

Increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder among children with immigrant fathers

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Children born in Finland who had an immigrant father were two times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than those with two Finnish parents, discovered researchers from the Research Centre for Child Psychiatry at the University of Turku in Finland. Researchers stress that schools and clinicians should become more aware of intergenerational transmission of trauma.

Post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) is a trauma-and stressor-related disorder that occurs when an individual is exposed to any traumatic events. Individuals with PTSD develop symptoms such as re-experience of events, avoid stimuli, negative alterations in cognition and moods, and hyper-arousal.

"In this population-based study we showed that if [children](#)'s fathers had migrated less than five years before the birth of their child, the risk for PTSD diagnosis in children was almost twofold," says Doctoral Candidate Sanju Silwal from the Research Centre for Child Psychiatry who is the main author of the paper.

Highest risk of Transgenerational Trauma in Families with North African or Middle Eastern Background

The study showed that risk for PTSD diagnosis was two times higher among children with immigrant fathers born in North Africa or the

Middle East.

"The finding is likely to be related to the fact that immigrants from that part of the world are often entering Finland as refugees. The whole immigration process for them may be a [traumatic experience](#) as it usually involves various burdening experiences during the trip, and even after arrival to the host country, it may take years before receiving the asylum decision," Silwal says.

According to Silwal, it is important to note that the study included a heterogeneous group of immigrants, and refugees could not be distinguished from others who migrate to Finland for study, work, or based on family ties.

Professor of Child Psychiatry, Dr. Andre Sourander from the University of Turku says there is increasing evidence of intergenerational transmission of trauma among holocaust survivors, veterans and refugees.

"Moreover, parental traumatisation might impair parenting capacities and attachment relationship with their children and increase the risk of traumatic events in the family," Dr. Sourander states.

Sourander leads the Finnish Prenatal Studies research group focusing widely on family risk factors during and after pregnancy which are associated with key childhood psychiatric and learning disorders.

Findings Promote Early Identification

According to Silwal, the findings are significant for both clinical practice and research.

"If left untreated, [traumatic events](#) can increase the risk for other

psychiatric disorders and cause serious disability and chronic illness such as depression and cardiovascular diseases," she notes.

The findings may advance early identification of problems and thus lighten their treatment.

"It is important that clinicians who treat traumatised immigrant parents are aware of the possible trauma transmission in their children. Schools and clinicians need to pay more attention to understand the cultural contexts and behavioral problems of immigrant children, to which the trauma exposure may impact. With the increasing [immigrant](#) population in Europe, studies on PTSD among second generation immigrants are of great importance," she says.

The register-based study included all 3,639 children born in Finland between 1987–2012 and diagnosed with PTSD.

More information: Sanju Silwal et al. Parental immigration and offspring post-traumatic stress disorder: A nationwide population-based register study, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2019.02.002](#)

Provided by University of Turku

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