence against Palestinian children in the West Bank, the UNICEF reports (www.unicef.org/sop/what-we-do/child-protection) show that the capacities of child protection systems are inadequate and unable to respond to the needs. In addition, there is a significant lack in laws, policies and services that target child outcomes across the West Bank territories. Therefore, the current situation emphasize that families and children in such an environment are very vulnerable and research on prevention and development of effective interventions is indispensable and must be considered a top priority. Empirical evidence, primarily from high-income settings, suggests that programmes that combine parenting components may improve parenting functioning and child's outcomes (Chen & Chan, 2016; Vlahovicova, Melendez-Torres, Leijten, Knerr, & Gardner, 2017). Interventions focusing on educating caregivers on better parenting their children are increasingly being implemented as strategies to address the needs of families affected by prolonged chronic stress. The underlying assumption for using parenting psychoeducation is that change in parenting skills is a key mechanism for reducing current and preventing future child behavioral and emotional problems (Gardner, Burton, & Klimes, 2006).

However, yet little is known about the effectiveness of parenting programmes in low and middle income countries in conflict affected settings.

In a recent review of existing evidence of parenting programmes in low and middle income countries (LMIC) (Murphy et al., 2017), only one evaluated intervention (Wieling et al., 2015) tailored to a conflict-affected population in Northern Uganda. Initial findings from this feasibility study suggest the intervention has promise for changing parenting behaviour. In the context of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank only one pilot randomized controlled trial was conducted to provide first evaluation of a family based intervention “Caring for Children Through Conflict and Displacement”. The intervention targets parents and caregivers of children (aged 8-14) aiming at promoting family functioning and child's psychological well-being. Initial findings of this pilot study indicated that the intervention can be delivered feasibly and evaluated with families in this humanitarian context. Furthermore, preliminary outcomes data showed that the intervention may have the potential to both improve family functioning and reduce children’s problem behaviors (El-Khani et al., 2019). Despite this endorsement, to the best of our knowledge little is known about the effectiveness of parenting interventions that aiming at promoting parent-child interactions and child's development outcomes among parents and caregivers of young children (under 5) in the context of conflict-affected settings, mainly among Palestinian families in the West Bank.

Book-Sharing Parenting Programme

Book-Sharing Parenting programme is a research initiative, and a collaboration between WHO, UNICEF, the Universities of Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Bangor and Oxford, and other civil society organisations who are focused on improving parenting practices and child's outcomes in low and middle-income settings. It involves the development, testing, and large-scale dissemination of a suite of open-source and evidence-based parenting programmes for highly-risk settings. Over the past decade, it has carefully developed and tested in randomised controlled trials (RCTs) a suite of freely available parenting programmes for low-resource settings. The programme facilitates caregivers' stimulation of young children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development through focused engagement with picture books. Aimed at caregivers with children aged 1 – 5 years, caregivers are encouraged to engage the child in an active exchange about a picture book, following the child’s interest and cues. This practice of shared reading has been shown to dramatically enhance children’s language and emotional development. The programme is delivered to parents through trained facilitators over eight weekly 1:30 hours sessions. Delivered in a group setting, with up to 8 caregivers per group, the trained facilitators use a combination of interactive discussions on the theory, video demonstrations, and practical demonstrations to train parents in sensitive shared reading techniques. In each session, each caregiver is given the opportunity to practice the skills learnt, with the facilitator providing coaching and mentorship to encourage the caregiver to continue the practice at home, with the “book of the week” provided to them. In the following session, caregivers share their experiences with the group, where they teach and learn from each other. Separate shared reading programmes for caregivers with younger children (aged 1-3 years) and for caregivers with older children (aged 3-5 years) have been developed in order to speak to the different developmental needs of children of different ages.

The Book-Sharing programmes evaluation has recently began in LMIC and preliminary data show it holds a promise for low-resources settings. Findings of RCTs conducted in South Africa among caregivers and their children (infants and toddlers) (Cooper et al., 2014; Dowdall et al., 2021; Vally, Murray, Tomlison, & Cooper, 2015) show that the intervention has positive effects on the child language, attention and parental sensitivity and reciprocity. Also, it showed that mothers participated in the intervention reported lower levels of harsh verbal and psychological interactions with their children (Dowdall et al., 2021).

**The study aims**

The proposed study aims to:

1. Developing a sensitive socio-culturally version of the Early Book Sharing programme to be implemented among Palestinian families in the West Bank. This aim of the first phase of the study to select relevant books for the study population in terms of language (Arabic language) and contents. This phase might involve NGOs in the Palestinian community that support children's books in the Palestinian community (such as **Tamer Institute** [https://www.tamerinst.org/en/#](https://www.tamerinst.org/en/), and\or **Sesame Workshop** <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/press-room/press-releases/new-arabic->). The books will be selected in collaboration with professionals in the field of literature for young children.
2. Investigating the feasibility of the intervention delivery, participants' recruitment, and engagement in the intervention and study.
3. Evaluating the impact of the Book-Sharing programme on parents' and children's outcomes by conducted a small randomized controlled trial - RCT. The small RCT study will investigate the impact of the intervention on improving parent-child interaction (increasing parental sensitivity to the child's needs and reducing unintuitive and neglecting actions), in addition to promoting child's outcomes (Language, attention and socio-emotional development). This will provide us with preliminary data on the potential benefits of the intervention for caregivers and their children.

**Methodology**

**Study design and setting**

This pilot study will employ a randomized controlled trial with two arm feasibility groups. The study will be conducted in one refugee camp in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank (Al-Amari <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/amari-camp>). As the Palestinian community is a conservative community and mothers tend to be the main caregiver of the child in the early stages of the child's development, the current study will be conducted among mothers only as the main caregivers of the children. The study will recruit N = 30 dyads of mother and child, N = 15 dyads in each arm (accurate and final sample size will be calculated later). Participants will be allocated randomly to either the intervention or a wait list control group. Outcomes' measures will be completed by participants at three points of time: 1. At baseline (before the delivery of the intervention – 1-2 weeks before the intervention), 2. Post-intervention (after the intervention was completed) and 3. At follow-up (6 months following the completion of the intervention). The questionnaires of the study will be completed by the mothers – about themselves and their children.

The current pilot study will involve a mixed-method research design In addition to completing self-report questionnaires, the participants of the study will be asked to take part in a focus group for mothers. The focus group will be conducted among N = 8-12 mothers, at the end of the intervention. The focus groups aims at capturing the experience of the mothers in participating in the intervention. In addition, the focus group will look at the mothering experience in a context of a refugee camp and conflict affected settings – challenges and needs.

The participants of the study will be recruited in collaboration with the UNRWA professionals in the refugee camp (<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/integrating-mental-health-within-unrwa-family-health-team-model>). We anticipate the sessions to be delivered in one of the centers of the UNRWA in the camp to facilitate the access for the mothers and their children.