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# Parenting in times of refuge: A qualitative investigation

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## Abstract

This qualitative study sheds light on how the different phases of refuge and resettlement shape parents' perceptions of their parenting. We used in-depth interviews to examine parents' accounts of how war and refuge gave rise to different stressors, and how these in turn shaped parenting. We interviewed 27 Syrian refugee parents recently settled in the Netherlands (16 families) twice, using a grounded theory approach. We distinguished five phases of refuge, namely prewar, war, flight, displacement, and resettlement. During flight and displacement, stressors associated with financial and material losses appeared to induce parental empathy for children's suffering, which seemed to increase parental leniency. Stressors emerging from family separation during displacement, however, were reported to burden parents and to lead to uncertainty, which seemed to compromise parental warmth and sensitive discipline. While narratives suggest that families reacted in similar ways during the phases of war, flight, and displacement, differences seemed to emerge during the resettlement phase. Some parents stated that in resettlement, they experienced post-traumatic growth (e.g., increased compassion for their children) and were more autonomy supporting than before the war. Other parents seemed to struggle with accepting and supporting their children's emotions and appeared to resort more readily to parental control. Our findings suggest that emotional

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exhaustion plays a key role in how parents viewed their parenting changed during refuge, and that individual differences in parents' abilities to recover from emotional exhaustion played a key role in shaping parenting in resettlement.

#### KEYWORDS

Emotional Exhaustion, Parenting, Post-Traumatic Growth, Refugee Process, War Exposure

Fleeing one's war-torn country places immense financial, logistical, and psychological stressors on families. These stressors impact families on multiple fronts, including parents' ability to provide adequate psychological support for their children and to reestablish trust (Leyendecker et al., 2018; Timshel et al., 2017). Fleeing, or the process of becoming a refugee, encompasses multiple phases: preflight, flight, and resettlement, during which refugees face different stressors that often accumulate and interact to shape their adaptation (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Lustig et al., 2004). To thoroughly understand how the process of becoming a refugee shapes interactions between parents and children, we need to consider stressors experienced by refugee families along the entire process (De Haene & Derluyn, 2018). This is relevant because if perceived changes in parenting are due to temporary stressors, parents' perceptions of their parenting might further change if some of those stressors were alleviated.

## War-induced stress

War-induced stress refers to pressure placed on families that is caused by problems triggered by the war, such as family separations and loss of financial resources (Hill et al., 1949). War-induced stress disrupts daily family life, increasing the focus on survival needs, and reducing families' sense of control over their own lives (Sim et al., 2018; Somasundaram, 2003). Such contextual changes can influence parenting. Parenting involves the behaviors that parents engage in attempting to influence and support the development of their children (Baumrind, 1996). Parents suffering high levels of uncertainty and fear, as triggered by war, might fear for their children and therefore become overprotective and constricting, in day-to-day interactions with their children (Dekel, 2004). In addition, parents might have limited emotional and cognitive resources available to emotionally support their children (Leyendecker et al., 2018).

In addition, changes induced by the war, such as financial struggles, can adversely impact parents' mental health and marital relationships (Haj-Yahia & Clark, 2013; Williams, 2011), which can lead to increased harshness and hostility in parent-child interactions (e.g., the Family Stress Model; Conger et al., 1992; James, 2010). For many families, living in impoverished conditions is a new realization (Sim et al., 2018; Williams, 2011). Sudden increases in financial burdens can trigger role strain, where parents view themselves as inadequate and incapable of living up to their previously identified parental roles (Goode, 1960; Merry et al., 2017), which is associated with less nurturing and engaged parenting (Berryhill, 2016).

War also comes with trauma. Children's direct exposure to violence and parental exposure to violence both contribute to children's maladjustment (Eltanamly et al., 2021; Fazel et al., 2012; Rousseau et al., 1998). One way of explaining this is that when parents and children are exposed to war-related trauma, together, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms can be triggered, in both parents and children. This means parents (or children) might not

only develop PTSD symptoms due to direct exposure, but might also suffer secondary traumatization due to living with a child (or parent) who has also been exposed to trauma. This relational trauma dynamic can make it challenging for parents to regulate their own emotional states, and those of their children's, exacerbating the adverse impact of trauma on children (Relational PTSD; Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001). This also suggests that trauma that originates outside of the family could impact parental availability and responsiveness (De Haene et al., 2010) which could buffer or exacerbate the impact of the cumulative war-induced stress on children's mental health (Eltanamy et al., 2021; Lustig et al., 2004).

While prospective research on the developmental course of PTSD in refugees is scarce (Comtesse et al., 2019), evidence suggests that contextual factors play a role in the maintenance—and even the onset—of PTSD in refugee populations. More specifically, longitudinal studies show that daily stressors (e.g., lack of access to medical care or uncertainty about the future) were related to the maintenance of PTSD (Eytan et al., 2011) or even a steady increase in PTSD over time (Roth et al., 2006). Such daily stressors were the strongest predictor of adverse mental health 11 years after the war (Comtesse et al., 2019). Other studies however show an opposite pattern, with PTSD decreasing over time (e.g., Priebe et al., 2013). This seems to suggest that rates of PTSD might vary depending on the stressors families are dealing with along the different phases of the refugee process. An important correlate of PTSD is lack of emotional availability with their children (Van Ee et al., 2016). It is therefore important to disentangle the role of unique stressors during specific phases of the refugee process on parenting (Vaage et al., 2011), which necessitates a move beyond a pathological stance to also investigating factors that relate to healthy adjustment among refugee populations (Rousseau et al., 1999; Sigal, 1998).

## Refuge-induced stress

Seeking refuge in foreign cultures can present families with different stressors. Confrontation with a new culture leads to acculturative processes (Berry, 1986) where parents might engage in different cultural socialization practices to impart their cultural identity in their children (Roubeni et al., 2015). And while children identify closely with their parents' cultural orientations (Vietze et al., 2020), acculturation gaps still exist between parents and children (Berry, 1986; James, 2010; Telzer, 2010). When children retain fewer values from their native cultures, and more from the host cultures, parents might worry that their children will lose their cultural heritage, potentially giving rise to parent–child conflict (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). In addition, children could also act as language and cultural translators for their parents, threatening the parents' authority, reversing parent–child roles, and potentially increasing family disagreements (Betancourt et al., 2015; Osman et al., 2016; Timshel et al., 2017). This could lead some parents to be more harsh and controlling when dealing with their children, in an attempt to regain their status, such as the case in some migrant families (Rasmi et al., 2017).

In addition, parents' perceptions of their competence in their role as parents and in their ability to effectively influence the behavior of their children (Parental Self-Efficacy; Coleman & Karraker, 2000) can be compromised by their loss of control and acculturation gaps when families become refugees (Ali, 2008; Williams, 2011). Low parental self-efficacy, in general populations, is associated with more harsh and controlling discipline and less responsivity, monitoring, and support (Jones & Prinz, 2005); however, we do not know whether this also holds for refugee families.

Several factors influence a family's adaptation to war- and refugee-induced stress (e.g., Hill, 1971). First, the nature of the hardship to which the family is exposed. It is not only how much trauma but also what kind of trauma families have been exposed to that play a role in shaping parenting (Eltanamy et al., 2021). Second, a family's resources such as tangible assets, social

support, and psychological health can shape the impact of stress on parenting behaviors and cognitions (van Ee et al., 2012). Finally, the meanings families make of hardships influence a family's adaptation to war-induced stress (Hill, 1971). If parents make positive meanings of the events and they do not view such stressors only as threats to their family's status, goals, and objectives (e.g., viewing fleeing homeland as an opportunity to have a new start), parents might actually experience positive changes following such horrific experiences instead of only negative ones (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

## The present study

The war in Syria erupted in March 2011 resulting in close to 6 million refugees at the time collecting the data for this study (United Nations [UN], 2018). The Netherlands has been receiving an average of 100,000 refugees per year since 2016 (Macrotrends, 2021). The decision on an application takes between six and 15 months (Immigration and Naturalization Service [IND], n.d.b), which if accepted grants refugees a temporary residence permit, the right to apply for family reunification, and three years to demonstrate active engagement in learning Dutch and integrating in the Netherlands (IND, n.d.a).

In the present study, we aimed to improve our understanding of (1) the different war- and refuge-induced stressors that parents experience during preflight, flight, and resettlement; and (2) parental accounts of how these stressors, in turn, shaped parenting along the refugee process for recently-arrived Syrian refugee families in the Netherlands. To get a more precise understanding of how various extreme stressors shape parenting within families, we studied the entire refugee process. That is, how does the addition and removal of various stressors—along the different phases—change parenting within the same families, and what differences exist between families. We focused specifically on younger children (i.e., 12 years or younger), because adolescence signals the beginning of a phase transition marked by changes in parent–child dynamics (Granic et al., 2003). By focusing on younger children, we were able to understand parental accounts of sources of disruptions to parent–child dynamics that are separate from this phase transition. We used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allowed us to study the different phases in the refugee process in-depth, without relying on an a priori defined theoretical classification of parenting behaviors and cognitions.

## METHODS

### Recruitment

The study was approved by the institutional review board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via Dutch language schools for children and adults, by organizations and volunteers working with Syrian refugee families. The first author met with potential participants or with volunteers working with Syrian refugee parents, and introduced the study, its objectives, and the time commitment parents had to make. Interested parents were contacted to set a date and time for the interviews. Of the ( $N = 30$ ) parents who were approached to participate, three parents declined participation, two did not want to be tape-recorded, and one was later excluded because the family spent some time in Libya prior to relocating to the Netherlands, where war experiences might have been partly different from Syria.

## Participants

Participants were 27 parents from 16 families (16 mothers; 11 fathers). Parents were between 27 and 53 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38.1$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.2$ ), had, on average, just over three children aged up to 21 years. We interviewed parents specifically about children younger than 12 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 7.6$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.4$ ). Participants were all Arab Muslims and primarily born to Syrian parents (73%). A total of 27% were of Palestinian origin but had lived their entire lives in Syria. The Syrian population is 85% Arabic, 87% Muslim and primarily born to Syrian parents 99% (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2018). On average, participants were highly educated in comparison with Syrians in the Netherlands (Dagevos et al., 2018) and Syrians in their home country (The Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2018). Seven percent of our sample had between 6 and 9 years of formal school education, 52% had a high school certification, and 41% had a university education. Families, on average, arrived to the Netherlands 22 months prior to the interviews. All families had a residence permit, and all but two families were living in social housing (provided by the Dutch government). Two families were still housed in central shelters for asylum seekers. Interviews were conducted between July 2017 and May 2018.

## Procedure

Participants were interviewed twice, with approximately one week (range 5–14 days) between the two interviews. When both mother and father expressed interest in participating in the study, both parents were interviewed together. Meeting families twice allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the families and thus allowed more in-depth interviewing. Spacing the interviews around a week apart also gave time for families to reflect on their parenting, which was then discussed in the second interview. Each interview lasted around 90 min (range 49–119 min). Interviews were conducted by the first author in the participants' native language. After the interviews, the interviewer wrote down her reflections on the interview (e.g., aspects about parenting that were not clear and were therefore worthy of investigating in second interviews). Interviews were tape-recorded. Three translators, who had previous experience translating research material, listened to the Arabic interviews and then translated, and transcribed them directly into English. Random segments of the interviews were selected by the first author to check translation accuracy. No major changes were made to the translated text.

In the first interview, we inquired about the families' demographic information (e.g., age, number and ages of children, years of education, and ethnic background). Because we were interested in understanding how war-induced stressors impacted parenting, we devoted the first interview to understanding parenting prior to the war. During the second interview, we asked parents to reflect on changes in their parenting behaviors, emotions, and self-efficacy during the different phases. Specifically, statements about parenting were extracted from the first interviews, and parents were asked to contrast them along the different phases they went through. This helped focus data collection and fill conceptual gaps (Charmaz, 2006). For example, parents who reported reading bedtime stories to their children in prewar times were asked whether they also read to their children during the war, while fleeing, in displacement, and in resettlement. A pilot interview was conducted with one resettled refugee mother who was not part of the study, to test the interview questions, and fine-tune interview questions where necessary. No major changes were made based on that interview.

## Bracketing

Prior knowledge and preconceptions can influence how data are collected, analyzed, and reported (Rolls & Relf, 2006). To minimize such potential biases, bracketing—the “process by which the researcher draws awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 88)—was a core aspect of the research process.

This process was conducted in two phases. The first author listed her preconceptions regarding Syrian refugee families and discussed them; first with someone from outside the field but from the same culture as the research participants; and second, with the research team. These two phases of bracketing were designed to discuss cultural preconceptions, and the scientific and cultural knowledge of the interviewer. In addition, after every interview, the first author wrote down her reflections on preconceptions experienced during the interview. This helped to set those preconceptions aside in second interviews and while analyzing the data. Codes that reflected “bracketed” preconceptions (e.g., permissive parenting) were avoided. Instead, we used objective descriptions (e.g., letting children choose when to go to bed). This process was ongoing and allowed us to maintain a reflexive stance and distance our preconceptions from the research process (Rolls & Relf, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

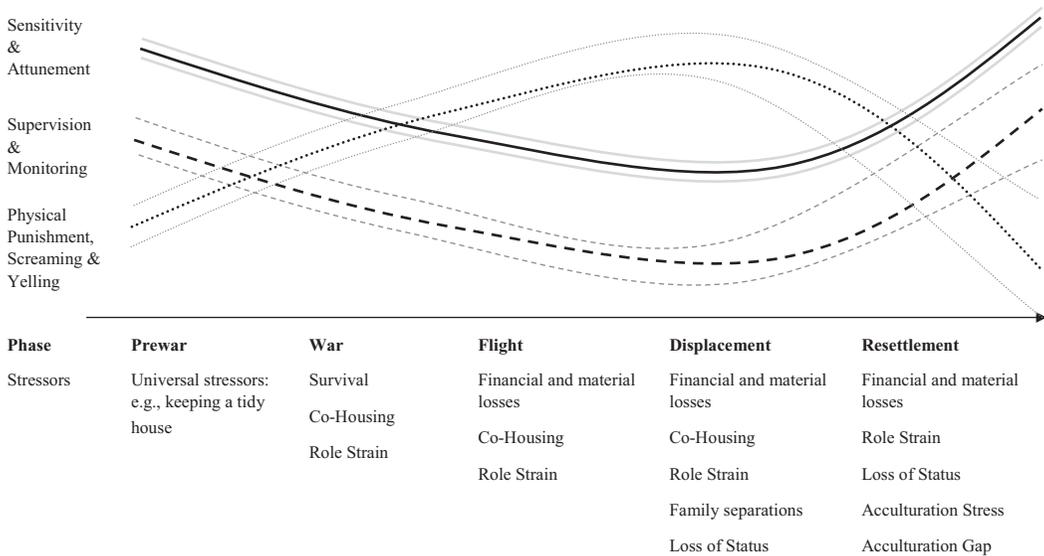
## Data analysis strategy

We used a grounded theory approach, because our aim was to work toward generating theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding was conducted while data collection was ongoing, to allow us to tailor questions to saturate different codes (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Holton, 2007). We connected key concepts using axial coding (Green & Thorogood, 2014). This process involved constant comparison within (i.e., same interviewee) and between (i.e., different interviewees) data segments and took place over three phases (cf. Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, open codes (e.g., expression of love) were assigned to data segments, which were coded into as many categories (e.g., parental warmth) as possible. Second, data segments were compared within and between each other to identify properties of categories (e.g., categories concerned with parental behaviors; cognitions; emotions). The first, second, and third authors discussed the open codes and the creation of categories. Discrepancies between codes and categories were resolved by discussion.

## RESULTS

Families reported five distinct phases: prewar; living under war conditions; flight; displacement; and resettlement. Stressors that impacted families the most across phases were as follows: financial and material stressors, family separations, and loss of status. Different stressors shaped parenting in different phases (Figure 1). Prewar times appeared to be characterized by a sense of safety and normalcy, which were disrupted by the war. During war, once residential neighborhoods and schools were bombed, safety seemed no longer to be guaranteed, and random arrests of young men appeared to be common. For safety, many families then fled their homes with multiple relocations which was often accompanied by co-housing with other family members. When families seemed to have lost hope to return to their homes, they sought prolonged displacement either within or outside of Syria. During displacement, most fathers (75%) left to apply for asylum in European countries. These family separations usually extended for over a year, after which mothers and children reunited with fathers in the Netherlands. In resettlement, some parents seemed to struggle with a loss of status and difficulties acculturating to the hosting culture. The following paragraphs first describe pre-resettlement and then resettlement stressors. Within each category, the role that individual stressors seemed to have in changing parenting is elaborated on, both within and between families.

Overview of results on differential impact of war-induced stressors on parenting



**FIGURE 1** Overview of results on differential impact of war-induced stressors on parenting. *Note.* The gray lines are shown to illustrate variability in responses between participants. Solid lines represent sensitivity and attunement; dashed lines represent supervision and monitoring; and dotted lines represent physical punishment, screaming, and yelling. Lines were created based on frequency counts of statements by parents

## Pre-resettlement

### Financial and material losses

#### *Co-housing*

Many families reported living with other family members to limit their expenses. This appeared to increase conflicts between adults and between children, increase interference from other family members in parenting, and more generally reduce the privacy families once had. This appeared to increase parents' stress levels. For example, parents seemed to find it hard to set limits to their children as grandparents often overruled parents' limit-setting. Parents reported feeling frustrated for being unable to discipline their children as they wanted. "My daughter was very spoiled by my parents, so I had a hard time raising her the way that I wanted to," indicated Jailan (Mother). Compromised privacy seemed to reduce chances for one-on-one attention with children. "There was no privacy, [...] There was no time to play with them anymore," said Reem (Mother). Some grandparents seemed to have a large role in caring for children while housed together. Those children seemed to form stronger bonds with their grandparents and had more conflicts with their mothers "You are not my mom, Nana [grandma] is," said Basma (Mother).

#### *Role strain*

Financial strain also seemed to induce role strain as parents perceived that they were no longer able to provide for their children like they once did, creating a state of disequilibrium between familial demands and family resources. As one father, Marwan, puts it: "This financial situation ... made me upset. I was no longer able to afford the demands of my children ... Suddenly you buy your child second-hand clothes." Parents therefore appeared to view their provider roles less positively than they once did.

To reduce the impact of reduced financial means, some parents reported working despite dangerous settings, while others mentioned relying on previous savings or financial assets to avoid that their children would realize their new underprivileged situation. Still, parents seemed aware of the impoverished status their children were in, which apparently led to feelings of helplessness, and reduced feelings of parental self-efficacy. “[My daughter was hospitalized] but I couldn't stay with her, it was very expensive,” said Hala (Mother). Parents seemed to try to compromise for the emotional difficulties their children were going through by punishing less, or by overlooking behaviors they had previously disciplined. Examples of this are allowing children more screen time and ignoring things such as an untidy room or loud play. “I always felt like I wasn't doing enough for her, so I let her do whatever she wanted [...] it was out of my hands,” said Ahmed (Father).

## Family separations

Family separations—when husbands fled to Europe to apply for asylum—seemed to impact both fathers and mothers. Fathers mentioned that they only communicated with their children in telephone conversations or text and voice messages. Fathers reported feeling helpless and unavailable for their children during that time, sometimes doubting their decision to flee Syria and leaving their families behind. When reunited, fathers seemed to try to make-up for their unavailability during separation by letting their children sleep next to them, or by engaging in fun activities such as teaching children how to use roller skates or ride a bicycle. That is, family separations seemed to make fathers show more parental warmth when reunited with children in resettlement. “While I was here and they were away I was aching from inside because they were deprived. I wanted to correct this situation... when we were reunited, they used to sleep next to me,” said Tamer (Father).

Mothers seemed to suffer for having to perform more household duties than they were used to prior to family separations. They also reported having to deal with a high level of uncertainty—awaiting the reunification—without their husbands' psychological support. These stressors seemed to reduce mothers' abilities to deal with their normal day-to-day demands of parenting. They therefore reported reducing their interactions with their children, in order to focus on other tasks: “I just wanted her [my daughter] to leave me alone,” said Marwa (Mother). This suggests that mothers engaged less with their children, and their provision of warmth (e.g., taking the time to listen to a distressed child) was greatly reduced. In addition, their tolerance for misbehaviors seems to have reduced, which appears to have translated into an increase in punitive discipline, and even the onset of physical punishment for some families. That is, family separations and the demands of single parenting seemed to make mothers display less parental warmth and increased parental harshness and hostility.

## Resettlement

### Loss of status

Becoming war refugees, families seemed to lose their previously held social status. While several used to work as engineers, teachers at international schools, or in senior management positions, they reported not being able to work in comparable positions in resettlement and had to start their careers all over again. Parents reported that they do not like being seen as refugees. “The word ‘refugee’ annoys me. I'm not a refugee!” said Reem (Mother). Older fathers specifically reported a lack of hope for themselves. They appeared to feel they had made the right decision by moving to a new culture, but mainly hoped for a better future for their

children, and not necessarily for themselves. Such loss of status seemed to translate into more equality in parent–child relations, something parents seemed to struggle to accept. “Imagine I do my homework and check the answers with my son, he corrects me,” said Amira (Mother).

## Acculturation stress

In resettlement, parents seemed to struggle with acculturation stress. Families reported experiencing difficulties learning the language, understanding certain social expectations (e.g., how to plan social visits). This appeared to make parents feel stressed and overburdened, like what they felt in displacement. “You left the people you love, your country. You're living with your children a new life in a new society, a new language, a new life. It's full of negatives,” said Esmat (Mother) as she compared her life in resettlement to her life in Syria.

In contrast to when displaced however, these feelings of stress and being overburdened seemed not to translate into less engagement or harsher discipline. The regained certainty and stability that came with settling in the Netherlands and family reunifications seemed to buffer against this. Despite the stressors, most parents appeared to actively spend time with their children, and to rely more on communication and removal of privileges to discipline children than prior to resettlement. “I have become more aware. I mean, I listen ... I began to try to understand them more, accept the things that they do,” said Reem (Mother).

## Acculturation gap

Related to acculturation stress was the fear parents seemed to have that their children might adopt values of the host culture which contradicted their own. This was specifically the case for parents with pre-adolescent children, whose faster integration in the host culture than their parents seemed to have created an acculturation gap. Parents appeared to be confronted with their parenting practices that were sometimes different from those typical of the host culture, seemingly leading them to question their practices. For example, parents suggested that they feared that their long-adopted techniques emphasizing a hierarchical familial structure with boundaries between parents and children were no longer valued in the host culture and might actually be harmful for their children, possibly pushing children away toward the more egalitarian host culture. While most parents seemed to have felt fairly confident about themselves as parents in Syria, many of them seemed insecure about themselves as parents in resettlement. Some parents suggested that they encouraged open communication about different cultural values (e.g., having a boyfriend or same-sex marriage). Other parents, however, appeared to try to reduce their children's adoption of Dutch cultural values by controlling their children's behaviors, such as refusing birthday invitations and preventing their children from engaging in activities in which the child's new friends engaged (e.g., Halloween trick or treat, applying nail polish).

## Post-traumatic growth

There seems to be a positive impact on a large proportion of families. For example, family separation seemed to make some parents value their children's presence more. In addition, parents' realization that they could have provided their children with a better future, had the war never erupted, appears to have increased their empathy for their children. “They've lost those past 3 years of childhood,” said Esmat (Mother).

These acquired perceptions meant that parents seemed to seek more active engagement with their children, display more warmth and affection, be more child-centered, and make

punishments milder than prior to the war. For example, parents commented on symptomatic behavior (e.g., bedwetting) from their children's standpoint, suggesting that they acknowledged their children's frustrations with such symptoms. Some parents thus reported being more tolerant for their children's misbehaviors and seemed to support their independence and agency, more so than before the war. "When I interacted with other communities and other people ... I came across a lot of people who could ... I don't know, I mean I used to be strict in dealing with my daughters... here, I began to treat them differently," said Reem (Mother).

A smaller proportion of the families reported neither an increased compassion for their children, nor a need to redefine parenting priorities. These families seemed to report more on their caretaking tasks and providing structure for their children. When they talked about their children, they seemed to do so more from a parent-centered perspective. These parents seemed to focus less on children's independence and agency, as suggested in them deciding on their children's clothing or hairstyle, or asking their children to take care of younger siblings. One father—Ahmed—mentioned how he told his daughter that they "shouldn't be the only ones helping them [younger siblings]. You should also help us [parents] with them."

### Accumulation and dissipation of stress across phases

Along the different phases, stressors seemed to accumulate or dissipate (Figure 1). Accumulation of stressors appeared to peak during displacement when families were separated while fathers were applying for asylum while not knowing when they might regain a sense of stability. Parents also mentioned that they felt worried and seemed to have lost control over day-to-day decisions. They reported being emotionally exhausted, which played a key role in explaining how war-induced stress seemed to impact parenting. For example, parents seemed to be more irritable in response to what they previously assessed as normal child behavior. "No matter how patient you are and how well you know what you have to do and what you shouldn't do, you're tense and charged, and they're children [they normally make mistakes]," said Esmat (Mother).

In resettlement, the regained stability and the relief due to family reunification seemed to work to change the make-up of accumulated stressors. While the amount of stressors did not appear to reduce from displacement, the nature of the stressors seemed to be qualitatively different. Many parents seemed to recover from the emotional exhaustion experienced during displacement. Despite the stressors, some parents reported seeking opportunities for further education, volunteering at various organizations, and putting extensive effort to learn the language, which seemed to work to reduce the impact of loss of status. This seemed to be particularly the case for more skilled parents (e.g., language proficiency or with more years of education). "A new language to learn, but I master English, so I was ... I worked as a translator with them [shelter house] ... We enjoyed it. It was nice," said Reem (Mother).

Stressors in resettlement seemed to not negatively impact parents as it did in previous phases. In fact, many parents appeared to be more engaged in their children's lives, to spend more time discussing, talking, explaining and using logic to deal with problems, and to rely less on forceful or punitive measures in comparison to previous phases. "The financial situation did not get better, but the psychological situation got a 100% better," said Marwan (Father).

## DISCUSSION

Studying families that have undergone extreme stress in the refugee process provides a unique understanding of how different war- and refuge-induced stressors impact the lives of parents and their children. To this end, we interviewed Syrian refugee families in the Netherlands on

the various stressors they had faced in different phases of their journey from war-torn Syria to the Netherlands, and their narratives of how these stressors impacted their everyday parenting.

Families distinguished between their experiences in five, rather than three, phases along the process of becoming a refugee (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Lustig et al., 2004). Based on their narratives, we split the preflight stage into prewar and war and distinguished displacement from flight. They referred to flight as a separate phase in itself, giving it the name “life out of a backpack!” and to displacement as living in a neighboring country. Stories of parenting during war, flight, and displacement were marked with a fair degree of homogeneity between families (Figure 1). In other words, stressors such as shortage of finance, co-housing, role strain, family separations, and loss of status seemed to influence accounts of parenting in rather similar ways among parents. Families reported that they had to focus on survival, where they prioritized things such as caretaking activities, leaving little room for individual differences in parenting. First, parents viewed that their active engagement with children (e.g., reading to children, engaging in play) dropped. Second, parents mentioned they were less able to supervise their children's whereabouts. Our findings echo those of previous research where displacement stressors reduced parents' ability to attend to the needs of their children (Ajduković & Ajduković, 1993). They are also in line with findings of higher incidence of mental health problems among parents in displacement settings than in resettlement (Alfadhli & Drury, 2016; Bogic et al., 2015). Finally, parents reported that behaviors such as screaming, yelling, and physical punishment steadily increased along the different phases of refuge, to reach a peak during displacement, which is something reported often in displacement research (Sim et al., 2018; Timshel et al., 2017).

At first sight, these findings might seem at odds with previous research that showed that parents living in chronic war conditions tried hard to offer emotional support to their children despite their own distress (Pagorek-Eshel & Dekel, 2015) and increased their monitoring and supervision of their children (Dekel, 2004). Differences in exposure duration might help explain these seemingly opposing findings. Parents living in chronic war conditions might have adapted to the constant threat and therefore were able to offer adequate emotional care and monitoring (Dekel, 2004; Pagorek-Eshel & Dekel, 2015). Participants in our study seemed to have been living in stability prior to war eruption and might have shown to be an initial response to war marked by a reduction in parental warmth and sensitivity, as well as monitoring and supervision, which dissipates over time.

Stories of parenting in resettlement, however, seemed to be more different between families. This echoes previous research that consistently reports varying degrees of adjustment among refugee populations (e.g. Betancourt et al., 2015; Fazel et al., 2012). Satisfaction of basic needs, illustrated by the afforded safety and the regained stability, seemed to allow some families to exercise their own agency in parenting (Self Determination Theory; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This builds on previous work that showed that war refugees who have experienced trauma together with their children showed reduced conflict with children in resettlement (Rousseau et al., 1998). Other families however mentioned mainly trying to control their children's behavior. Such divergent accounts of parental responses to stressors in resettlement seemed related to children's age and parental feelings of self-efficacy. For example, parents of older children seemed to be more concerned about their children's acculturation than parents of younger children, a pattern also evident among refugee and non-refugee immigrant parents (Calzada & Eyberg, 2002; Osman et al., 2016). Moreover, parents who appeared to feel a stronger sense of parental self-efficacy seemed to use more communication-based strategies and to empower their children more than parents who seemed to feel less efficacious, reaffirming the link between parental self-efficacy and parenting characterized by emotion regulation and planning (Márk-Ribiczey et al., 2016).

Emotional exhaustion can be used to further understand such seemingly divergent accounts of parenting in resettlement. Some families seemed to recover faster than other families from

the emotional exhaustion experienced in previous phases. Specifically, some families (e.g., those with language proficiency) appeared to put their resources to use to acquire new skills, seek new opportunities, or support their children's integration in the Dutch culture, seemingly engaging in “a gain-spiral” (Betancourt et al., 2015). Indeed, individuals who can exercise control and experience mastery tend to recover from emotional exhaustion (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnetag et al., 2010). In our study, these parents seemed to engage more in parenting practices that tapped into warmth and involvement (e.g., play, communication, and discussion), and less in parenting practices that tapped into parental control (e.g., physical discipline).

Our findings suggest that families generally show a certain degree of resilience despite adversity. War- and refugee-induced stressors seemed to have therefore worked for some families to increase their sense of compassion for their children, to increase their appreciation of life, to rely more on faith as a source of support, and to redefine their parenting priorities. Those findings support the proposition that some individuals might experience growth after going through trauma, questioning whether “trauma is necessarily a handicap” (Rousseau et al., 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and stand in line with research on holocaust survivors where resilience despite adversity is a common occurrence (Sigal, 1998). Apparently, the experience of living through war along with ones' children changes parents. In our case, it seems that post-traumatic growth is reflected by parents' perceptions about positive increases in family cohesion and perceived reductions in using physical discipline.

Our findings do not come without limitations. First, our sample is of low ethnic diversity. Despite recruiting participants through multiple channels, we did not encounter any Christians, Shiites, or Kurds who represent different minority groups among the Syrian population. While this homogeneity possibly allowed us to reach saturation faster, our findings cannot be expanded beyond the experience of Sunni Muslims. In addition, our assessment of parenting in phases prior to resettlement might have been compromised by its retrospective nature. Parents were asked to recall their parenting practices over a period of 7 years, an exercise that might have been subject to different types of recall bias (Coughlin, 1990; Hardt & Rutter, 2004). It is important to highlight that in our study, parenting stress does not reflect an objective assessment but rather reflects parents' perceived stress. Parents might nevertheless be affected by their own perceptions of how they once were and how they currently are as parents. In other words, parenting stress levels are influenced by those biased appraisals (Crnic & Low, 2002).

Despite these limitations, several strengths give us confidence in our findings. First, as we aim to compare how parents perceive the effects of accumulation and dissipation of stressors along the different phases of refuge on their parenting behaviors and cognitions, we need to study them within families. Our study captures exactly that through analyzing those perceived changes within families. Second, the two-interview format strengthened the relationship with the interviewer, which was evident from a generally more open reporting in second interviews as compared to first interviews. Third, we have captured both mothers' and fathers' perspectives, affording us a more balanced view and voice of the experiences of refugee fathers, who are currently underrepresented in the literature (Williams, 2011). This was particularly evident when parents gave examples to support an argument made by their spouse or through contrasting their own views to those of their spouses. Finally, through bracketing, we tried to reduce the methodological, ethical, and emotional challenges that come with studying sensitive topics and populations (Rolls & Relf, 2006).

Future research needs to focus on the long-term impact of the aforementioned stressors on parenting. Our current study mainly captures a snapshot of how recently resettled refugee parents perceive their parenting has changed, but whether such perceived changes sustain as families stay longer in resettlement, or whether parenting might take a different turn, is yet to be uncovered. Also, factors such as racial discrimination, loneliness, and difficulties finding a job could contribute to maintaining mental health adversity in refugees in post-conflict

settings (Johnson & Thompson, 2008). Future research might also look more closely at the role of children's age in changing parenting practices. That is, some of the perceived changes we witnessed in the current study, such as granting more autonomy support, may reflect natural development due to children getting older, and may not be driven by life in resettlement alone. Future research might also benefit from a close inspection of meaning-making of trauma as one protective mechanism in parent–child interactions.

Clinicians supporting refugee families resettled in high-income countries need to pay special attention to the complex interplay between different stressors experienced prior to migration as well as post-migration (Bogic et al., 2015). The seemingly different responses to stress in resettlement highlight this, while stressing the importance of reducing the impact of post-migration stress in resettlement (Hynie, 2018). Moreover, supporting refugee families in gaining different kinds of skills that can support their integration in host cultures can be vital (Betancourt et al., 2015). In addition, interventions targeted at improving parents' resilience might consider allowing parents to reflect on strengths gained despite the adversity they have been through, allowing participants to create their own meanings of their experiences (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2014). Finally, the overall sense of loss that appears to be experienced in resettlement calls for the need to improve refugees' parental self-efficacy. A search for their individual strengths can provide a strong base for supporting their parental self-efficacy, something that we believe speeds up their recovery from emotional exhaustion. Perhaps, in this way, we can ease the suffering of parents in their final destination on the road to refuge.

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