A PSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT OF PALESTINIAN CHILDREN

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In recognition of all the efforts that have been devoted to the completion of this study, Save the Children hopes that the results of this assessment will assist in the design and development of future projects to improve the quality of life for Palestinian children and their families.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, reports of increased trauma amongst Palestinian children have multiplied. In order to provide a better understanding of the psychosocial well being of Palestinian children, the following assessment was undertaken by Save the Children-US and the Secretariat of the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children (NPA), a Palestinian NGO, in collaboration with Save the Children-Sweden. Funding was provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The study was designed primarily to gain insight into how the children themselves view their situation, and to provide them with an open forum in which to speak. During the months of July and August 2002, a representative, stratefied, random sample was chosen from cities, villages and refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. Sixty-one percent (61%) of those interviewed live in the West Bank and 39% live in Gaza. Girls and boys were represented in equal proportion.

The study results attest to the children's ability to be their own spokespersons. They were able to clearly identify risk factors in their lives, as well as the strengths, coping mechanisms or resiliency that they and their families possessed. Parents and teachers were also interviewed, in order to ascertain their views regarding the children's psychosocial well being, as well as their own coping mechanisms when relating with children in the current environment. Together the findings form a nuanced picture of the Palestinian children's well being to date.

The psychosocial well being of Palestinian children is under significant strain, mainly due to the omnipresence of violence in their surroundings and the resulting pervasive feeling of danger in their lives. The majority of sampled children (93%) reported not feeling safe and exposed to attack. They fear not only for themselves but also for their family and friends. Almost half of the children (48%) have personally experienced violence owing to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict or have witnessed an incident of such violence befalling an immediate family member. One out of five children (21%) have had to move out of their homes, temporarily or permanently, overwhelmingly for conflict related reasons. Children in Gaza were generally more affected than children in the West Bank. Children in urban and refugee camp settings were also more affected than children in rural areas.

The stress suffered by Palestinian children is accentuated by the widespread feeling that parents can no longer fully meet their needs for care and protection. This feeling was shared by more than half of the children (52%), especially the somewhat older children in the sample (59%). Besides the financial and material limitations, and the lack of control over external events, the care Palestinian children receive from their caregivers - parents and teachers mainly - is further compromised by the fact that the caregivers themselves are stressed and frustrated, having therefore less emotional and mental energy to provide the necessary psychosocial support to their children.

Under such circumstances, it is difficult to remain a carefree child. It is therefore not surprising that nine out of ten parents report symptomatic traumatic behavior amongst their children, ranging from nightmares and bedwetting, to increased aggressiveness and hyperactivity, as well as a decrease in attention span and concentration capacity. A minority of parents (approximately 5-8%) report that their children have become fixated on thoughts of death and revenge.

Despite their adverse circumstances, and the resulting strain on their well being, Palestinian children continue to exhibit resiliency, most evdenced in their optimism regarding their own future. Indeed, the majority of Palestinian children (70%) continue to feel that they can improve their own lives by developing academically first and foremost, but also personally and socially. By the same token, a majority (71%) of Palestinian children continue to channel their energy into "positive, constructive and non-violent activities".

Resilience is also evident in the central role that schooling continues to play in the lives of Palestinian children. Although parents and teachers report that they are alarmed about decreases in students' attention spans and rising absenteeism, the participants themselves clearly continue to value their education. Ninety-six percent (96%) see it as their main means to improve their situation, both presently and in the future. As such, they also view education as one of their main means of peaceful resistance against the occupation.

Concomitantly, the school has grown in importance as a social forum, and source of support, for Palestinian children. Under present circumstances, they find it difficult to meet with their peers in recreational, non-formal and social gatherings. Parents say that the environment outside of the home is unsafe and threatening, and that with the exception of going to school they do not encourage their children to leave home. The reduction in access and freedom is frustrating to children who are in need of opportunities to enjoy and express themselves, and who need to learn how to deal with the situation by sharing their views with other children. In fact, the discussions revealed the extent to which children use the little recreational time they have to discuss and exchange views with friends, rather than to play.

In addition to focusing on schooling, Palestinian children generally continue to engage in activities that are constructive and positive in nature. This includes helping their families, becoming pro-active players/helpers in their community, or participating in peaceful demonstrations that avoid confrontations with Israeli soldiers or checkpoints. Thus, while the majority of children consider it important to "actively resist the Israeli occupation", most (71%) focus on peaceful, non-violent ways to this end. A smaller group (21%) tends more towards withdrawal, blocking out the conflict around them by keeping themselves busy at home, or by focusing on protecting themselves from danger. Only a minority of children (7%) focus on violent means of resistance, believing they need to be fearless and aiming to become soldiers/martyrs in the future.

The violent and unpredictable external environment is undermining parents' sense of control. Overall, those interviewed clearly indicated that responsibility and care of their children resided with them, even though approximately half of them (43%) feel they are not able to fully provide the needed care and protection for their children under the current situation. All

parents felt that significant changes needed to occur at the political and economic level before they would be able to effectively protect and provide for their children again.

Despite expressing frustration about their diminished capacity to act as caregivers, parents remain focused on the importance of supporting their children through these difficult times and on preventing them from suffering long-term psychological damage. To this end parents are understanding about changes in their children's behavior and generally accept traumatic symptoms as a "normal response" to a stressful environment. Like their children, they consider it essential that schooling continues, and understand the importance of recreational play. They are also aware of the importance of interaction and dialogue with their children, although not all find it easy to put this into practice. While a majority of parents (65%) reported significant interaction with their children through dialogue and a smaller group (12%) reported some interaction, the number of parents who do not (23%) remains significant. Also striking is the extent to which parents seem unaware of the fact that they are key role models for their children. This likely reflects their own decreasing levels of confidence and their lack of empowerment.

Palestinian teachers also remain focused on supporting their students and identified a number of strategies that they rely on to this end. Nearly all those interviewed (90%) suggested that student achievement improved when they gave them more time to express emotions and thoughts in the classroom, when children were allowed to carry out physical exercises and art, and when they were allowed to confront and deal with their emotions in the context of classroom activities. In general, teacher discussions indicated that they were aware of the importance of helping children cope with the situation and felt that the school was essential in facilitating children's adaptive functioning. Accordingly, the relationship between teacher and student had generally improved since the start of the Intifada, as reported by 57% of teachers and 60% of children. Only 12% of teachers and 10% of children said that it had deteriorated.

Based on the findings of this assessment, it is suggested that in order to help Palestinian children cope with their current predicament, a three-pronged, interactive intervention strategy be adopted that focuses collectively on children, parents and teachers/schools. Its aim is to help children and their caregivers cope with daily stresses and dangers, thereby assisting children in developing effective resilience in the face of negative life events. Specifically, the study recommends the following:

1. Programs should be introduced that attempt as much as possible to re-establish a sense of "normalcy" in the lives of Palestinian children by providing them with greater opportunities to participate in on-going recreational/ cultural/sport and other non-formal activities. Support should be extended to existing community-based initiatives that seek to provide such opportunities.

2. In addition to formal support aimed at strengthening their ability to identify psychological symptoms and deal with behavioral problems among their children, parents should receive help and guidance in accessing material and financial resources, and should also themselves be provided with psychosocial counseling and support.

3. In light of their increasingly pivotal role in the lives of Palestinian children, schools should be assisted in broadening their extra-curricular facilities, turning them into "multi-functional centers" where children can study, play and socialize throughout the day, with a view to bolstering their "sense of normalcy". In addition, counseling and support offered to parents should also be extended to teachers.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a considerable literature dealing with the impact of war and other traumatic events on the development of children. It is widely acknowledged that for children to develop "normally" and be "psychosocially healthy", a number of their basic needs must be met.[1] Children who undergo traumatic experiences of war and conflict usually develop special needs - for understanding, emotional resolution, security, a sense of belonging and self-worth.[2] Several factors determine how they cope with their ordeal, including the type, degree and duration of the stressful life events, the child's subjective understanding of them, and the child' stage of developmental growth. The social ecology of a child's life is also important; this includes parents, families, peers, schools, as well as religious and other community-based institutions.

Children's cognitive and affective processes can be affected by conflict, imprinting emotional, psychological and physiological scars. This may lead to behavior characterized by distrust and hostility and can prevent the child from developing into a productive and social adult and citizen. However, under the right circumstances , a child's cognitive and affective processes can also serve as a source of strength, building "resilience" and increasing their ability to "bounce back" from unusual stress or trauma. This is especially the case when a child can count on continuous support from parents, family, friends and/or other community members and social institutions.

Research into resilience has shown that most children can cope fairly well with low levels of risk. Most of the time, their development and ability to reach their full potential will only be jeopardized when risk accumulates.[3] The West Bank and Gaza represent such an environment where risk factors accumulate for young people.

Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, death and injury have become part of a child's daily life in the West Bank and Gaza, impacting the young directly or indirectly. According to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, approximately 23,000 Palestinians have been injured and 2,400 have died since September 2000; approximately 18% of the deaths are of children under 18 years old[4]. Children have also been exposed to violence in the form of the destruction of homes, bombing and shelling raids, imprisonment, razing of agricultural property, the uprooting of olive trees, the construction of fences and barriers around or through their communities, as well as stringent curfews and closures confining them to their homes during prolonged periods of time. Economic decline, growing poverty, and the lack of financial and/or physical access to quality health care have furthermore had a detrimental effect on the

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1 The 'normal' development of a child implies their attainment of 'normal' thought and mental processes, appropriate emotional states, constructive and proactive behavioral patterns, positive social interactions, and a positive self-regard and outlook on their environment and life in general.

2 Ressler, E., J.Tortorici, and A. Marcelino. (1993), Children in War: A Study for Unicef, UNICEF, New York.

3 Boothby, N., (1992) "Displaced Children: Psychological theory and practice from the field", Journal of Refugee Studies, 5 (2), (106-122); Boothby, N. (1996) "Mobilizing communities to meet the psychosocial needs of children in war and refugee crises", in R. Apfel and B. Simmon (eds.) Minefields in their hearts; The mental health of children in war and communal violence (149-164), New Haven: Yale University Press; P.J Bracken, and C. Petty (Eds.) (1998), Rethinking the trauma of war. London: Free Association Books.

4 Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) at www.palestinercs.org, June 30, 2003. According to the database, as of May 31, 2003, 412/ 2,338 deaths or 18% were children under 18 years old.

health and nutrition status of Palestinian children. A USAID-financed nutritional assessment in 2002 found that the incidence of acute malnutrition amongst children under 5 years old is 13% in Gaza and 4.3% in the West Bank[5]. Finally, thousands of children have not had regular access to their schools due to closures, curfews, and destruction or confiscation of schools.[6]

Following the Israeli military offensives in Spring 2002, reports about increased trauma amongst Palestinian children multiplied. Watchlist, an international NGO, and the Women's Center for Legal Aid & Counseling (WCLAC), a Palestinian NGO, found increases in sleeping and eating disorders, concentration problems, crying, bedwetting, feelings of hopelessness, and preoccupation with death.[7]

Against this background, Save the Children-US and the Secretariat for the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children (NPA), a Palestinian NGO, decided in March 2002 to embark on an assessment of the psychosocial well being of Palestinian children, in collaboration with Save the Children-Sweden. The assessment is part of a USAID-financed project in which Save the Children-US and the NPA work together to provide support to Palestinian children through community-based psychosocial support programs. The West Bank and Gaza-wide program highlights, among other things, the importance of self-esteem and coping skills in the lives of children.

The main aim of this qualitative study was to learn what children have to say about their situation and to understand how they are dealing with the conflict situation that permeates their lives. The study was designed to provide children with an open forum in which to speak. To this end focus groups and open-ended questions were used to stimulate discussions. Questions were devised to address not only the problems children are facing but also their responses to these problems and their coping skills. Additionally, parents and teachers were interviewed to obtain their views regarding children's psychosocial development, and to gain insights into how they are coping with their roles and responsibilities in the context of the prolonged conflict. The study was not designed to determine the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinian children, nor to project the long-term developmental consequences of the conflict on these children.

It is hoped that by listening and learning from the children themselves, mental health professionals and community workers will be in a better position to design and implement programs on their behalf.

> "...it is imperative that we deal with the long-term impact of violence on our society in the present, specifically focusing on the implications for women and children, who are the most vulnerable groups. If not, we run the risk that attitudes which are developed in response to the external political threat will be internalized and come to be embedded in local value systems and culture"[8]

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[5] Abdeen, Z., Greenough, G., Shahin, M., Tayback, M., Nutritional Assessment of The West Bank and Gaza Strip, 2002.

[6] Palestinian Ministry of Education, Report on conditions within the educational sector, January 2003.

[7] WCLAC, Report on the Situation of Palestinian Children and Women, Jerusalem, August 2001.

[8] Quote from WCLAC Report on the Situation of Palestinian Children and Women, August 2001.

II. METHODOLOGY

A technical and administrative team of researchers from Save the Children-US, Save the Children-Sweden, and the NPA were responsible for developing the research goals, tools, and methodology. The researchers included:

- Dr. Cairo Arafat, Director of the NPA Secretariat, is a child psychologist and former UNICEF officer who has developed policies and programs for disadvantaged children in several parts of the world. She has conducted previous research on children and violence in the West Bank and Gaza,

- Dr. Neil Boothby, Professor of Public Health at Columbia University and Senior Advisor for Save the Children-US, is an internationally recognized expert on the impact of political conflict and population displacement on children,

- Ms. Una McCauley, Consultant for Save the Children-Sweden, has conducted numerous assessments and evaluations on children and the impact of armed conflict on their well being,

- Ms. Ulla Blomquist, Director of Save the Children-Sweden in the West Bank and Gaza, is a social scientist, who has worked extensively with children in armed conflict and difficult circumstances in many parts of the world,

- Ms. Dahab Musleh, a trained children's social worker with expertise in managing research projects through her previous work with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), was responsible for research administration, including ensuring that the research methodology was carried out as specified by the primary researchers.

The primary researchers identified the following study objectives, approaches and tools.

1. Research Objective and Methodology

The study's primary objective was "to learn more about the children's psychosocial functioning in the current crisis situation". Questions it sought to answer included the following: How do they perceive the situation? What does it mean to them? How are they coping with life events? To whom do they turn for help and support? What are their expectations for the future?

The team believed that qualitative methodologies, and in particular focus group discussions, were the most appropriate research tools to meet the study's objective. Focus group research is based on the conduct of organized discussions with selected groups of individuals. Because questions in focus groups tend to be open-ended, this type of qualitative research can provide in-depth information on what people think and believe - unlike other research tools, such as

surveys and questionnaires, which usually limit people's responses, thereby predetermining to a certain extent the findings of the research. Focus group research enables and allows for the inclusion of varying perspectives and insights into how children, parents, and teachers understand life events and share these understandings with one another. It would not be feasible to draw out in such a way the respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions, using surveys or questionnaires.[9]

The principal limitation of the data thus gathered is that, by its qualitative nature, it is not easily translated into quantifiable measures. The method of data analysis and processing in the present study is outlined below (Section 6, Data Processing). In addition, it should be noted that each focus group may differ in terms of the exact content of the discussion, based upon both the external environment and the characteristics of that group, such as the group facilitator, the dynamics of the group, and dominant characters within the group.

2. Sample Selection

A representative, stratified, random sample of children aged between 5 and 17 years from the West Bank and Gaza was selected to participate in the study. The sample was based on population estimates and distribution from the PCBS' Population, Housing and Establishment Census (1997). Sample distribution took into account (1) age group (5-12 years and 13-17 years), (2) gender, (3) districts and, (4) place of residence (village, camp, or city). In addition, the sites selected included both areas that had suffered high levels of conflict - i.e. Israeli military incursions of March and April 2002 - and areas that had not.   Sample selection was thus designed to correspond with the characteristics of the general population of children living in the West Bank and Gaza.

The children were selected on a random basis by the school counselors conducting the survey. Provided with information on how many children, gender, and age group to target, school counselors would enter the village, camp, or city selected for participation, divide it into quarters, and go to every tenth home to ask if there was a child meeting the specification/ parameter (eg. male child between the ages of 8-12 years). If the family did have a child, or more than one child, meeting the requirement, they were informed of the purpose of the study and asked if they were willing to have their child participate. Those who were not interested were not solicited further. In order to be eligible for participation, children had to present a signed parental consent form.

In total 1,266 children were thus selected, constituting a representative sample of the population of children living in the West Bank and Gaza.

Parental focus groups were in turn assembled by asking participating children to take home invitations for both fathers and mothers to meet on a set date. In total, 449 parents were selected. Teachers' focus groups were set up by forwarding invitations to the five participating school districts. In total, 70 teachers were selected.

In the case of all sample categories, whether children, parents or teachers, more people asked to participate than could be accommodated.

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9 Powell, R, H. Single, H and K. Lloyd. (1996) "Focus groups in mental health research: Enhancing the validity of user and provider questionnaires", International Journal of Social Psychology, 42 (3), (193-206)

3.   Questionnaires

The team developed three sets of questions - targeting children, parents and teachers, respectively. The questionnaires were specifically developed for use in focus group discussions. Data was collected within a focus group format and not from each individual separately. This allowed the participants to identify with the group and to share their experiences and living conditions with one another. Each set of questions was divided into three sections. The first section focused on basic issues regarding health, nutrition, service availability, educational practices, housing, and information on types of traumatic experiences that had been faced within the last year. The questions were intended to gather basic information and to stimulate conversation.[10] The second and third sections included questions that were more open-ended in nature: the second section focused on the respondents' understanding of the situation, their feelings and beliefs. The third section focused on factors within the respondents' lives that they perceived to be protective, including the availability of social support networks and the importance of maintaining routine in their lives.[11]

4.   Fieldworker Training

Fieldwork Supervision Manual: A fieldwork supervision manual was developed, detailing information on the research objective, expected output, selection methodology for the focus groups, interview mechanisms, and the follow-up required after the completion of each interview. The manual also included general remarks on communication skills for the focus group moderators and facilitators, as well instructions on technical and administrative tasks to be performed by the supervisors of these field workers. Based on the manual and the three questionnaires, training workshops were organized in various West Bank and Gaza districts. The NPA was responsible for this task, supported by trained supervising counselors from the Palestinian Ministry of Education and researchers from the YMCA-Beit Sahour, who had previously carried out focus group research in the West Bank and Gaza. Due to continuing curfews and closures, the training team found it difficult to organize workshops in some regions. In such instances, field workers and supervisors were oriented by telephone, using the training manual as a reference.

Supervisors: Because curfews and closures make travel extremely difficult in the West Bank and Gaza, the research team designated one supervisor for each district - typically a school counseling supervisor from the Ministry of Education or UNRWA. The Fieldwork Supervision Manual was designed to enable these individuals to ensure that data collected by the field workers was reliable and conformed with valid standards.[12] Guided by the Manual, the supervisor trained moderators and facilitators and ensured that focus groups were selected according to the specified criteria. They also submitted reports on each of the completed focus groups.

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10 Children were asked to tell what they had for breakfast, if they liked it, and if they would prefer something else. The purpose of these kinds of questions is to get children, parents and teachers motivated to speak about something easy and non-threatening. It also allows them to start thinking about their right to express themselves, their beliefs and opinions without being criticized.

11 Copies of the questionnaires for children, parents and teachers are available, upon request, from the Secretariat of the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children (NPA): npapal@palnet.com

12 Copies of the Field Supervision Manual are available, upon request, from the NPA: npapal@palnet.com

Moderators and Facilitators: A total of 49 facilitators and 49 moderators were trained to conduct the focus group discussions. The former were responsible for being present at all times to record the discussions, both in writing and on tape. The latter were firstly tasked with making the group participants feel comfortable during the discussions. To this end they explained the purpose of the study, encouraged all participants to voice their opinions and regularly assured them that information would be kept confidential. The moderators then led the ensuing discussions, keeping the participants on track and encouraging further discussion and clarification when appropriate. The moderators were also prepared to provide appropriate referrals to children, parents and teachers who required counseling or support. All the moderators were qualified school counselors familiar with the communities in which they worked.

5.   Focus Groups

Data collection took place in July and August 2002. Almost all focus groups were held in schools, clubs, or community centers, allowing field workers to interview children, parents and teachers in familiar community settings. Each focus group discussion was held separately, and at no time were children interviewed in the presence of parents or teachers. Similarly, teacher and parent focus groups were held separately.

In total, 95 children's focus groups were held with an average of 10-15 children per group (1,266 children in total). In addition, 35 focus groups for parents were held (449 parents in total). Five additional focus groups were held with teachers from the Ramallah, Jerusalem, Hebron, Gaza and Khan Yunis districts (70 teachers in total). Parent and teacher focus groups were primarily used to gain further understanding and insight into the lives of Palestinian children.

6.   Data Processing

At the end of each interview the moderator, facilitator and supervisor together reviewed the handwritten notes and taped material. The results were then consolidated onto two data forms: one for quantitative information (first section) and one for qualitative, open-ended information (second and third sections).

The data from section one were analyzed as individual data, given that the questions in that section had lent themselves to recording individual responses. The data from the second and third section were analyzed as group data. As mentioned, the second set of questions invited children to put forth their ideas and perceptions of the situation, their feelings and understanding of what is happening around them. Each of the responses put forth within the group discussion was tallied and ranked by total. The data collectors were asked to record the three most prevalent responses for each question provided by each group, in order to facilitate data analysis and allow sufficient weighting of group responses. As to the final section of the questionnaire, children were first asked to analyze what they considered to be protective factors in their lives. After the discussion, the children were asked to prioritize

their responses and, as a group, rank them in order to gain a clearer understanding of what are their primary protective factors and suggested actions to better their living circumstances.

Supervisors were responsible for reviewing the completed group data forms; ensuring that they were completed in accordance with the methodology specified in the fieldwork manual; and confirming that they were technically sound. In the case of missing or invalid data, the supervisor returned the forms to the data collectors, asking them to verify the correct response. In cases where data were unverifiable, the group data were discarded and a second discussion was convened with a new group.

The Statistical Program for Social Science (SPSS) program was used in entering data and examining their consistency. Data analysis included abstracting quantifiable measures from the entered data.[13]

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13 SPSS is analytical software that provides analysts with the foundation for project planning, data collection, data access, data management and preparation, data analysis, reporting and deployment.

III. **C**HILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

1   Introduction

The primary objective of the study was to gain a more precise understanding of how Palestinian children view their life situation, and how they are coping with these life events. To this end, a total of 95 children's focus group discussions were organized throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Between 10-15 children participated per group, under the joint guidance of a trained moderator and facilitator. The groups consisting of younger children (5-12 years old) were generally gender mixed; the older groups (13-17 years) were mostly gender-specific.[14] Each session lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

Guided by open-ended questions posed by the moderator, the group discussions allowed children to elaborate on negative events and risk factors in their lives and the ways in which they deal with them. The discussions then focused on potential protective factors in the children's lives - including parents, friends, teachers and the local community - and the extent to which the children felt the support these factors provided was adequate. Finally, the sessions allowed the children to talk about individuals who they viewed as their role models, as well as their expectations for the future.

Moderators reported that the children were articulate in expressing their views. They also appeared to enjoy the opportunity to openly and freely reflect on their futures, and found the sessions to be informative and engaging. Many said they felt relieved to know that others thought and felt like they did, others were somewhat surprised to learn about some of their peers' experiences. The participants' enthusiasm was particularly evidenced by the eagerness with which they spoke out about their problems and their repeatedly expressed desire for more such sessions, as voiced especially by the older children.

Sample Profile

1,266 children between the ages of 5 and 17 were involved in the study; 42% of the sample (534/1,266) were between 5 to12 years old, and 58% (732/1,266) were between 13 to 17 years old. There was a 50/50 gender split. Sixty-one percent (775/1,266) of participants lived in the West Bank and 39% (491/1,266) in Gaza. Most, or 39% of the children, lived in cities, 33% in villages, and 28% in refugee camps. The sample used in the study is representative of the overall population of children in the West Bank and Gaza by age, gender and locality of residency.

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14 Schools for older children are generally gender-specific and parents objected to discussions with both sexes participating.

Fig. 1: Number of sampled children by age group, gender, type of locality and region

	West Bank cities	West Bank villages	West Bank camps	Gaza cities	Gaza villages	Gaza camps	Total
5-12 years female	48	78	30	26	0	88	**270**
5-12 years male	74	95	15	39	0	41	**264**
13-17 years female	105	101	15	66	15	69	**371**
13-17 years male	74	110	30	56	22	69	**361**
Total	**301**	**384**	**90**	**187**	**37**	**267**	**1,266**

2. Risk Factors

In focus group discussions, Palestinian children identified a number of issues which constitute risk factors in their lives. Broadly, the responses can be grouped as describing problems deriving from socio-economic difficulties on the one hand, and on the other issues associated with conflict - related violence.

Life is Hard

Children's comments clearly indicated that economic and social conditions have deteriorated since the beginning of the second Intifada and that they continue to do so. Generally the participants were open to discussing these changes, clearly identifying the kinds of problems that have emerged and what this has meant to them. The picture that emerged is largely consistent with the prevailing socio-economic reality in the West Bank and Gaza, which is characterized by high and rising unemployment and poverty rates, and concomitantly deteriorating living conditions.

Thirty-two percent (32%) of sampled children reported that their father was unemployed, while 11% said their father worked only part-time.[15] Of those fathers who were still working full-time, the vast majority were civil servants employed by the Palestinian Authority. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the children indicated that their mothers were housewives without access to an external source of income.[16] The remaining 15% of mothers held jobs as schoolteachers, cleaners, dressmakers or (part-time) secretaries. Children reported that they themselves had less pocket money, that their parents had limited resources, and that they had observed changes in how family members interacted with each other.

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15 Note that this understates official estimates: according to the World Bank, unemployment has reached 53% in the Palestinian Territories. The World Bank also estimates that the percentage of the Palestinian population living below a poverty line of $2 per day has jumped from 21% in 2000 to 60% in 2002, and has since risen further. Source: Twenty-Seven Months, Intifada, Closures, and Palestinian Economic Crisis. An Assessment, May 2003 . Note that the research project did not try to elucidate whether respective fathers were "newly unemployed (post-September 2000)" or "previously unemployed (prior to September 2000)". However, many children spoke as if their fathers had been previously employed but were no longer working, reporting such things as: "My father no longer has a job", or "When my father was working things were easier and better, but he doesn't have a job now".

16 Prior to 2000, approximately 10% of Palestinian women were employed outside the household according to PCBS (May 2003). Data available at www.pcbs.org.ps.

Having to move home is another phenomenon widely reported in the focus groups, exaggerated by the ongoing conflict and the exposure of children and families to danger within their homes.[17] One out of five of children (266/1,266 or 21%) reported having had to relocate either permanently or temporarily for conflict-related reasons. Data from previous studies indicated that such relocations were not common before the Intifada. The problem is more pronounced in Gaza than in the West Bank, and is also more prevalent in urban and camp settings rather than rural areas.

Fig. 2: Incidence of temporary or permanent relocation in West Bank and Gaza

Temporary/Permanent Relocation in WB & Gaza	West Bank		Gaza	
21% [266/1,266]	18% [139/775]		26% [127/491]	
	Urban Areas	Camp Areas	Rural Areas	
	26% [125/488]	24% [84/357	14% [57/421]	

This trend of relocation is exacerbating the difficulty of overcrowding: 16% of the sampled children reported living in households with 11 or more people, 51% lived with 7-10 household members, and the remaining one-third lived in households with 6 members or less. Eighteen percent (18%) of the children reported living in homes with 2 or fewer rooms, whereas 35% lived in 3-room homes, and 47% lived in homes with 4 or more rooms. Based on information provided by the 1997 PCBS Census and Housing Survey, overcrowding is a growing problem in the West Bank and Gaza.[18]

Life Is Not Safe

Focus groups discussions revealed the extent to which Palestinian children are aware of the danger and violence permeating their daily lives. The overwhelming majority of children (1,175/1,266 or 93%) reported not feeling safe in general and feeling vulnerable to attack, injury, house demolition or arrest in particular. They not only fear for themselves but also for their family and friends. This is not surprising, given the extent to which the children interviewed had come directly into contact with conflict-related violence.

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17 UNICEF and Palestinian National Authority (2000) The Situation of Palestinian Children, UNICEF.

18 PCBS data from 1997 indicate that there were 6.1 and 7 persons per household in the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. Additionally, there were also 1.9 and 2.1 persons per room in the West Bank and Gaza, respectively.

Fig 3. "Life is Not Safe": Sources of insecurity among Palestinian children

Life is Not Safe	WB	WestBank	Gaza	5-12 years	13-17 years
Perception: "Our Parents Cannot Protect Us"	52% [663/1,266]	48% [374/775]	59% [289/491]	43% [232/534]	59% [431/732]
Witnessing/Experiencing Intifada-Related Violence	48% [608/1,266]	40% [309/775]	61% [299/491]	40% [213/534]	54% [395/732]
Total Destruction/ Sealing of the Home	10% [123/1,266]	7% [53/775]	14% [70/491]	—	—
Suffering Physical Injury	18% [226/1,266]	15% [120/775]	22% [106/491]	15% [81/534]	20% [145/732]
Intifada-Related Death of a Family Member	9% [114/1,266]	9% [68/775]	9% [46/491]	—	—
Arrest of Minimum 3 Hours	5% [57/1,266]	7% [51/775]	1% [6/491]	1% [8/534]	7% [49/732]

Almost half of the children (608/1,266 or 48%) reported witnessing and/or experiencing one or more conflict-related events. These events included home demolitions; shooting and shelling; closures and barriers on their way to and from school or surrounding areas; having parents, siblings, or friends imprisoned, injured, killed; and being under curfew.[19]

Intifada-Related Injuries: One out of every six children interviewed (120 children in the West Bank and 106 in Gaza, or 18% in total) reported that they had been physically injured during the last two years. One out of five children (240/1,266 or 19%) reported having a family member who was injured/disabled, and almost one third of the children (367/1,266 or 29%) reported having a friend/classmate who had been physically injured.

Intifada-Related Death: Almost one out of ten children (114/1,266 children or 9%) reported losing a family member (from the immediate or extended family) through military actions, bombing attacks or assassination attempts, while 16% (203/1,266 children) had friends or classmates who had been killed during military operations.

Arrest: By the same token, 20% of children (253/1,266) had experienced the arrest of one or more family members, while 12% (152/1,266) knew of friends/classmates who had been arrested. Sixty-three participants (5% of the total sample), reported that they had themselves been arrested since September 2000. All were boys between the ages of 5 and 17. Among them, 47 reported being arrested without charge, eight were arrested while participating in demonstrations, and the remaining eight were arrested for other reasons. These included being related to someone who was wanted by the Israeli army, or being in area where the army was conducting mass arrests. The experiences of these children are further detailed below.

19 Most children involved in the study reported that they had not left their village, camp or city since the start of the Intifada. This supports comments made by parents that they keep travel with children to a minimum to avoid the hazards of closures and blockades. This may be why only a small percentage of children reported having come into contact with closures, blockades or barricades.

Children's Experience of Arrest

While six of the 63 boys arrested were immediately released, the remaining 57 were arrested and/or detained for varying lengths of time, minimally three hours. The majority (49) were over 13 years old, eight were 5 - 12 years old.

Of the 57, 44 were released after a few hours while the rest were detained or imprisoned for at least one day. Two boys between age 5 and 12 were detained for more than a week and three reported being sentenced to prison for more than one year by Israeli military courts, during which time they were kept in jails in Israel.

All of the 57 boys described their arrest and eventual interrogation and imprisonment as humiliating. Many said they had been submitted to psychological and physical pressure, including sleep denial. Twenty-nine said they had being subjected to a range of humiliating experiences, including having their clothes stripped off of them, having canvas bags tied around their heads, and being tied to poles. Twenty-five children said that they had suffered physical violence during imprisonment, while three reported being subjected to sexual abuse.

Home Demolition/Sealing: In principle, the home functions and is perceived as a "safe haven" for children. However, this is no longer true for Palestinian children. One out of three (410/1,266 or 32%) participants had seen their house damaged during the Intifada, and one out ten (123/1,266 or 10%) had seen their house totally destroyed or sealed by Israeli forces. These homes were either located close to Israeli settlements, near checkpoints, or in areas that are frequently bombed and shelled. The children's reports are consistent with information that emerged from the parental focus group discussions: only 12% of all parents interviewed (54/449 parents) considered their homes to be safe and 24% (108/449 parents) said that they had been forced to move out of their homes.

In this context, it is not surprising that less than half of all children interviewed (603/1,266 children or 48%) felt that their parents were capable of protecting them. This sentiment was especially prevalent among older children: only 41% of 13-17 year olds (301/732 children) believed that their parents were capable of protecting them, compared to 57% of the younger children (302/534 children). Parents echoed these feelings. They, too, lamented their limited ability to provide for and protect their children and all those interviewed felt that their ability to do so had eroded since the start of the second Intifada (For further discussion of this issue, see Chapter IV.)

3. Protective Factors

The focus group discussions allowed the identification of several active coping strategies that are being utilized by children, as well as key resources in the community that support childhood resiliency. Although providing a wealth of information, the group discussion findings did not allow for a precise breakdown between children from the West Bank or Gaza, between boys and girls, or between younger or older. The information below , thus presents a picture of the outlook of Palestinian children in general.The quantitive information was extracted from the data entered in SPSS.

Self-Efficacy[20] and Guarded Optimism

Fig. 4 Palestinian children's outlook on the future

Outlook on the Future	"Future in general is bleak"	"I can do something about my own future"	"I am unsure about my capacity/unable to improve my situation"
	85% [1,076/1,266]	70% [887/1,266]	30% [379/1,266]

Focus group discussions indicated how Palestinian children are pessimistic about the future in general, as illustrated by their responses to a series of open-ended questions regarding "issues that affect them negatively".[21] However, they remain optimistic about their own personal growth and development, both in terms of maintaining ambitions to undertake professional careers and in their confidence of being able to cope under trying circumstances.

 Out of the 1,266 children sampled, 85% (1,076/1,266 children) felt that the dire situation would remain "as is" or worsen, only 15% (190/1,266 children) were optimistic that the situation would improve. However, when asked about their own future - i.e. their future at school or within the family - children displayed a more positive and hopeful attitude. This was most evidenced by their replies to the question "What do you think will happen in the future...what are your expectations?". In this instance, 70% (887/1,266 children) indicated that they could do something to improve their situation. The remaining 30% (379/1,266 children) reported that they were either unsure of their own capacity to improve the situation or were unable to improve the situation.

Children identified several strategies they use to cope with their situation.

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20 For definition of "self-efficacy", see box below, p.24

21 Specific sample questions put to children included the following: (1) "What kind of events in your life or day to day affairs are bothering or upsetting to you?",(2) "What kind of negative events occur around you?",(3) "Can you describe some bad situations in which you have found yourself, or bad events that have befallen you?"

Fig 5: Coping strategies: what children feel they can do "to make the situation better"

	Self-improvement			
Coping	90% [1,144/1,266]			
Mechanisms	Pro-active & non-violent resistance	Keeping busy	Protecting oneself from danger	Making oneself fearless
	71% [897/1,266]	14% [182/1,266]	7% [91/1,266]	7% [91/1,266]

The overwhelming majority of sampled children (1,144/1,266 or 90%) identified "self-improvement" efforts as their primary means of coping with life events. They indicated that they would continue to work on developing themselves personally and/or academically in order to be able to meet the needs of the future.

In this context, a majority of children wanted to play an active role in resisting the occupation: seventy-one percent (897/1,266 children) reported that they could improve their situation by taking pro-active actions against the occupation. The actions mentioned varied from partaking in awareness raising activities regarding the situation in the West Bank and Gaza, refusing to purchase Israeli goods, helping families in need, and participating in peaceful demonstrations. Continuing their education was another action children identified as an important means available to them to resist occupation. Some mentioned writing slogans on walls.

A smaller group of children (182/1,266 or 14%) were less interested in active resistance, and preferred to participate in activities, such as sports, arts, and family events, as a means to "keep busy" or "to keep their mind off the reality they live in". To a certain extent, these children are seeking to make the situation better by withdrawing from it.

Approximately 7% (91/1,266 children) were focused on learning to better protect themselves when in danger. It is striking that the strategy of "protecting themselves when in danger" was accorded little value or attention during focus group discussions, despite the pervasive feeling of insecurity as reported above. One possible explanation is that most children interviewed view the broader state of affairs as intractable and therefore focus on aspects of their personal lives over which they can still exercise a measure of control.

Finally, another minority of children (91/1,266 children or 7%) noted the importance of making themselves "fearless", and reported wanting to be soldiers in the future and/or develop "weapons like firebombs". Some mentioned throwing stones at tanks or at soldiers. Though a few expressed the wish to become a "martyr", there was little evidence in the discussions that these children had actually internalized a death wish; for instance, a number of them believed they could come back and do other things after having been a martyr. These responses are consistent with the general literature on children in conflict areas, which indicates

that minors who are exposed to armed conflict can internalize the "culture of violence".[23]

Overall, the above findings indicate a high degree of self-efficacy among Palestinian children: that is, the belief that they can achieve a degree of success through their own efforts, at least in the personal, academic and social domains of their lives. This degree of self-efficacy is key to the generally positive outlook of Palestinian children on their own future: their belief that they can do something about their own future is premised on their belief in, and interest in, self-improvement. Self-efficacy has been highly correlated with childhood resiliency in studies of other groups of children growing up in adverse environments, including war-zones[24].

"Coping self-efficacy is defined as a person's subjective appraisal of his/her ability to cope with the environmental demands of the stressful situation… Coping self-efficacy has been correlated with better psychological adjustment following severe environmental stressors such as volcanic eruptions (Murphy, l987), hurricanes (Benight, et al., under review), and military combat (Solomon, et al., l988)."[25]

23 Dyregrov, A., and M. Raundalen. (1987) "Children and the Stresses of War: A review of the literature," in C. Dodge and M. Raundelem (Eds.) War, Violence and Children in Uganda. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.

24 Haggerty, R., Sherrod, L., Garmezy, N., and Rutter, M. (1996). Stress, risk and resilience in childhood and adolescents: Processes, mechanisms and interventions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Macsoud, M., Aber, L., and Coehn, I., (1996) Assesing the impact of war on children. In In R. Apfel and B. Simmon (eds.). Minefields in their hearts; The mental health of children in war and communal violence (218-230). New Haven: Yale University Press

Punamaki, R, and Suleiman, R. (1990). Predictors and effectiveness of coping with political violence among palestinain children. British Journal of Social Psychology, 29, 67-77

25 American Psychiatric Association (l987), Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd ed., rev.). Washington, D.C. For further information please see:

Benight, C.C., Ironson, G., Wynings, C., Klebe, K., Burnett, K., Greenwood, D., Carver, C. S., Baum, A., & Schneiderman, N. (under review). Coping self-efficacy as a predictor of psychological distress following a natural disaster: A causal model analysis. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology.

Murphy, S. A. (1987). Self-efficacy and social support: Mediators of stress on mental health following a natural disaster. Western Journal of Nursing Research 9, 58-86.

Solomon, Z., Weisenberg, M., Schwarzwald, J., & Mikulncer, M. (1988). Combat stress reaction and post traumatic stress disorder as determinants of perceived self-efficacy in battle. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 6, 356-370.

School as a Vital Social as well as Academic Arena

The focus group discussions illustrated the extent to which school plays a pivotal role in children's life and is valued as such. In many ways, responses indicated that children believe that school provides them with the opportunity to work concretely towards improving themselves and ensuring a better future. This is not surprising given the importance of school within Palestinian society, where elders of society have traditionally stressed the value of education as a tool for improving oneself. The vast majority of children interviewed (1,215/ 1,266 or 96%) noted that schooling was an essential aspect of their lives. Only 4% of children (51/1,266) did not share the view that schooling is important for them.

Similarly, the majority also reported that they were likely to continue their education, despite the difficulties in their lives. When asked about their motivation to continue school, children referred first and foremost to the desire for more information and knowledge, second, to ensure a good livelihood, third, to build a solid and valuable social setting for themselves and their families, fourth, as a means of resisting ongoing occupation, and finally to build their community. Only 6% of children said they did not like school and really did not want to return but knew their parents would insist[26]. Approximately 3% of children interviewed reported that they had dropped out of school, either to join the labor force or because they had difficulty completing their studies when invasions, curfews and closures caused continuous disruption.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of school as an academic forum, children also appreciated school as a place where they meet with their friends and enjoy the company and support of their peers and teachers. When the children are at school, they have a chance to discuss events that have occurred in their lives, share these experiences with others, listen to other children and learn better ways of coping. School thus serves to break down the sense of isolation that many children living in conflict situations experience, due to the breakdown of other systems within their lives, and the prolonged times of closure and curfew.

The children generally expected schools to remain open. Their sense of security and safety that each day they will still have somewhere to go and learn and meet with their peers is noteworthy, given that children's education has been severely affected since the beginning of the Intifada. For example, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Education, 498 schools were disrupted and/or closed because of curfews and closures during the past academic year. Additionally 269 school buildings were damaged as a result of rockets and tank shelling since the breakout of the second Intifada, 9 schools have been permanently closed, of which 3 have been turned into military bases. [27]

Nevertheless, there has been a strong community and national emphasis over the last two years on continuing education, keeping schools open, and supporting remedial education programs to help children to catch up with their studies following forced absences. The

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26 This group includes children who understand the importance of school in their lives as well as children who do not recognize or appreciate this.

27 Palestinian Ministry of Education (MOE), Assessment 3, The Effect of the Israeli Occupation on Education from (28/9/2000 - 26/3/2003), available on-line at: www.moe.gov.ps

community has thus sent a clear message to children that school is important and that all efforts will continue to be made to ensure that schools are kept open and that children receive an education.

Community efforts to keep schools open have enabled children to maintain important routines and a measure of predictability in the midst of the conflict. Children wake up each morning knowing they have a place to go, to learn, and to engage with their peers. Predictability, academic achievement, and positive peer relationships are highly correlated with childhood resiliency.[28] Keeping schools open, safe and secure is thus critical to protecting the developmental well being of Palestinian children.

It must be noted, however, that the profile of children at school became less positive during the interviews with parents and teachers. Parents elaborated on the increased levels of fear manifested by children in going to and coming from to school, fear of separation from parents and families, and an inability to concentrate and to study. By the same token, teachers raised concern about a decline in academic performance, and an increase in absenteeism and aggressive behavior (See Chapters IV and V).

Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities are important to children because they provide an informal, non-structured environment in which they can comfortably express thier feelings and thoughts among peers. This can serve as an important source of strength and support in conflict situations. Yet as revealed by the focus group discussion, children's extra-curricular activities have clearly been affected by the current crisis.

Approximately half of the children interviewed (608/1,266 or 48%) claimed that they no longer spend as much time on extra-curricular activities. Activities mentioned include sports, reading and writing, computer games/internet/chatting, watching television, listening to music, drawing, playing outdoors, and going on small trips with parents to visit relatives/friends. A small group of children (80/1,266 or 6%) mentioned that they play Intifada-related games, including playing "martyr" or "Israelis versus Palestinians".[29]

Fig 6. How the conflict has affected extra-curricular activities

Extra-curricular Activities	Interruption in routine	Interruption due to curfews and closures & fear of parents for children's well-being	Intifada – games
	48% [608/1,266]	26% [328/1,266]	6% [80/1,266]

28 Boothby, N. (1996). Mobilizing communities to meet the psychosocial needs of children in war and refugee crises. In R. Apfel and B. Simmon (eds.). Minefields in their hearts; The mental health of children in war and communal violence (149-164). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bracken, P.J. and Petty, C (Eds.). (1998). Rethinking the trauma of war. London: Free Association Books.

Haggerty, R., Sherrod, L., Garmezy, N., and Rutter, M. (1996). Stress, risk and resilience in childhood and adolescents: Processes, mechanisms and interventions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

29 For further details see Chapter IV, section 3

When asked why they no longer pursued extra-curricular activities, many children (671/1,266 or 53%) felt they had insufficient time available, for a variety of reasons, including having to help parents more or needing more time for homework. From the discussions, it also became clear that a significant part of children's free time is spent watching television, leaving less time for extra-curricular activities outside the home. Eighteen percent (228/1,266 children) explicitly attributed their decreased participation to the Intifada-related closures and curfews and inaccessibility to sites of the activities. Others (100/1,266 or 8%) reported that their parents did not allow them to go out after school to participate in activities because they were fearful for their well being. A small percentage of children (6%) noted that they had no place to go to, even if they wanted to participate in these types of after-school activities. An even smaller percentage (3%) reported that they did not participate in any activities because they did not have the funds or did not want to.[30]

Children reported three primary reasons for not playing:

◼ Invasions, curfews and closures, making activity sites inaccessible

◼ Parents preventing children from playing outdoors due to fear of them being hurt, attacked or detained.

◼ Children feel there are no longer safe places to play.

Secondary reasons cited by children for not playing:

◼ Children no longer feel like playing

◼ There are insufficient funds to buy toys/games or children had to spend their free time working/helping parents

These reports by the children were partially confirmed by findings from the parents' group discussions. Half of the parents reported that children were still engaged in recreational activities one to three times per week. According to parental reports, at least one out of three of their children spends considerable time doing extra-curricular activities or participating in summer camp activities. Parents did not go into detail on how their boys and girls spend their time differently, however traditionally boys are more likely to be involved in outdoor activities, while girls tend to be more involved in home-based activities. The parents' group discussion focused more on the play at home and in particular on the so-called Intifada-related games (For further details, see Chapter IV).

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30 It is not to be excluded that the economic factor could be more significant than was reported in the focus group discussions, as children may find it difficult to admit the lack of funds for extra-curricular activities in front of their peers.

Friendships

As noted above, positive peer relationships are a potential source of childhood resiliency, especially for children growing-up in adverse settings. In light of this, the study also attempted to gather information about friendship formation and quality of peer interaction through its group discussions.

The findings show that most Palestinian children establish and maintain friendships within the school environment. Other sources of friendship are neighbors, relatives, and persons from clubs and community institutions like the mosque, church or library. This pattern of friendship parallels the life style of most Palestinian children. As identified in the interviews, children spend most of their time at school, secondly in their homes, neighborhoods, and with members of the extended family and lastly, in children's clubs. These findings are largely consistent with the life patterns of children in other countries. One exception is that the school is playing a more prominent socializing role in the West Bank and Gaza, as noted above. Another exception is that most children did not report spending considerable time with their friends within a home setting, possibly because many live in crowded domiciles.

Sharing feelings and thoughts with their peers emerged as an important coping strategy for Palestinian children. Study participants widely report spending less time playing with their friends and more time talking about recent events largely linked to the conflict, exchanging views on such topics as "what happened the night before," "what was likely to occur," "what they should be doing," and so forth. Politics ranked first as a conversation topic, while play and school were only a distant second and third, respectively. Peer discourse can often provide children with important information about current events and can ease feelings of being isolated in an insecure environment: as such, it is an important coping mechanism. However, the reduction in play time and play opportunities, noted by most of the children, remains a cause for concern.

Role Models

When asked about their role models, children ranked their fathers first, followed by "educated and cultured persons". Mothers were ranked third. Likely, these responses reflect in part the patriarchal aspects of Palestinian society: fathers and males in general are widely seen as decision makers, as exercising control and having access to resources - including access to education. According to national data, men in the West Bank and Gaza tend to be more literate than women, and in 90% of cases fathers tend to be the major breadwinner for their family.[31]

When parents were asked about the role models of their children, they did not mention themselves. Instead, they put national Intifada figures and leaders at the top of the list and "martyrs" second. The Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and President Bush took joint 3rd place as role models children adopt from the perspective of parents. These responses indicate

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31 More research is clearly needed in order to understand the extent to which boys and girls identify different role models and the reasons for this.

that parents are not picking up on the importance and influence of their own behavior on the children. It may also reflect parental insecurity due to their perceived inability to provide for and protect their children.

4. Conclusion

The focus group discussions revealed the extent to which Palestinian children are aware of the risks and hardships they face, and the impact recent events have had on their lives. However, they display a high degree of self-efficacy in the face of such adversity. Many of those interviewed are inclined to try to improve their lives by engaging first and foremost in personal and academic development and involving themselves in social activities. While a majority feels it is important to be part of Palestinian "resistance against the occupation," most are not primarily inclined towards "violent resistance." Instead they focus on pro-active, peaceful strategies to this end. By example, many prefer to boycott Israeli goods rather than wanting to join military actions against Israelis. They also want to participate in activities that show national pride and commitment by caring for the environment, helping others in need, learning more about their country and traditions, and keeping their faith in the future emergence of a Palestinian state in which they hope to become productive and capable citizens.

It is important that concerned authorities and organizations respond to these finding by boosting existing support for personal development, academic achievement, and social, artistic and athletic engagement among Palestinian children. Schools should be a particularly important focus of such efforts. Already, they are playing a crucial role in supporting children's ability to cope with insecurity, threat and danger. Children perceive them as an essential venue for meeting friends, maintaining social relations, as well as acquiring information and skills necessary for their future. Although a majority of children interviewed were pessimistic about improvements in the general situation - whether political, economic and social - they nevertheless wanted to become productive and active members of society and felt that schooling would help them in this regard.

While supporting the personal, academic and social development of the general population of Palestinian children, it is also important to identify and assist the much smaller percentage of these children who are vulnerable to violent ideation. As Graca Machel notes in her book, The Impact of War on Children, "war affects the psychological and social well-being of adolescents at a time of life when they are deeply focused on establishing their identity. In the aftermath of war, many adolescents have great difficulty imagining a future that holds a meaningful place for them."[32] One means of assisting the psychosocial recovery of such children is to encourage positive social interactions with caring adults, and to facilitate participation in pro-active activities that encourage them to express themselves and to act as "helpers" within society. This is a particularly important in so far it strengthens these children's self-image and esteem.

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32 Machel, Graca (2001). The Impact of War on Children. UNICEF. Malaysia: C. Hurst and Co.

IV. PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

In order to contextualize children's perspectives on the ways in which the present conflict has affected their psychosocial well-being, the study also solicited parental input. A total of 449 parents were interviewed in 35 focus groups, each comprising 13 to 15 adults. They were approached through written invitations, which their children brought home from school. The majority of those selected were parents of children who took part in focus group discussions. Each parental discussion session lasted approximately 2 hours.

In the sessions, parents were first posed a set of questions about various aspects of their children's lives, including their health, nutritional status, education, and social/recreational habits. They were also asked about the kinds of social services that were available in their community. They were then asked to elaborate on how they viewed their children's needs, and the extent to which they felt able to meet these needs under present circumstances. Through a second set of open-ended questions, parents were prompted to describe changes in their children's attitude and behavior, as well as their own views about the current situation and its effect on their children's well-being.

In most instances parents were cooperative and willing to speak openly about the difficulties their children were experiencing. In all focus groups, they frequently reflected on their own personal situation and how it had been affected by the ongoing conflict. Hearing other parents speak out about their problems encouraged many of the participants to do the same. Many seemed to appreciate the opportunity to unburden themselves; indeed, a number of moderators said that they often felt they were participating in psychological debriefings rather than data collection.

Sample Profile

Overall, 449 parents representing at least 270 households participated in 35 focus groups across the West Bank and Gaza. The following table details the distribution of participants.[33]

Fig 7. Number of sampled parents by type of locality and region

	WB cities	WB villages	WB camps	Gaza cities	Gaza villages	Gaza camps	Total
Fathers	43	69	25	23	16	60	236
Mothers	34	83	36	32	13	15	213

33 Letters were sent home with children inviting both mothers and fathers to the focus groups. In the majority of cases (approximately 60%) both parents participated.

2. Perception of Risk: "Life is Hard and Unsafe"

Echoing children's reports, nearly half of all parents (195/449 or 43%) felt unable to protect and care for their children: to provide them with food and health care, and also with counseling. They clearly indicated that this was due to the ongoing emergency situation and that this marked a stark departure from "normal circumstances".

"Can you protect and care for your children?"

Parents Report:

- 34/ 35 groups included parents who reported that they could not provide sufficient care for/protection of their children,

- 18/35 groups included parents who replied that they could care for/protect their children,

- 1 parents group, from a rural area in the Southern West Bank where invasions, curfews and attacks had been limited, reported they felt able to meet the care and protection needs of their children.

Specifically, three quarters of all parents interviewed (337/449 or 75%) reported that they had become dependent upon the extended family to help them purchase household foods and supplies. One quarter (117/449 or 26%) reported they were unable to provide sufficient food for their children, even when they were receiving such assistance. They also said that the provision of appropriate health care and counseling services had become difficult. Fourteen percent of parents (63/449 or 14%) said they were no longer able to provide proper health care for their children due to a lack of financial resources, or lack of access to health care facilities. The vast majority of parents (323/449 or 72%) also reported they had no access to appropriate counseling services, although they confirmed that there was a general need for such services in their community. Of the 126 parents who enjoyed some access to counseling services, more than half did not consider the services suitable or of acceptable quality (69/126 or 55%).[34]

Only a small minority of parents (approximately 20-35/449 or 4-8%)[35] reported they still felt in control of their lives, and able to meet the needs of their children. In-depth discussions revealed however that these parents differentiated between internal issues, over which they could exercise control, and external problems that were beyond their control. The former included the manner in which family members treat each other, parenting skills, familial resources, and family support networks; the latter included such problems as closures, lack of work, poverty, violence, and the lack of a national police force for protection in their

[34] 16 out of 126 parents (13%) reported that counseling services were of suitable/acceptable quality, 69 (55%) said they were not suitable/ unacceptable, 21 (17%) said they were of moderate quality, and 20 (16%) did not comment on the quality of services.

[35] Including the aforementioned group in the southern West Bank.

communities. These parents also felt able to protect their children only when they were at home, while the environment outside the home was perceived as unsafe and threatening. Even this small group therefore felt that their own interventions were not sufficient to ensure their children's well-being.

The sense of helplessness amongst parents was particularly evident when the discussion turned to their children's "protective needs." The overwhelming majority (395/449 or 88%) said they no longer considered their homes to be a safe place and that they had on one or more occasions had been forced to seek shelter elsewhere. One out of three parents (300/449 or 67%) felt that violence involving soldiers or settlers was beyond their ability to predict or control. The focus group discussions thus illustrated to what extent the violent and unpredictable external environment is undermining the parents' sense of control in the home.

Parents Report

"Our children are fine while at home, but at any point in time our house could be bombed or invaded and then we will not be able to protect our children or ourselves."

"As parents we try to always give our children a sense that we are in control and can care for them, but our children say to us: you cannot protect us from the bombs, you cannot protect us while we are outside or at school. Something could happen to us or even you and then who will take care of us?"

3. Behavioral Changes in Children

During the group discussions, parents were asked whether they had witnessed changes in the behavior of their children within the last two years, and if so, of what kind. They were then asked to rank these according to their prevalence. The overwhelming majority of parents (400/449 or 89%) reported they had observed changes in one or more of their children (the average number of children in families surveyed in the sample is 5-6). In other words, nearly nine out of ten parents said their children were experiencing psychological distress, manifested in adverse behavioral, attitudinal and/or emotional changes. In the discussions, they attributed these changes to the conflict, specifically violence permeating the life of the family, the deteriorating economic situation, and pervasive closures and other restrictions.

According to the parents, most of the behavioral/psychological symptoms had either first appeared or increased during March and April 2002, when the Israeli army carried out large scale incursions into most Palestinian cities. In most cases (31/ 35 groups), it was noted that the changes were "significant" or "great". Parents also said that not all their children were reacting in the same way; they refrained however from venturing into specifics about particular children, in order to maintain confidentiality. It should be noted in this context that most of the families in the group knew each other.

Children React Differently:

Parents Report

"Our children go through similar experiences but respond differently. Some of our children become anxious and fearful and cling to us, others become withdrawn and depressed. Some of our children donít seem to be affected and go right on with their play."

"I have six children...two don't leave the house, two spend their time watching TV and observing events around them, and the other two are outside playing and enjoying themselves."

In response to the question "Have you noted any behavioral changes or practices in your children within the last few months?" parents characterized and ranked the changes as follows: (1) traumatic/psychological symptoms (noted below), (2) changes in play behavior, (3) negative social behaviors, (4) school affiliated behavioral changes, and (5) recurrent thoughts of death and revenge.

Fig. 8 Parents describe behavioral changes in their children

Parents Report	Behavioral Changes in one or more of their Children				
	89% [400/449]				
	Psychological Symptoms	Change in Play	Anti-Social Behavior	Drop in Academic Performance	Thoughts of Revenge & Martyrdom
	73% [327/449]	48% [216/449]	46% [208/449]	37% [168/449]	6% [28/449]

Symptoms of Trauma

The most frequently reported behavioral changes, reported by 327/449 parents in 34/35 focus groups[36] included: repeated nightmares, sleep disorders, bedwetting, lack of initiative, fear, anxiety, obsessive behavior, hyperactivity, uncontrolled anger/aggression, and loss of confidence and trust in adults. These symptoms were identified directly by the parents, without any prompting from the group leaders.

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36 The one focus group where parents did not report traumatic symptoms was held in a rural area in the Southern West Bank, where invasions, curfews and attacks had been limited.

These findings complement the results of the children's focus group discussions, because in none of these did the children mention any of the aforementioned symptoms or behavioral problems. Though children were not asked directly about them, they were prompted by probing questions, including questions to the effect of how they viewed their own behavior and the changes if any that it had undergone. The children's apparent reluctance to discuss these problems was most likely attributable to the fact that they were in the presence of their peers.

The parents' observations are significant for several reasons. First, they indicate that though parents are themselves stressed, they are still tuning into their children and they are aware of the importance of monitoring their children's emotional state. Second, even though the behavior patterns observed were often bothersome, many parents accepted their "legitimacy" as "normal responses" to traumatic and violent situations, reflecting inner conflict and turmoil in their children. Third, the psychological terminology and depth of knowledge demonstrated by many parents was striking, particularly since 72% of them said they had had no direct access to counseling services. This is attributable to campaigns run in the Palestinian television, radio and print media since the beginning of the second Intifada, aimed at raising awareness about children's psychosocial well being.[37] Indeed, many parents gave examples of shows and materials that had helped them understand what was happening to their children.

Changes in Play[38]

Almost half of all parents interviewed (216/449 parents in 18/35 focus groups) reported changes in their children's play behavior, affecting the type and frequency of play. Mainly, according to the parents, Palestinian children are playing violent games more often, in particular "Intifada games". During these games, children deploy war terminology, e.g. "air attack", "demolition crew coming", "F16", "Apache helicopter", as well as Hebrew words. They also name and imitate Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, fighters, "martyrs" and other personalities they see on television. Some children play Israeli demolition crews wrecking Palestinian houses. However, not all play focuses exclusively on military games - children are also playing Al Jazeera or MBC journalists,[39] or nurses or doctors at an emergency trauma unit. In parallel with the noted increase in war gaming, parents also observed the children were acting in an increasingly aggressive manner toward one another. Some observed violence directed toward friends and siblings. According to the parents, such changes in play behavior are even apparent amongst very young children.

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37 For example, during the second Intifada, the NPA Secretariat, UNICEF, and Save the Children-US have produced eight television spots for Palestinian children and parents that deal with issues of fear, anxiety, bedwetting, and positive parental-child interventions and practices. Save the Children-US and the NPA Secretariat produced an additional four TV spots on how to protect children living in conflict areas. These and a host of TV, radio and counseling shows, as well as printed awareness- raising materials for children, parents and teachers have been featured on national and local TV and radio stations and in newspapers since the second Intifada began in September 2000.

38 In this section, parents discussed play behavior that they witnessed while the children were at home or in their near vicinity. In the previous section, children were talking about extra-curricular activities that are frequently organized after school by clubs, children's groups, and other organizations that provide sports, art, fun activities, drama and music in a more structured environment.

39 Al-Jazeera and MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Corp) are two satellite-based news stations that are popular in the West Bank and Gaza.

Parents report:

"The first word my 1 year old said was 'debbabeh' (tank)."

"Most of my children draw pictures of tanks, helicopters, shootings and bleeding people."

"My daughter knows all the journalists who report on the Intifada and can imitate how they talk."

It should be noted that while parents perceive their children to be playing more war games, the children themselves do not: only 6%of children made mention of such activities, compared to 48% of parents. Children did confirm that they were playing Intifada games but also reported that they still enjoyed sports, reading and writing, using the computer, watching television, drawing, playing outdoors and going on visits and trips with the family. Indeed, Intifada games were last on the list of preferred activities. It may be the case that parents are ignoring or not observing these activities, possibly because they are primed to observe changes in their children's behavior that are directly related to the conflict, which dominates their own concerns. Since this is a subject that provides direct insight into how Palestinian children are interpreting and responding to the current crisis, it requires further attention.

Negative Social Behavior

Almost half of all parents interviewed (208/449 in 16/35 focus groups) reported an increase in negative social behavior among their children. Overall, they felt that their children had become more rebellious and were no longer listening to them. Parents saw this as reflecting negatively on themselves - a sign that they as parents were no longer in a position of power and authority. They in turn related this to the difficulties they have in meeting their children's basic needs for security and protection.

Parents Report:

"My children no longer listen to me."

"They do not do as I request of them."

"They have become more aggressive with one another."

"They play truant from school."

"They have started to steal small items from friends, the local store, and me."

"My children keep threatening that they are going to go to the Israeli settlement, if they do not get what they want."

In general, parents were frustrated and angry with their children's deteriorating behavior in contrast to their apparent acceptance of other traumatic symptoms, as reported above. This is likely due to the fact that Palestinian society demands that children respect and obey their parents. It is an issue that should be addressed in current efforts to help Palestinian parents communicate with their children. It also highlights the importance of understanding familial and cultural practices when designing child and family interventions. Notably, increased rebelliousness in children was also reported in a number of studies during the first Intifada (1987-1993).[40]

School involvement and participation

One out of three parents (168/449 in 13/35 focus groups) noted that their children were afraid to go to school and also had difficulty concentrating and paying attention in class. This in turn was reflected in decreasing school achievement rates, truant behavior and/or a rising incidence of drop-outs. Parents remained supportive of their children continuing their education, but they believed that the conflict situation was interfering with their ability to succeed in school. These sentiments were supported by teacher focus group discussions. Nine out of ten teachers noted worsening academic performance among their students, rising truancy/absenteeism, frequent lack of concentration, and decreased class participation for some children. (For further details, see Section V.)

This information is partly corroborated by official sources. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Education, a substantial proportion of the 2000, 2001 and 2002 academic years was lost due to closures, inaccessibility of schools, curfews, and destruction of facilities. Increases in truancy/absenteeism and drop out rates have also been reported. However, to date there are no comprehensive statistics available that would allow a comparison with the situation before the Intifada.

Again, this picture contrasts with that which emerged from the children's focus groups. It is plausible that both perceptions are valid. For children, school remains the principle means of making and maintaining friendships, as well as acquiring knowledge and skills for future advancement. They are less likely to be aware of the deteriorating quality of the education they are receiving, or of troublesome changes in their own behavior, or that of their peers. However, such concerns are likely to preoccupy parents and teachers. Investment in improving the quality of education is critical to ensuring that both children's and parents' hopes for the future remain attached to this key institution.

Recurrent Thoughts of Death and Revenge

Approximately 6% of all parents interviewed (28/449 in 9/35 focus groups) reported that some of their children had recurrent thoughts of participating in funeral processions, becoming martyrs, being involved in military actions, or taking revenge for friends and family members who had been killed. Parents noted that these thoughts were closely linked to recent events in the children's lives, such as them witnessing an invasion or a funeral procession.

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40 Al-Haq. (1999) Punishing a Nation: Human Rights Violations During the Palestinian Uprising, December 1987-December 1988.

4. Parental concerns

While parents were capable of identifying deterioration in the psychosocial well being of their children, such changes did not necessarily rank high on their list of life concerns. The main concerns articulated during the focus group discussions were rather prioritized as follows: (1) disruption of education, (2) inability to shield themselves and their children from attacks, (3) lack of economic stability and income, (4) inability to provide proper nutrition for their children, (5) difficulty preventing children from coming into conflict with the law, and (6) difficulty to ensure the proper nourishment, physical health, and psychosocial development of their children.

This ranking should not be interpreted as signifying parental inattention to the psychosocial well being of their children. The group discussions refute this possibility. Rather, the ranking highlights those family issues over which parents feel they cannot exercise control. Disruption of education, violence, and economic instability are all external factors over which parents have little or no control. In contrast, most parents reported that they were to a certain extent able to ensure that their children received food and adequate health care - even if in the latter instance, it had become more difficult to do so, and the quality of service had deteriorated. Accordingly, "ensuring appropriate nutritional, health, psychological, and social development of children" ranked lower on the list of their concerns.

In addition, the ranking highlights those problems that parents perceive to be of most long-term significance. For their part, psychological/behavioral changes in their children is largely viewed as a short-term problem. There was an expectation that the symptoms will disappear once the political and economic situation improves. In contrast, parents fear that if their children do not enjoy a proper education, it will have longer lasting consequences. Similarly, poverty is perceived as a threat to the family's social status, which takes a long time to rebuild. While these perceptions may be understandable, they do raise concerns from a psychosocial standpoint. Even if parents recognize that their children can develop long-term psychological problems and recognize the need to forestall this, they may be underestimating the scope and severity of the risks involved.

5. Interaction and Guidance

In response to the question "How do you spend your time together with your children?", more than half of the parents (292/449 or 65%) reported spending considerable time engaging in the following types of activities: talking, watching television together, or doing educational activities (homework assignments). A minority of parents (54/449 or 12%) reported performing some activities together, such as playing sports together, and carrying out household chores, but generally did not spend considerable time with their children. Almost one quarter of all parents (103/449 or 23%) reported not doing anything with their children, faulting work pressure, feelings of depression, or a lack of motivation.[41]

41 Information from the parental focus groups does not illustrate differences between maternal and paternal interaction patterns, and to what extent the Intifada has affected these. Based on previous studies, it is generally believed that fathers tend to spend minimal time with their children but it is unclear whether interactions have increased as families are increasingly confined to their homes. This should be investigated further.

In this context, it should be noted that most parents interviewed for the study were part of intact and cohesive families. Most felt they could still rely on extended family and community networks, despite the strains the conflict has placed on the social fabric in the West Bank and Gaza.

Those parents who did to some extent interact with their children said that talking absorbs a major share of their most valued time together. Their discussions with their children typically focused on encouraging them to look forward to the future, to have hope, to encourage their own development, and to provide the child with a means to express his/her needs, thoughts and desires. The parents felt that these types of discussions strengthened their relationships with their children. It is clear that they also enable children to understand their position and role in society, as well as why their parents take a specific stand on a particular issue. In further discussions, the parents said that such discussions were best carried out in an open manner so that children would be encouraged to speak their minds freely.

It is important to note that in families where no such dialogue takes place and children therefore do not absorb appropriate information and value norms, a social, moral and cultural vacuum may result. This void may be filled by peers and non-family members, but not necessarily in the best interest of the child. Though all parents were fully opposed to their children participating in any type of violence, one third of them said that they had not explicitly discussed this issue with their children. In the absence of such guidance, other voices may become disproportionately influential.

6.   Conclusion

Parental focus group discussions show that violence and an unpredictable external environment are undermining parents' sense of control inside the home. The home, which is the family's principal safe haven,[42] is no longer perceived by either parents or children to be "safe and secure". This is a critical risk factor in the lives of Palestinian children, which must be addressed as a priority.

Parents clearly indicated that responsibility for their children and their care resided with them, but only half felt able to meet their children's needs under present circumstances. All felt that their ability to discharge their parental responsibilities was predicated on political changes at the national and international level. Accordingly, their self-confidence and sense of empowerment as parents remain hostage to external factors. This issue should be afforded more consideration in the development of psychosocial programs for Palestinian children and families. The majority of such programs do not currently target mothers and provide little if any assistance to fathers and other male adults.

Parents recognize the importance of providing guidance to their children and their need for recreation. However, they also feel stretched in their ability to meet these needs. At least one quarter of parents admit to not spending time with their children because they are stressed

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42 There are no public "emergency shelters" in the West Bank and Gaza.

or burdened by other concerns. Most feel incapable of effectively ensuring their children's long-term psychosocial well being while the current conflict prevails.

There is a clear need for interventions that empower parents: nearly nine out of every ten parents say their children experience psychological distress, manifested in adverse behavioral, attitudinal and/or emotional changes. While parents are generally understanding of these traumatic symptoms, it is more difficult for them to accept growing rebelliousness and declining academic performance among their children.

V. TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

Teachers are traditionally highly respected members of Palestinian society, that values education as a means of obtaining employment and signaling social status. Prior to the Intifada, approximately 95% of Palestinian children under the age of 16 were attending school, typically spending 4-5 hours per day in class, six days a week. By interviewing a small sample of teachers, the study sought to gain further insight into the behavior and psychosocial well being of these children, and to learn how teachers were helping them cope with the current situation.

Five groups of teachers (70 in total) were selected to participate in the assessment. The groups were drawn from different parts of the Palestinian Territories: from the Jerusalem, Hebron, and Ramallah districts in the West Bank, and the Gaza and Khan Younis districts in the Gaza . It was also planned that a sixth group would be included, drawn from the Jenin district. However, the area was under continuous curfew throughout the data collection period, making it impossible to hold any local focus group discussions.

Teachers were randomly selected from government, UNRWA, and private schools. Male and female teachers jointly participated in focus group discussions. The breakdown of participants by district level is provided below:

Fig. 9 Distribution of participants in teacher focus groups, by gender and district

	Jerusalem	Hebron	Ramallah	Gaza	Khan Younis	Total
Male teachers	6	5	4	7	9	31
Female teachers	6	9	8	7	9	39
Total	12	14	12	14	18	70

The first part of the discussion focused on obtaining information about teaching conditions, including the time that participants spent traveling to and from schools, their salaries and problems encountered inside and outside the classroom. Open-ended questions subsequently explored a broader range of issues, soliciting teachers' assessment of their students, their attitudes, the nature of activities undertaken in the classroom, and students' expectations for the future.

First and foremost, the discussions illustrated the extent to which teachers themselves currently feel stressed. They cited as sources of frustration and strain low salaries and difficult working conditions including large class sizes, 1-5 hours commutes to and from school, and a lack of routine and structure in educational programming. Such concerns were particularly prevalent among teachers in public schools, as well as male teachers acting as the primary breadwinners in their families.

As a result, teachers said they felt less motivated, were more anxious and/or nervous in dealing with students, more hurried in their teaching, and less willing to spend time explaining lessons. While they understood the importance of adapting in the current crisis and could clearly identify the negative impact of their behavior, they could not identify ways to overcome it. It is important to keep this in consideration when assessing their perspectives on the psychosocial well being of their students, and also when designing comprehensive, community focused psychosocial support programs for Palestinian children.

2. Children in the Classroom

Teacher discussions illustrated the extent to which the current crisis was affecting their students, largely confirming findings from the parental group discussions. Nine out of ten teachers (90%) noted that the students' attitude and behavior in class had undergone changes, generally resulting in a drop in academic performance. The changes identified ranged from increased absent-mindedness and lack of concentration, to increased aggression and anxiety, less attention to follow-up and homework after school, and increased absenteeism. Teachers generally work with more than one grade and tended to provide only general information about their students and not to make distinctions on the basis of age or gender.

Like parents, teachers indicated that the dangers associated with the journey to and from school help explain declining academic performance and increased absentmindedness among many Palestinian students. Eighty-two percent of teachers reported that the commute weighed on their own minds when in the classroom, and that this interfered both with their own ability to teach effectively, as well as their students' ability to concentrate.

Teachers also believed that aggressive behavior among Palestinian children was becoming more prevalent. Fifty-nine percent observed higher levels of irritation and stress in students. This was especially the case for students coming from broken or dysfunctional families. Teachers reported that children also tended to be more aggressive and disruptive in class following periods of closures, curfews, and bombings and shelling. They said such behavior was observed at all grade levels.

One quarter of teachers (25%) interviewed were alarmed about increasing absenteeism and rising dropout rates. They said that most students drop out because either they or their parents fear for their safety going to or returning from school. Teachers reported that they were working with parents to encourage them to keep students in school but that they were unwilling to pressure reluctant parents too hard in this regard, since they themselves cannot guarantee the safety of the children. It should be noted that though schooling is compulsory

in the West Bank and Gaza and all children are guaranteed a place, responsibility for ensuring continuing attendance largely rests with parents, not school administrations. This is especially the case since the outbreak of the current crisis.

3. Interaction and Guidance

Teachers were clearly conscious that they needed to help their students cope with the current crisis, and described several strategies that they had adopted to this end. Over 90% had allocated more time in class for discussions in which children could speak out about their feelings and difficult experiences in their lives. They had also allotted more time to drawing, creative writing and physical exercise. Teachers said that they believe these types of activities were important avenues for self-expression and improved the students' ability to concentrate and perform in the classroom. They also felt it was important that parents allow their children to express their feelings and thoughts. Accordingly, those children who had open relations with parents and teachers were said to be more likely to cope. However, teachers also cautioned about the difficulties of implementing their commitment to their students' well-being. Many stressed that making time for supportive class exercises was not easy when they are under constant pressure to make up for class time lost to closures and curfews. In this context, remedial education was widely viewed as important. As detailed earlier, this is also recognized by the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

Over half of the teachers (57%) said relations with their students had improved over the last two years. Most reported feeling more sympathetic and in tune with their students and being more accessible and sensitive to their need for love, care, and guidance. Only 12% of teachers reported that relations with their students had worsened during the last two years, mainly due to increased student anxiety and aggressiveness. These teachers noted that students were more disobedient in class and were challenging their authority. The remaining one-third of teachers reported either minimal or no changes in their relations with students. It is worth highlighting that this closely matches the findings of the children focus group discussions. Over 60% of students sampled indicated that their relations with teachers had improved during the last year, while only 10% of students reported that their relationships had deteriorated. The remaining 30% did not notice any change in teacher-student relations.

4. Conclusion

Despite expressing frustration about their personal and professional circumstances, Palestinian teachers remain focused on their students and concerned about their well being. They were willing to identify difficulties they faced at work and the impact this had in the classroom. They also identified strategies that they had adopted in order to help their students cope with stress and anxiety. Among other things, they stressed the importance of allotting time to activities that allow students to air their views and feelings. They also noted the importance of remedial education. Meanwhile, they remain very concerned about growing absenteeism, rising student dropout rates and decreasing academic performance. It is likely that the prolongation of the conflict will only exaggerate these problems.

IV. MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of focus group discussions with children, parents and teachers in the West Bank and Gaza, this study provides a multi-faceted insight into the lives of Palestinian children and the ways in which the current crisis has affected their psychosocial well being. The study's findings are summarized below.

1. Findings

Palestinian children are under significant psychosocial strain, mainly due to the violence that currently permeates their lives, inducing pervasive feelings of insecurity. Their precarious situation is aggravated by the widespread feeling that neither parents nor teachers can fully care for or protect them. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to remain a carefree child. Parents and teachers observe widespread symptomatic traumatic behavior, ranging from nightmares and bedwetting, to increased aggressiveness and hyperactivity, as well as decreasing attention spans and concentration capacity. They report that a minority of children have become fixated on thoughts of death and revenge.

Nevertheless, Palestinian children continue to exhibit resilience, as is evidenced by their enduring sense of self-efficacy and optimism about their own future. A majority of them continue to feel that they can improve their own lives by developing academically, as well as personally and socially. Indeed, it is striking that thus far they continue to channel their energy into positive, constructive and peaceful activities, and that only a small minority manifest a drift towards violent ideation.

School plays an essential role in the lives of Palestinian children. Although both parents and teachers were concerned about children's eroding ability to concentrate and pay attention in class, as well as rising absenteeism and drop-out rates, the children themselves clearly continue to value their education. They see it as their main means of improving their present and future situation. As such, it is also viewed as one of their main means of peacefully resisting the occupation.

The importance of the school as a social arena and source of support for Palestinian children has grown during the Intifada. Considerable national and community level effort has been devoted to keeping schools open despite curfews, closures and violence that prompts parents to keep their children at home as much as possible. Presently the school is therefore one of the few venues where children can regularly enjoy and express themselves in a peer setting. Talking with friends is particularly important: increasingly, children use recreational time to share feelings and talk about the current crisis, rather than to play. Critically, school attendance also provides a stabilizing routine and reassuring reference point in the increasingly chaotic lives of Palestinian children.

The nurture and care that Palestinian children receive from parents and teachers is compromised by the fact the latter are stressed and frustrated. Many struggle to cope with loss of incomes and rising violence. Parents in particular feel unable to adequately protect and provide for their children and feel that this has undermined their authority. Teachers feel challenged by difficult work conditions: citing low salaries, long and dangerous commutes to and from school, interruptions due to curfew and closures , as well as a lack of structure in educational programming and problems in the class room, including rising absenteeism and drop out rates.

Despite their own difficulties, parents remain focused on the importance of supporting their children. They attach great importance to their children's need to continue their education, and are aware of the need to prevent them from developing long-term psychological problems. However, while the majority of parents reported significant interaction with their children, the number of those who do not interact with their children or provide them with guidance remains significant. For their part, teachers remain focused on helping their students cope in the conflict. To this end, most try to allocate extra time for classroom activities that allow students to express themselves and talk about their problems. They are also focused on ensuring the children's safety while at school.

2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this assessment it is suggested that a three-pronged, interactive intervention strategy be adopted to help Palestinian children and families cope with the current conflict.

Children: Programs should be supported which channel children's resilience, encourage positive aspects of their outlook on the future, and empower them to take control of their lives. This includes giving them opportunities to participate in regular recreational/ cultural/ sport and other non-formal activities that provide them with life skills for the present as well as the future, and support their physical, psychological, cognitive, social and behavioral development. A special emphasis should be placed on activities that allow children to express themselves, resolve psychological/social/ behavioral problems and encourage their desire to become positive and supportive members of their community. As much as possible, these activities should seek to reinject "normalcy" into children's lives, especially those who repeatedly suffer distressing or traumatic experiences.This will require establishing more child/youth play centers and spaces for children's activities, subject to proper adult supervision.

Parents: It is important that further steps be taken to help parents deal with children manifesting psychological symptoms and behavioral problems. To the extent that most parents are exposed to negative life events that limit their ability to effectively cope with the pressures of the crisis, they themselves are also clearly in need of personal counseling. However, since there is a limited availability of counselors, psychologists, and social workers in the West Bank and Gaza - a problem further exacerbated by curfews and closures - a "service-oriented" model of intervention is not feasible. The focus of such interventions should therefore be on building basic skills and providing diagnostic and remedial templates. Lastly but crucially,

parents should be further assisted in their efforts to meet their children's basic needs - for shelter, nutrition, health and education. Many parents requested such support during the focus group discussions.

Schools: Building on ongoing initiatives, teachers and school counselors should be provided with guides to in-classroom psychosocial exercises that allow children to express themselves and improve their ability to concentrate and be attentive in class. Furthermore, the school's capacity to serve as a "multi-functional center" should be bolstered, allowing children to study, play and socialize throughout the day. This will require improvements in physical infrastructure designed to make schools more child-friendly; the training of psychosocial facilitators who can support children in the context of both in- and out-of-school activities; and programs that train teachers to deploy proper psychosocial methods in dealing with children in conflict. Lastly, teachers themselves should be provided with psychosocial services, including counseling and debriefing. Like Palestinian parents and children, they are under considerable strain.

3. Conclusion

It is outside the scope of this research project to assess the psychosocial damage that may ultimately befall either the children who participated in this study, or Palestinian children in general.

Children's ability to cope with the stresses of the current crisis is to a large extent contingent on the kind of support they receive, including the closeness of their relationships with parents and teachers, their primary caregivers. Children who are not secure in their environment and do not enjoy sufficient support are more likely to be overcome by the strains of the conflict. In this context, it is hoped that the kind of interventions suggested can help safeguard the children's overall well being. It is also hoped that they will be particularly targeted at those children who have been most affected by the conflict.

If Palestinian children are to be afforded their right to develop to their full potential, they must be able to enjoy safety in their homes, schools and communities, and be able to continue aspiring to a future very different from their present.