

**A new generation:**

**How refugee trauma affects parenting and child development**

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)



Dit boek is een uitgave van Arq Psychotrauma Expert Groep en vormt een onderdeel van de Arq boekenreeks.

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**A new generation:  
How refugee trauma affects parenting and  
child development**

**Een nieuwe generatie:  
Hoe trauma's van vluchtelingen ouderschap en de  
ontwikkeling van het kind raken**

**(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)**

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht op gezag  
van de rector magnificus prof. dr. G.J. van der Zwaan, ingevolge het besluit van  
het college voor promoties in het openbaar te verdedigen op  
vrijdag 29 november 2013 des ochtends te 10.30 uur

door Elisa Blankers

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# Preface

How the experience of traumatic events may affect an individual is a much-visited topic in psychotraumatology. Traumatization and treatment alike have been widely researched and discussed, usually in relation to adults. The question of whether and how the traumatization of parents impacts on their children is also hardly a recent one.

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Yet the book you are about to read demonstrates that new insights into this matter can still be gained. It explores the complex dynamics of the interaction and attachment relationship of traumatized asylum seekers and refugees and their young, non traumatized children from a new perspective.

While the concept that children may be impacted by the traumatization of their parents was introduced as early as 1975, debates about the nature of this impact, if any, on the parent-child bond have continued to this day. Arguing convincingly the existence of such an impact, the present study investigates in depth what the effects of parental traumatization are on children. Before the attachment relationship between parent and child is explored, however, the effects of the traumatization itself on both the parent and the child are examined. The parents' posttraumatic stress symptoms are studied, alongside the psychosocial functioning of the children, including any developmental difficulties they might present. Particularly innovative here is the adoption of a combination of measuring instruments: the study used a unique combination of parental report, involving both fathers and mothers, and close observation of parent-child interaction and attachment. Apart from, strikingly perhaps, showing no significant gender differences between the fathers' and mothers' level of emotional availability to their children, this approach was also of great importance in that it not only confirmed the findings of earlier studies but was also able to lend these greater objectivity.

What especially emerges from this study is how traumatization may cause parenting limitations, and how these, in turn, may disrupt a young child's development. But, importantly, no significant link was found to exist between

parental PTSD symptoms as such and disconnected parenting. Yet the strong link between disconnected parenting behaviour and disorganized child attachment was confirmed, in marked contrast to what had previously been supposed. It is amply demonstrated that what the parents' traumatization affects is their ability to respond sensitively to the child, which is of prime importance in helping the child to develop emotional and behavioural self-regulation. Thus, it is via extreme insensitive parenting that the pathway towards disorganized or insecure attachments runs. Along similar lines, it was found that trauma symptoms have a direct relation with child's well-being.

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Clinical psychologist Elisa van Ee's research is based on a study of 80 asylum seekers and refugees and their children aged between 18 and 42 months. This group came from diverse cultural backgrounds and varied in terms of the length of their stay in the Netherlands. Thus, this study does not so much consider specific cultural parenting customs as adopt a broader, indeed universal, view of the attachment relationship between traumatized parents and their non-traumatized offspring and the mechanisms underlying this. In line with this wider stance, the author of this profound study raises a number of conceptual issues related to the subject of trauma and attachment. For instance, given that many asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in a so-called 'condición migrante', which is exacerbated by feelings of insecurity and lack of control, particularly if they are still awaiting a permanent asylum status, the question arises whether the preferred strategy for their children lies in, for example, an ambivalent or rather in a secure attachment to their parents.

Van Ee also extensively discusses the implications her findings have for clinical practice. Not only are therapists urged to also address the matter of parenting when treating parents, and to do so in particular with mothers of children born of rape. She also advocates that treatment of parents take the child and parent-child perspectives into account as well as the adult emphasis and that its focus should lie in restoring safety and helping the parents resume their parental role, even if their own PTSD requires therapy.

What makes Van Ee's study significant is the combined approach to and perspective on trauma and attachment. It greatly contributes to our understanding of parenting behaviour in the wake of extreme life events, and at the same time offers new opportunities and directions for future research into the complex dynamics of the parent-child relationship. In the working alliance

with our patients and the hard labour of the treatment, the reenactment of the unsafe and insecure attachment of the past is a crucial element. The working through of this aspect in the treatment needs emphasizing again and again. From this perspective the author sheds light on the path of the therapeutic process and helps the therapists and our patients to persevere in the difficult process of treatment in a safe and secure environment.

It is with great pleasure that we present this study and share its important findings. We feel it has increased our understanding of the interplay between traumatized parents and their non traumatized offspring and of an important new approach to the care extended to these.

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Chair Board of Directors Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group

To my children Tifara and Isandro,  
and the hope that is born with every new generation

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