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Parental involvement and child social emotional learning among Syrian refugee families in Jordan: Findings from the FIERCE project

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ABSTRACT

The current study focusses on the relationship between parental involvement and child social emotional learning among Syrian refugees. Father involvement with the child from maternal and paternal perspectives, the quality of mother-child interaction, mother-child closeness, and child social emotional learning are explored in this study. The sample consists of 325 Syrian refugee families including fathers, mothers and their 4-8 years old children resettled in Jordan. Data from mothers and children were collected at three different timepoints, and from fathers were collected at two different timepoints in Amman and Za'atari in participants' homes. Secondary data including questionnaires and observational tasks from the Family Intervention for Empowerment through Reading and Education (FIERCE) project was analyzed. Moreover, correlational and multiple regression analyses were run to explore relationships among study variables in addition to descriptive analysis. The results revealed that at the multivariate level, there was no significant relationship between any predictor variable and child social emotional learning at any timepoint. However, this study paves the way for further research investigating parental involvement and child social emotional learning in a refugee context, opening new avenues to better understand the differential role of mothers and fathers in shaping children's socioemotional competence in humanitarian settings.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Forced displacement worldwide

The displaced population is growing in the world. According to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023a), 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2022 for different reasons. Nowadays, climate change and disasters have started to play essential roles on people's displacement besides wars, with people leaving their homes due to earthquakes, limited natural resources, and floods.

Forced displacement brings about different terms to define the identity of populations. It is important to define differences among these terms while creating and applying appropriate policies and interventions to reach our goal. The United Nations defined each these terms through the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The term *immigrant* refers to a person who moves into a country to become a resident of that country for different reasons (IOM, 2019). Financial reasons might play a vital role in immigrating to a developed country. Immigrants can study or work to get a permanent residence permit.

The term *asylum seeker* is defined as someone whose request for legal recognition and protection has yet to be waiting. They have a right not to be returned to their home country at risk and are protected under the legal status. Lastly, *refugee* is defined as a person who moves into a country since he/she is not able to stay in or return to his/her residence or the country of his/her nationality for reasons of violence or war (IOM, 2019).

In the past, the Second World War resulted in a huge movement of people across countries and continents. Many Europeans immigrated to the United States during that time. Another key historical event which caused big population movements took place on the other side of the world, India. The partition of India created excessive migrations. Another part of the world, Middle East, suffered multiple conflicts, namely Iraq. Afghans have also suffered from conflicts for a long time. It resulted in malnutrition, poverty and financial problems, forcing Afghans to leave their country (UNHCR, 2023b).

More than a decade ago, a civil war started in Syria. Even though the heat of the war is cooling down compared to the past, it takes time for citizens to rebuild their lives. The neighbouring countries of Syria keep hosting Syrian refugees since the civil war has started in 2011. The country which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, Türkiye, shelters around 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2023c). According to the UNHCR (2023d; 2023e), other countries which host a considerable number of Syrian refugees are Lebanon (around 795 thousand) and Jordan (around 659 thousand). In this study, we will explore Syrian refugee fathers' and mothers' involvement with the child in the context of forced relocation after the war. The research project's sample includes Syrian refugee fathers, mothers and children who were displaced in Jordan.

1.2 The Syrian civil war and its consequences

1.2.1 The Syrian civil war in a nutshell

The Syrian Arab Republic gained its independence 1946. However, Syria created the United Arab Republic by merging with Egypt, which was a step towards to pan-Arabism.

The aim was to be united as all Arab people under a single national state. Syria faced with a coup in 1961 and reestablished the independent Syrian Arab Republic. They have continued to struggle to reach political stability within the country, until Hafez al-Assad seized power as a president and ruler of Ba'ath Party. Following his death in 2000, his son, Bashar Assad, became the president of the country. He also put forceful practices on the civilians as his father during his ruling era.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in U.S., the tension between Syria and U.S. had been growing, because the U.S. blamed Syria acquiring weapons and helping Iraq. U.S. government imposed economic sanctions into Syria at the beginning of the 2000's and entailed military forces later. Syrian civilians had been suffering for a long time for political reasons. In addition to these conflicts, at the beginning of 2011 the *Arab Spring* started in Tunisia (Magen, 2012). Anti-government groups aimed to overthrow current long-lasting and anti-democratic regimes in North African and the Middle East countries. Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Egypt were influenced massively by the protests, whereas Algeria, Jordan and Morocco were impacted comparably less (Hale, 2013; Žuber & Moussa, 2018). The Arab Spring triggered the willingness of democracy in some groups in Syria, which resulted in the conflict between those groups and Bashar Assad's army in 2011. Assad and his supporters are Shia Alawites, whereas rebellion groups are Sunni Muslims who constitute the majority of the Syrian Arab Republic (Žuber & Moussa, 2018). As a result of this civil war, which has been continuing for 12 years, a huge refugee crisis has started in the world.

1.2.1 Devastating impacts on civilians

Syrian civilians have been paying a heavy cost for 12 years. The war created a lack of resources, limited food security, a high number of infant deaths, limited access to education and health system, child marriage and abuse, an escalating economic crisis in Syria and a refugee crisis worldwide. According to Kešeljević and Spruk (2023), even though Syria has been able to overcome negative financial effects rapidly thanks to support from other countries, the impacts of the war on civilian are not recoverable quickly.

Regarding psychological consequences, Mohsen et al. (2021) argued that the higher prevalence of mental health problems among Syrians compared to the World Health Organization prevalence estimations and other study results is the consequence of long-lasting war and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syrian civil war has also devastated harms on Syrian civilians' cognitive functioning. One research found that Syrians' beliefs and sense of identity are seriously distorted after the war (Chung & Shakra, 2020; Matos et al., 2021) They started to think about the future and themselves under the exposure of the war.

Since one of the most important aftermaths of the war is the high number of displacement of Syrians, the follow-up process of displacement should be taken into consideration. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022) states that approximately 5.8 million children crossing Syria and the neighbouring countries need physical and psychological support to recover from trauma as well as to adapt to the new life after resettlement. According to Halasa et al. (2020), Syrian refugee

children who are displaced in Jordan show moderate levels of social anxiety and post-traumatic stress.

With respect to family dynamics among Syrian refugees, there is much more distress among all family members. Distress can be caused directly by the war or indirectly by its consequences, such as economic crisis, limited or no access to health services, anxiety about the future, and feelings of insecurity. Al-Natour et al. (2018) investigated domestic violence among Syrian refugees, specifically marital violence in households, demonstrating that women were more exposed to marital violence, humiliation and insecurity after the war. Gharaibeh & O'Sullivan (2021) emphasised how women and children are significantly affected by war and displacement. They suggest that practitioners should focus on women and children's stressors and coping mechanism to help them recover. As regards the influence of the war on women and children, women who were pregnant or recently had a baby during the war were also severely affected during or after their pregnancy period. Punamäki et al. (2018) found a positive relationship between exposure to war trauma and maternal mental health symptoms in pregnancy and the postpartum period, and in turn, infant development in the sample of Palestinian women from Gaza.

1.3 Jordan's response to the Syrian refugee situation

Jordan is one of the most influenced countries by the long-lasting Syrian refugee crisis as it is a neighbouring country to Syria. The country hosts more than 760,000 registered refugees from Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Somali and Syria, with the latter constituting refugees'

main country of origin (UNHCR, 2023f). Children under five years make up approximately 12.5% of this population (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2023). With respect to living conditions, host governments may choose placing refugees into camps so that the conflict of interest between refugees and the local population is prevented.

In 2012, the Jordanian government started to place Syrian refugees into camps in Zaatari, one of the largest refugee camps in the world which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, and Al Azraq in 2014 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Zaatari camp (left) and Al Azraq camp (right)*



These camps are administrated by the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) and UNHCR. According to UNHCR (2023f), 608,387 refugees resided in urban areas, whereas 134,584 resided in camps. They registered 347,416 children of a total of 744,368 refugees and asylum-seekers by the end of 2022.

Regarding displacement, Syrians and Jordanians also share the same language and religion, and similar culture which makes the adaptation of refugees into the new home easier. Abdo et al. (2019) argued that, even though the Jordanian government, Jordanian natives and other non-governmental organisations provide support and service to the

Syrian refugees, they still moderately suffer due to poor psychological health and social relationships. Bashedi et al. (2019) investigated PTSD among Syrian refugees residing in Amman, reporting that 38.7% of the sample had PTSD symptoms, predominantly men, and 88.2% of the sample had suffered trauma.

UNHCR periodically conducts surveys to measure how Jordanians view refugees since mid-2020. UNHCR (2023f) states that Jordanians have continued to perceive refugees positively in spite of sanctions of escalating economic crisis and COVID-19 pandemic. Fallah et al. (2019) investigated the effect of Syrian refugee inflows on Jordanians' wage, hours of work and employment or unemployment. They underlined that the Syrian refugee influx does not produce negative outcomes on Jordanian natives' labor market. In contrast, Ceritoglu et al. (2017) found that the Syrian refugee influx affects Turkish natives' labor market in negative way. Furthermore, the cost of living for Jordanians as well as refugees increased in 2022 compared to 2021 due to increasing inflation, so there are still urgent needs to be met for refugees (UNHCR, 2023f).

There is ongoing progress towards enhancing refugees' living conditions and diminishing concerns through the collaboration of various foundations. However, there are still many obstacles to overcome, such as protection issues. Refugees are safeguarded under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that the UNHCR and the Jordanian Ministry of Interior signed in 1998, despite the fact that Jordan is not a signatory to the UN 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees (Achilli, 2015). Instead, since 2014 the government has prohibited refugees to cross into Jordan except for children, women, and people who need immediate medical care.

Refugee camps are another problem involving safety and security. They are supposed to welcome refugees in a safe place temporarily until the threat is gone in their home country. One of the largest refugee camps in Jordan, Al Azraq, raises security concerns among Syrian refugees, particularly among girls and women because of harassment, kidnapping or abuse. Sajdi et al. (2021) underlined the violent environment and the sense of isolation in Al Azraq camp, as well as the impact of these risk factors on Syrian refugee adolescents, particularly girls. Children and adolescents have already so many risk factors after the war. Thus, the feeling of security is a central issue for children and adolescents to take into consideration while planning interventions for them.

1.4 Syrian refugee children and their parents

The Syrian households often consist of a large family of five to seven people (Collelo, 1987). Parents tend to have a higher number of children in Arabic society compared to Western society. In collectivistic societies like Syria, children engage closely with the members of the household or extended family. They may spend time with their siblings, cousins, or parents. Therefore, family dynamics play a critical role in the context of refugees and displacement in Jordan.

Children are already exposed to a variety of risk factors during and after the war, and as a consequence of this exposure, they continue to face a number of challenges in their daily lives. Girls are more likely than boys to be negatively influenced by traumatic experiences and may display internalisation issues such as emotional dysfunction and depressive symptoms in the face of adversity (Arakelyan & Ager, 2020). On the other

hand, children can build resilience to the adversity they deal with. Family dynamics can be either a risk factor to increase devastating outcomes or a protective factor to experience positive outcomes for a refugee child after the war.

According to a report on the mental health needs of Syrian refugee children (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015), when caregivers have disappeared or are separated from the lives of refugee children, potential mental health or developmental issues become more severe. The family unit is a critical aspect in promoting a sense of belonging in refugee children, according to Erdemir (2022), who studied several sides of the cultural wealth among Syrian refugee children who were relocated to Turkey.

As parents are exposed to adversity, they can feel insecure, distressed, and devastated like their children. Syam et al. (2019) conducted interviews with Syrian refugee couples residing in Shatila camp, finding evidence of increasing physical abuse by parents toward their children after displacement in Lebanon. In addition to the significance of refugee parents in their children's lives, the quality of parenting is also essential to contribute to their children's well-being and development. El-Khani et al. (2018) conducted a study with Syrian refugee mothers who were displaced in Turkey, highlighting the need to deliver parenting support to refugee parents to foster the wellbeing of refugee children and their parents. As a result, working with parents is a key point to help children recover from their trauma and adapt to the new life.

CHAPTER 2

PARENTS AND CHILDREN FACING THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR

2.1 Child social emotional development and the role of parents

Child social emotional development is defined as “(...) the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture” (Yates et al., 2008, p.2). There are different ways to learn social emotional skills (e.g., emotion regulation, building social relationships) and integrate them to have positive outcomes throughout their lifespan (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Social emotional learning (SEL) refers to this process of increasing social emotional competence.

According to Campbell et al. (2017), SEL consists of three main domains: social (e.g., understanding a social partner’s emotional cues), cognitive (e.g., organizing own thoughts), and emotional domain (e.g., identifying own and others’ emotions). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) created a framework for SEL which includes a total of five competence clusters: Self-awareness, relationship skills, self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness (Greenberg, 2023). An example of competence for self-awareness is being aware of one’s own emotions; for relationship skills, it is establishing and maintaining healthy social relationships; for self-management, it is the capacity of stress management; for

responsible decision making, it is the ability to evaluate of the consequences of own actions; and lastly, for social awareness, it is taking someone else's perspective (Greenberg et al., 2017; Greenberg, 2023).

Empathy is an important component of social emotional development. There are two dimensions: affective empathy, which promotes sharing of others' emotional states, and cognitive empathy, which builds understanding of others' emotions and a capacity to perceive difference between self-feelings and others' (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Empathic responding may vary based on developmental stages throughout the lifespan. Parents play a key role in promoting these empathic mechanisms in children. Zhou et al. (2002) demonstrated that parental warmth and responsivity within parent-child interaction are associated with the development of empathy in children; Barnett (1987) suggested that parents encourage their children to experience and express emotions by interacting with them within sensitive and responsive parenting.

The self-concept is another dimension of social emotional development. It includes a mental image that comes to mind about oneself, expressing oneself, making sense of the world and understanding oneself (Oyserman et al., 2012). The pre-school period is crucial in terms of children's social emotional development, as children are often in interaction with parents, peers, and teachers who facilitate the development of a sense of self and emotion regulation skills (Arslan, 2021).

Some studies indicate that early childhood social emotional competence can predict outcomes in the long term. For example, Moffitt et al. (2011) revealed that children's self-control during their first decade of life significantly predicted outcomes in their

adolescence and early adulthood. Jones et al. (2015) explored if early childhood social emotional skills predicted outcomes related to education, crime, mental health, substance use, employment, and mental health in the long run. They found that those skills predicted critical outcomes in the future. In addition, Duncan et al. (2017) also found that children's early skills at the entry of kindergarten predicted later outcomes.

Child social emotional learning can be promoted in various settings by different resources in the child's life. The microsystem (e.g., peers, parents, teachers, siblings) plays a critical role in a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It brings about the importance of school and home settings while fostering the development of prosocial and emotional skills in children. Dunsmore and Karn (2004) conducted a study investigating the effects of mother's emotional socialization and peer relationships on child emotional development. They found that children rated as having more stable friendships and being popular showed more emotion knowledge over time (a semester), and mothers' emotion socialization and beliefs in guiding their children about emotions indicated long-term impacts on child social and emotional development.

The teacher-student relationship enhances SEL in children as well as peer relationships in the school setting. Schönert-Reichl (2017) emphasizes the significance of teachers' own social emotional competence and well-being in addition to their knowledge of child social emotional learning in the early childhood period. Educators have been focusing on the promotion of SEL in the early childhood period, since social sciences revealed how crucial SEL is in child development and academic achievement (Corcoran et al., 2018). Even though numerous studies focused on the promotion of SEL in the

school setting through intervention programs (e.g., McClelland et al., 2017), the role of the family environment and parents are influential in child development and well-being.

Research has indicated that parent involvement in early childhood helps to promote child social emotional competence and have long term impacts on the child's life (e.g., Overbeek et al., 2007). Parents contribute to child development by being a role model and providing guidance as they are in children's immediate environment. Eisenberg et al. (1991) found that parents' sympathy as well as their ways to deal with their children's emotions were related to the vicarious emotional responding of their children.

Emotional socialisation refers to an aspect of social emotional development so that children can learn about emotions and ways of expressing them through observing their role-models, parents, or imitating them (Kitzmann, 2012). Eisenberg et al. (1998) emphasised the importance of parents' emotional-related child-rearing practices (e.g., reactions to the child's emotions, the way of expressing own emotions) on nurturing emotional socialisation in children. Miller et al. (2014)'s findings also support that parents' emotion socialization practices are related to child social emotional skills, especially emotion regulation capacity. The relationship between parents' emotion socialization practices and child social emotional skills has been confirmed in many studies over the years (e.g., Denham et al., 1997; Hajal & Paley, 2020).

The quality of the parent-child interaction plays a crucial role in the promotion of social emotional skills for children as well as parenting practices. A study examined the quality of dyadic collaboration between parent and child by using an observational task while investigating child social emotional skills and psychological adjustment in Chinese

children. In this study, Jin et al. (2017) revealed that parent-child collaboration moderated the relationship between parental supportive reactions and child emotion regulation. Laible and Song (2006) also conducted a study which focused on the role of the quality of mother-child interaction on child social emotional competence, demonstrating the significance of taking into consideration the context of mother-child discourse.

The closeness between child and mother is a factor affecting child social emotional development. Le Bas et al. (2021) and Rusanen et al. (2022) conducted longitudinal studies suggesting that mothers' postnatal bonding, which included interaction with and affection towards the child, was associated with child social emotional competence in the long run. Therefore, children who have close relationships with their mothers tend to have higher levels of empathic behaviours as mothers are influential model in their lives (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995). Farrant and his colleagues (2011) explored maternal aspects on the development of prosocial behaviour and empathy in children. Maternal cognitive empathy competence was found to be positively related to the probability of encouraging the child to take the perspective of others, which was in turn positively related to the child's cognitive empathy competence. Thus, research has highlighted the importance of the mothers' role in the development of child empathy skills.

Although the role of parental involvement in children's development has been extensively explored in the literature, less is known about father or paternal effects on child development. Harris (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on the role of father involvement, and findings indicated a significant positive link between active father involvement and child social emotional competence in early childhood. Culp et al. (2000)

suggested that the development of social emotional skills, particularly self-concept, might be related to high levels of father involvement through the mediating role of the child's feelings of paternal acceptance.

2.2 Risk and protective factors contributing to child social emotional development

Child social emotional development is a process which is influenced by various factors. These factors can be at the familial, sociodemographic, or environmental levels. Children who are exposed to familial risk factors such as maternal emotion regulation difficulties (Behrendt et al., 2019), sociodemographic risk factors such as poverty (Lee & Zhang, 2022), or environmental risk factors such as pandemic (Egan et al., 2021) tend to have negative outcomes in relation to their social emotional competence or delayed development.

For instance, McDonald and her colleagues (2018) investigated risk and protective factors contributing to child social emotional development in the All Our Babies/Families (AOB/F) cohort study in Canada. The results indicated that children who were not daily interacting with parents through play at 1 and 2 years of age showed delays in their social emotional development in the long run. The scholars underlined the significance of daily play-based interactions with parents for promoting child social emotional skills such as empathy in this study. In addition, they found that children of mothers with lower parenting self-efficacy and post-partum depression were at increased risk in terms of their social emotional development.

One of the risk factors contributing to delayed social emotional development is

displacement as a consequence of war. Khamis (2019) conducted a study exploring war exposure and emotional development with Syrian refugee children and adolescents residing in Lebanon and Jordan. He found out that children who reported higher levels of war exposure were more likely to experience emotion dysregulation. However, Kara and Selçuk (2021) have recently investigated the impact of armed conflict exposure on empathy in children living in the Eastern part of Türkiye. Interestingly, they found that armed conflict experience was positively associated with empathy skills in children. They interpreted this finding considering the definition of empathy as the concern for others' pain. Therefore, there can be inconsistent findings related to emotional development because of different definitions and dimensions of emotional development.

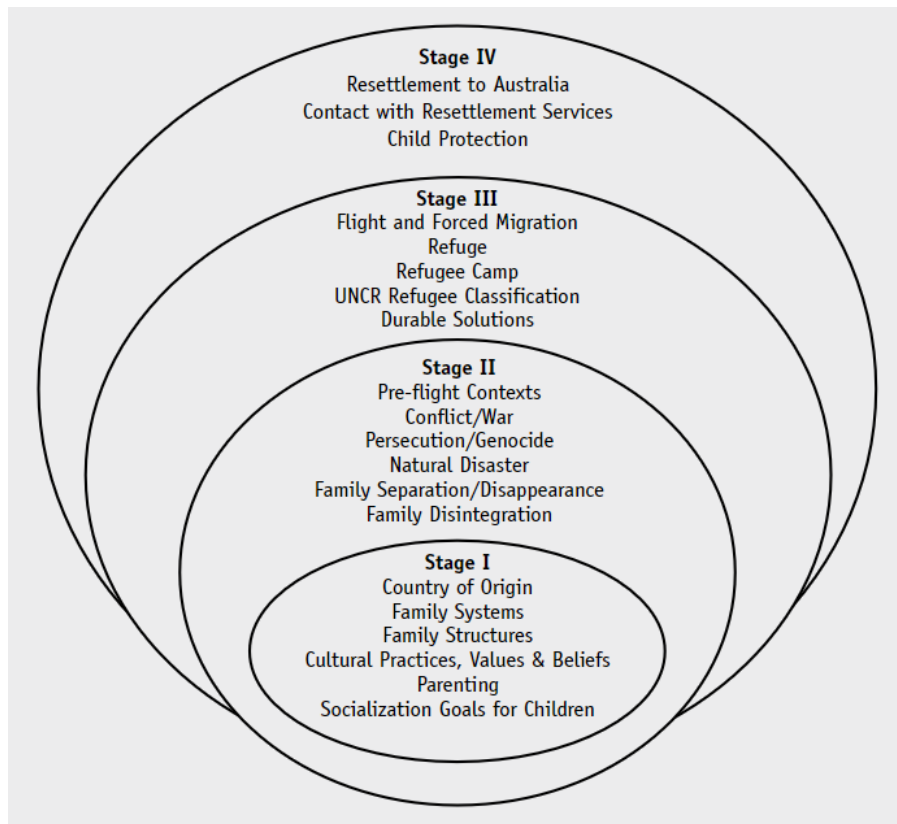
On the other hand, some protective factors such as positive parenting (Mendelsohn et al., 2018) and maternal feelings of attachment (Mason et al., 2011) foster resilience and promote child social emotional skills despite adversities in a child's life. Even social emotional skills on their own can play a role as a protective factor against adverse events (Malti, 2020). Child gender might predict the strength of impacts of protective factors on child development. According to Werner (2000), intra individual protective factors such as self-esteem have a long-term effect on girls' development and well-being, whereas outside sources of support, such as having a competent caregiver, play influential roles in boys' development and well-being. Tol et al. (2013) also emphasized that the positive effect of the socio-ecological context or protective factors within the individual might vary based on cultural values. Clearly, children need all levels of sources - including individual and the environment - to build resilience and deal with adversity.

2.3 Parenting within a refugee context

Abundant research has shown that parents play a key role in their children's well-being and development. Displacement highlights the importance of the quality of parenting on war-exposed children's lives as supportive parenting plays a protective role in their well-being and development. Dwairy (1998) pointed out the power of interdependence among family members in Arabic society, supporting that the influence of the family environment is substantial especially in Syrian refugees. Family dynamics, the relationship between parents and children, and parents' psychological and physical well-being have important long-term outcomes for children in spite of these adverse events.

An ecological framework has been proposed by Williams (2009) to understand the factors affecting refugee parenting in pre-settlement (see Figure 2). This framework also includes flight and migration contexts to understand how refugee parents (re)shape their values and (re)construct their existence in a new place, meanwhile taking care of their children under these circumstances (Williams, 2010). This kind of ecological framework helps researchers and practitioners understand refugee parents' needs for improving well-being of their children and to encourage refugee parents for positive parenting.

Figure 2. *An ecological model of refugee parenting in pre-settlement*



Source: Williams (2010)

El-Khani et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing resettled Syrian mothers about their challenges in parenting in a refugee context; and found that mothers were highly concerned about their children's safety and health, had problems in communication with their children, and had their own emotional difficulties. Refugees' parenting can be disrupted by various components in the refugee context in addition to their concerns about children. Parental psychological distress often results in physically harsh parenting and financial issues, which prevent parents and children from a daily positive parent-child interaction and are viewed as disruptive aspects in refugees'

parenting (Sim et al., 2018). Eltanamly et al. (2021) emphasized that war exposure has negative effects on children's adjustment through harsh and distant parenting practices. Parental psychopathology also predicted war-affected children's mental health, particularly emotional problems, despite controlling for trauma effects (Erucar et al., 2018).

Given this evidence, parents' resilience plays a crucial role in developing resilience in children under war and post-war circumstances and in building positive parent-child relationships to contribute to positive child development and well-being. On the other hand, interventions with refugee families made a great advancement in promoting supportive parenting. For instance, in a pilot intervention study, Lakkis et al. (2020) showed that the quality of the parent-child interaction improved after applying an intervention to promote positive parenting among Syrian refugee families displaced in Jordan and Lebanon.

2.3.1 Refugee fathers' engagement with their children

The parent-child relationship has been a key interest of scholars for a long time. However, most research has focused on mothers, who are traditionally viewed as primary caregivers. Researchers have been studying the involvement of fathers with their children since the late 1970s (Lamb, 2000). Father's role in child psychology was understudied compared to maternal aspects for a long time (Lamb, 1997). However, the importance of a father's role in child development and well-being has been emphasized by researchers, policy makers and practitioners (Wilson & Prior, 2010), so the number of studies on

paternal involvement in a child's life has increased in recent years. According to Gable et al. (1994), sensitive and responsive paternal parenting is associated with positive outcomes in child development.

Despite an altered focus on the importance of fathers in child development and mental health, refugee fathers still tend to be ignored or excluded from research in this area. Even though women and children are the most affected under the war conditions, men should be included in the literature. Zwi et al. (2018) showed that refugee children whose fathers were present on arrival after displacement tended to have higher levels of social emotional well-being.

In order to support their children's development, fathers may offer resources. However, they may be overwhelmed by their own psychological responses to the war, so they are no longer able to provide parenting. For example, they might suffer from PTSD as a common consequence of war on people (Klarić et al., 2007). Panter-Brick et al. (2014) found that parents' posttraumatic stress had a strong predictive effect within an Afghan refugee sample. It could be difficult to create a positive environment for child development and provide supportive parenting while struggling with PTSD (Zalihić et al., 2008). On the other hand, a study which investigated both quality and quantity of paternal involvement with the child within a refugee sample found that refugee fathers actively engaged their children in spite of struggling with PTSD symptoms (van Ee et al., 2013). Hence, refugee fathers are able to be involved with their own children.

Unfortunately, there is not much information about refugee fathers and their relationship with children. Ponguta and her colleagues (2019) conducted a pilot wait-list

randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the effectiveness of a parenting program, namely Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP), among refugee families in Lebanon. Refugee fathers' involvement with their children improved after mothers participated in a positive parenting program (Ponguta et al., 2019). This study indicates that refugee fathers' involvement with their children is mediated through mother involvement.

There is scarce knowledge about direct relationships between refugee fathers and their children. Hein et al. (2020) also examined the father's role in maternal well-being in a refugee context in Lebanon, reporting that father involvement might have an impact on child development through role of mother's well-being in disadvantaged communities. Additionally, even though some studies support the association between father involvement and child social emotional development (e.g., Culp et al., 2000; Harris, 2010), this relationship in the refugee context has not been investigated so far.

2.3.2 The relationship between refugee mothers and their children

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) proposes that a child's development is affected by her surrounding contexts at different levels, such as the microsystem (e.g., family and peers) and ecosystem (e.g., mass media). As the child's immediate environment including parents affects her well-being to a great extent, social interactions with parents have major impacts on child development. In addition to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973) has underscored the importance of children's interactions with significant others, particularly mothers, on child later development and mental health. According to Paulus et al. (2018), a child's

cognitive and affective development, specifically self-concept, is positively associated with the quality of their interaction with her mother.

The mother-child relationship can be conceptualised as mother-child closeness (e.g., Nomaguchi & Allen, 2023). The level of mother-child closeness changes through lifespan development of the child because parent-relationship is a dynamic interaction. Xie et al. (2021) has demonstrated that closeness within the mother-child relationship decreases over time, whereas conflict increases from middle childhood to adolescence. The authors stressed that mothers showed more warmth towards their children in the early years compared to later developmental stages. Siegal (1985) also stated that children who identified with their mothers developed better empathy skills, particularly among girls. This study underscores how the level of closeness between mothers and children plays a critical role in child social emotional development, especially as regards the empathy domain. According to Hou et al. (2022), mother-child closeness tends to predict a child's relationship with her own child in adulthood. They highlighted the influence of mother-child closeness on later developmental stages.

The interaction with significant others plays a key role for children in a human crisis context because they need protective factors to deal with adverse conditions. Research has shown that mothers' traumatic experiences may impair their ability to maintain an emotional bond with their children as a caregiver, and in turn, children's development (Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001; Wolmer et al., 2000). On the other hand, some activities or parent training programs can improve the refugee mother-child relationship, promote positive parenting, and in turn, contribute to refugee children's development and well-

being. In a recent study, Barnes et al. (2022) showed that book reading activity benefited refugee mothers to be actively in interaction with their pre-school aged children. Ponguta et al. (2019) also highlighted that the quality of mother-child interaction can be improved thanks to promoting positive parenting among refugee families.

The mother-child relationship is particularly crucial during infancy and early childhood periods in the context of war and displacement, as caregivers are the most influential resources in the early years of a child's life. Rezzoug et al. (2008) addressed the importance of the quality of mother-child interaction during the early years in a displaced population considering mothers' adverse experiences, showing that infants who were born into displaced families are exposed to impaired parenting. Ajduković (1996) found that mothers tended to interact less with their children and to engage with nervous attitudes after displacement into Croatia during the Bosnian war. van Ee et al. (2012) explored the relationship between mother-child interaction and child development considering war trauma experiences in a refugee context in the Netherlands. Interestingly, mother-child interaction was not found significantly associated with child development. Therefore, literature demonstrate inconsistent findings about the relationship between mother-child interaction and child development.

Prior studies exploring the mother-child relationship within a refugee context mainly focused on the effects of maternal post-traumatic stress (e.g., East et al., 2018; Peltonen et al., 2023; van Ee et al., 2012) or maternal/postpartum depression (Ahmed et al., 2017; Mohammad et al, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2019) on child well-being, whereas little is known about the link between mother-child closeness and child social emotional

development within a refugee context so far.

2.4 Refugee children's social emotional learning

War has devastating impacts on children as well as on adults. There might be even more long-lasting effects on children than on adults, because children depend on others to be taken care of and their needs to be met. They need affection, safety, and nurturing for healthy development despite the adverse consequences of war. According to Qouta et al. (2021), infants whose mothers had been exposed to war during pregnancy tended to show delays in cognitive, language, motor and social emotional skills. Specifically, some studies have shown that children become vulnerable in terms of their cognitive development (e.g., Mougrabi-Large & Zhou, 2020) as a consequence of war.

Children's social emotional development can be affected by living under refugee status or displacement through their parents' adverse experiences. Considering social emotional development, emotional processing as a part of improving empathy skills might play a key role in promoting social emotional development. Recently, Peltonen et al. (2022) found that Syrian children whose refugee mothers had harsh parenting practices (e.g., spanking) tended to have poorer performance in emotional recognition. Children whose mothers had higher PTSD scores were also more likely to have poorer performance in an emotional processing task in the same study. As a result, they pointed out the influence of refugee parents who suffer from mental health issues and adopt harsh parenting style as a consequence of war and displacement in children's emotion processing.

With respect to social emotional skills, Kim et al. (2023) conducted an RCT to assess the effectiveness of a SEL program, namely the Five-Component SEL (5CSEL), with Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. The authors found that SEL-targeted programs promoted social emotional skills in refugee children. Tubbs Dolan et al. (2022) also revealed that SEL and mindfulness-based programming improved academic and social emotional outcomes, in particular in Syrian refugee children attending schools in Lebanon. Uşaklı (2015) suggested facilitating drama sessions to enhance social emotional learning in refugee children living in Turkey. Even though the importance of SEL in children in a refugee context has been highlighted in the literature, the relationship between parental relationship and child SEL has not been explored in a refugee context. Therefore, we decided to investigate both paternal and maternal involvement with the children and children's social emotional learning among refugee families.

CHAPTER 3

THE CURRENT STUDY

3.1. The Family Intervention Empowerment through Reading and Education (FIERCE) project

The current thesis analyses data from the FIERCE project, conducted in the capital of Jordan, Amman, and the world's largest camp for Syrian refugees, Za'atari. The project is coordinated by Kristin Hadfield (Trinity College Dublin) together with Isabelle Mareschal (Queen Mary University of London), Amal El-Kharouf (University of Jordan), and Sophie von Stumm (University of York) and is funded by the British Academy.

The aim of the FIERCE project is to evaluate the effectiveness of a reading intervention via a wait-listed cluster randomized controlled trial. The sample involves 360 mothers and their 4-8-year-old children, with data being collected at the participants' homes at three different time-points over a year. While Yale MacMillan Centre funded the father data collection (led by Catherine Panter-Brick) at two time-points (T1 and T2), UNESCO South Korea also funded the mother and child data collection (coordinated by Rana Dajani) at the third time-point (T3). Different kinds of measures were used, such as observational tasks, questionnaires and cognitive assessments to evaluate child development, mental health, and family relationship quality.

3.2. Study Aim and Research Questions

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the role of father's involvement with the

child from both mother's and father's perspectives, mother-child closeness, and mother-child interaction quality in child social and emotional learning in a humanitarian crisis context. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:

R.Q. 1: Is there an association between father involvement and child social emotional learning (operationalized as empathy and self-concept) in displaced Syrian refugee families?

Father involvement has a substantial effect on different areas of early childhood, such as cognitive development (Rollè et al., 2019), language development (Varghese & Wachen, 2016), and social and emotional development (Kelly, 2018). Yet, the number of studies conducted with fathers who experienced traumatic events such as war are quite few compared to those studied with Western populations who are more advantaged. For example, father involvement and child social emotional competence has been explored in other than humanitarian setting (Culp et al., 2000).

Given limited number of studies in a refugee context, father involvement might have an impact on children through maternal well-being (Hein et al., 2020). However, the direct relationship between father involvement and child development needs to be investigated in deep. In addition, cultural differences and variety of parenting practices in different communities deserve attention as well as adverse experiences while studying father involvement and child development.

Although several studies have explored the impact of fathers who have PTSD on refugee children's development and well-being (van Ee et al., 2013; Zalihić et al., 2008)

to our knowledge, no prior studies have examined the relationship between father involvement and child social emotional learning in a refugee context. Based on the available literature on community samples, we expected that father-child involvement would be positively associated with child social and emotional learning in terms of empathy and self-concept.

R.Q. 2: To what extent is mother-child interaction quality associated with child social and emotional learning in a refugee context?

The literature highlights the importance of mother-child interaction on child social emotional development (Paulus et al., 2018). Researchers have recently focused their attention on maternal influences on child well-being in a humanitarian crisis context resulting from war and displacement. The exposure to war, displacement, or having a refugee status brings about some negative consequences in mothers' lives, and in turn, children's. Mother-child interaction quality can be disrupted by mother's negative experiences as a consequence of those effects mentioned above (war, displacement, or refugee status), and in turn, child development can be negatively affected through impaired parenting from refugee mothers (Rezzoug et al., 2008). As mothers face challenges with war-exposure consequences, maternal psychological distress and psychopathology may also negatively contribute to the child social emotional development through daily interactions with their children as a result of war (Lakkis et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2018).

Based on the available literature, we anticipated that children who positively

interacted with their mothers were more likely to exhibit increased emotional learning in terms of empathy and self-concept.

R.Q. 3: How is mother-child closeness related to child social emotional learning?

The importance of mother-child closeness in the early childhood period is underlined in the literature (Le Bas et al., 2021; Rusanen et al., 2022). Research has shown that children's development might be negatively affected by their mothers' adverse experiences through an impaired emotional bond between them (Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001; Wolmer et al., 2000). Contrary to these findings, mother-child relationship was not found to be associated with child development in a sample of refugees and asylum seekers (e.g., van Ee et al., 2012).

Even though the previous research investigating the mother-child relationship within a refugee context mainly focused on the effects of maternal post-traumatic stress (e.g., East et al., 2018; Peltonen et al., 2023; van Ee et al., 2012) or maternal/postpartum depression (Ahmed et al., 2017; Mohammad et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2019) on children's lives, to our knowledge, no prior study has examined mother-child relationship operationalized as mother-child closeness and child social emotional learning within refugee context. We wanted to explore this short-term longitudinal and cross-sectional associations in a refugee context. Based on the literature described above, we expected children who were closer to their mothers to have better social and emotional learning abilities.

3.3 Participants

The FIERCE project is a longitudinal study focusing on displaced Syrian mothers and their 4–8-year-old children. Fathers were included later in this project as well. Most of the families had been living in Jordan for 8 or 9 years at the time of data collection. Hence, most of the participating children were born in Jordan. Inclusion criteria was the requirement of being a refugee ‘mother’ who was the primary caregiver of at least one child between the age of 4 and 8 years old. There was only one exception of a child participated with the grandmother because the child’s mother has passed away. In addition, the fact that some of the children were 3 ($n = 2$) or 9 years old ($n = 1$) was revealed through participants’ official documents despite that age limitation was set as the inclusion criteria of the project. Those children were included in the analyses as well.

The FIERCE dataset includes 325 mother-child dyads at T1, 315 mother-child dyads at T2, and 102 mother-child dyads at T3; the total number of coded observational data is 238. The number of coded observational data of mother-child interaction in the shared book reading activity is 212 (89.1%), whereas a total of 195 dyads (81.9%) of free play episodes were coded. The number of father participants is different from dyads because funding of the project and data collection procedure were different for fathers. The dataset includes 160 fathers at T1, 105 fathers at T2, and none at T3. Participants’ demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participants' demographic characteristics*

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Mother age (in years)	320		32.61	7.02	20-55
Child age (in years)	321		6.32	1.18	3-9
Child gender (male)	161	50%			

3.4 Procedure

Data collection took place in Amman and Za'atari, Jordan. Participants were recruited in Amman via community-based organisations by introducing the FIERCE project and asking for their participation. Other participants were recruited in Za'atari by two leaders of the We Love Reading intervention. They gave information about the project to Syrian refugee women who might have been interested in participating. The researchers contacted those mothers by phone to ask if they would be interested in participation. In case a mother had more than one child in this age range, the child closest to 6 years old was chosen as the study child. The participation rate was 91%.

Ethical approval was received from the Health Policy and Management/Centre for Global Health Research Ethics Committee of Trinity College Dublin in January 2021. An informational document in Arabic detailing the goals of the FIERCE project, data protection, and participants' rights to discontinue participation without any penalty was

given to the recruited participants. For the purpose of avoiding reading-related restrictions, participants were also informed verbally. COVID public health concerns prevented the physical collection of informed consent forms. These forms were accepted from the adults for their participation and their child's participation on behalf of minors.

Data collection was performed in Arabic while it was translated into English simultaneously as well. The mother and child data were collected by female local fieldworkers, and the father data was collected by male fieldworkers. Data were collected in written and oral from mothers and children at the participants' homes and by fathers over the phone by fieldworkers who were native Arabic speakers based in Jordan. The data were input directly into KoBoToolbox. The fieldworkers were trained for one week in all measures used for the FIERCE project before data collection, and then conducted pilot data collection with 10 families in January 2021.

There are three time-points of data from mothers and children and two time-points of data from fathers. Figure 3 indicates the timeline of the randomized control trial of the FIERCE project including mother-child dyads, while Figure 4 shows the timeline for father participants.

Figure 3. *Timeline of the randomized control trial of the FIERCE project (mother-child)*

2021- February March April May June July August 2022- March April May

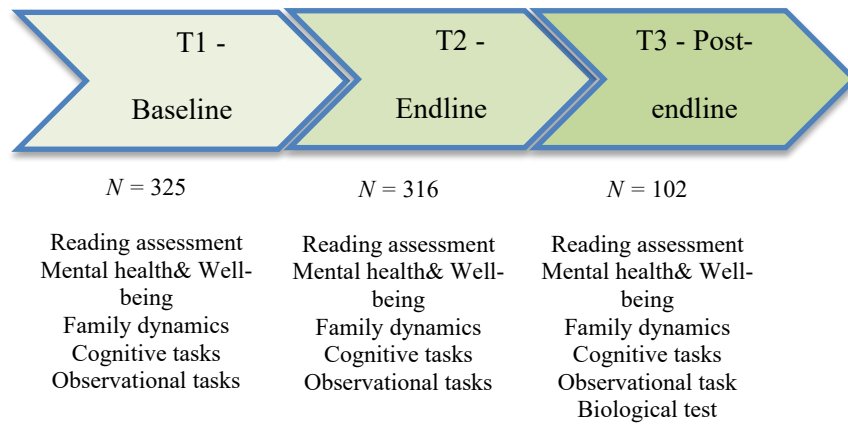
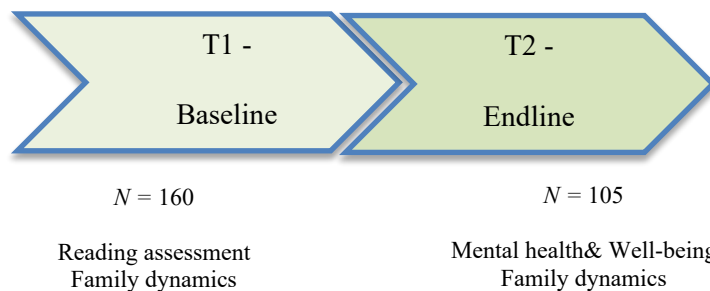


Figure 4. *Timeline of the randomised control trial of the FIERCE project (fathers)*

2021- March April May June July August...2022- January



In this thesis, we analysed the data of fathers from the survey on father involvement which was filled by mothers and fathers at T1 and T2, the data of mother-child dyads from the two observational tasks at T1, and the data of children who took part in the social and emotional competence assessment by themselves. The procedure involved the administration of questionnaires, behavioural/cognitive tasks, and observational tasks. Originally developed or previously validated measures in Arabic were used. Measures

developed and validated in English were also used by translating in an understandable and contextually appropriate manner. Fieldworkers recorded participants' answers to questionnaires in KoBoToolbox. For observational data of mother-child interaction, mother-child dyads were video-recorded while dyads were playing or reading a book. Then, all videos were coded based on a manual adapted from the Coding of Attachment Related Parenting (S-CARP). Data collection lasted approximately an hour for mothers and children, and approximately 30 minutes for fathers.

3.5 Measures

3.5.1 Father involvement

To assess father involvement with the child, the *Father Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ)* developed by Hein et al. (2020) was used. It was originally developed to be mother reported for the RCT in a sample living in refugee and disadvantaged communities in Beirut, Lebanon (Hein et al., 2020), but was adapted for FIERCE to be also completed by fathers about themselves. The FIQ consists of 20 items rated on a 4-point-Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). A total score of paternal involvement is the sum of ratings (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) (Hein et al., 2020). Nine items focus on the father's engagement with his children (e.g., speaks often with his children); six items are about how the father is involved with his wife as a spouse (e.g., is tolerant with his wife); and the last five items aim to measure paternal involvement with the community as a member (e.g., spends time with other fathers in the community). We used only the father-child involvement sub-scale of the FIQ reported by mothers and fathers at T1 and T2 in this study.

Internal consistency was measured at two different time-points in the FIERCE project, with Cronbach's Alpha being .82 and .62 for mother- and father reported paternal involvement at T1, respectively; and .85 for mother- and .65 for father-reported paternal involvement at T2, respectively.

3.5.2 The quality of mother-child interaction

To assess mother-child interaction quality through coding of videotapes of mother-child dyads during activities, the adapted version of the *Coding of Attachment Related Parenting (S-CARP)* developed by Bennetts et al. (2020) was used. S-CARP is an adaptation of the CARP (Matias, 2006; Matias et al., 2006) which is based on attachment theory designed for direct observation of at-risk parents and their 5-6-year-old children; S-CARP was adapted for the observation of parents and their 7-8-year-old children. The FIERCE project used the S-CARP measure to code mother-child interactions in observational data of mothers and children doing two tasks: Free play (5 minutes) and shared book reading (10 minutes). Both tasks took place in participants' homes at two different time points and were videorecorded. Before the tasks began, the fieldworkers informed the dyad about the fact that they would be video recorded and explained the task. At the beginning of each task, they were given two sets of toys (wooden blocks with cards and animal toys) for free play, and they were given two different child books for a shared reading session. Fieldworkers put an alarm for ending the task, or the mother-child dyad could inform the fieldworkers if they were done before the alarm. Another mother-child interaction task was puzzle to measure child task perseverance (grit). The child was

asked to build 7 pre-specified objects using duplo pieces, which was also video recorded. However, this observational task is not included in this study since it has not been coded yet.

The observational data of mother-child interactions were coded by different female research assistants. As the sample of the FIERCE project consists of conservative religious women who do not want to be seen by a male, the lead researcher who is a male could not observe and code the recorded videos of tasks for ethical reasons. He was able to see videos for coding only if they were blurred. Hence, he has been working on coding collaboratively with other female research assistants to complete coding of the observational data in the FIERCE project. They were trained in the coding scheme before coding started. They also had weekly meetings to make a progress on the quality of coding and make adjustments in the guideline of coding in case there was a need to make some changes.

S-CARP originally assessed two constructs: sensitive responding and positive mutuality. *Sensitive Responding* focuses on the mother's sensitivity towards the child's expressions of his/her needs. This construct is assessed through promotion of child's autonomy, guidance of the child during the task, and mother's responsive engagement, mother's expression of warmth, and mother's displayed mood. *Positive Mutuality* focuses on joint mother-child interactions. This construct is assessed through child's involvement of the mother in the task, dyad's shared attention on the task or attention to each other, the amount of eye contact, turn taking during the conversation, the fluidity of the conversation (cold/fluid/tense), body orientation toward each other and matched displays of positive

affect. The lead researcher of the project introduced another construct, called disruptive responding. *Disruptive Responding* focuses on the mother's hostile behaviours towards her child. It is assessed through contradictions in mother's behaviours and mother's forceful behaviours towards her child.

The structure of the S-CARP has been modified to reduce subjectivity of the coders. According to S-CARP, coders originally rate a construct based on its presence or absence ("yes" or "no"). After modification of the structure for the FIERCE project, constructs were also rated based on how often components were displayed during the task ("most of the time", "about half of the time", "rarely") and on whether they were displayed during the task or not ("present", "absent", "undetermined", "no opportunity"). The "Undetermined" option was used for the situations where the related behaviours of said construct could not be rated. Also, "No opportunity" option was used when there was no opportunity to observe the related behaviours of said construct in the recording.

In this study, we focused on the quality of mother-child interaction in terms of the frequency of those domain behaviours of mother-child dyads during the task. Therefore, most of the time is scored as 3, about half of the time is scored as 2, rarely scored as 1. If the answer is "no", it is scored as 0. We used promotion of child's autonomy, guidance of the child during the task, and mother's responsive engagement for the *Sensitive Responding*, which ranges between 0 and 9; child's involvement of the mother in the task, dyad's shared attention on the task or attention to each other, and matched displays of positive affect for the *Positive Mutuality*, which ranges between 0 and 9; contradictions in mother's behaviours and mother's forceful behaviours towards her child for the

Disruptive Responding, which ranges between 0 and 6. Percent agreement was calculated between coders to measure inter-rater reliability (IRR) using Cohen's kappa. Coders' agreement for shared book activity; Sensitive Responding was 51%, for Positive Mutuality was 53%, and for Disruptive Responsiveness was 73%. Their agreement for free play activity; Sensitive Responding was 59%, for Positive Mutuality was 50%, and for Disruptive Responsiveness was 58%.

3.5.3 Mother-child closeness

The short form of the *Child-Parent Relationship Scale* (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011) was used to assess the level of mother-child closeness. It originally consisted of 30 items (Pianta, 1992). In the FIERCE project, the research team used the 15-item short form, which measures closeness (items 1, 3, 5-7, 9, 15) and conflict (items 2, 4, 8, 10-14) between parents and their children. The Child-Parent Relationship Scale is rated on a 5-point-Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*definitely does not apply*) to 5 (*definitely applies*). Items include: "My child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me" (closeness) and "My child and I always seem to be struggling with each other" (conflict). Closeness scores range between 7 and 35, whereas conflict scores range between 8 and 40. Higher scores indicate more closeness or conflict in the mother-child relationship. Mothers reported on their relational closeness and conflict with the 4-8-year-old study child at all three time-points in the FIERCE project. In this thesis, we used data from the closeness sub-scale collected at T1 and T2.

Internal consistency of the scale, measured using Cronbach's alpha, was $\alpha = .52$ at

T1 and $\alpha = .62$ at T2.

3.5.4 Child social emotional learning – empathy and self-concept

To assess child social emotional learning, the *Holistic Assessment of Learning and Development Outcomes – Social and Emotional Learning (HALDO-SEL)* developed by D'Sa, Krupar, & Westrope (2019) was used. Save The Children has piloted the HALDO in a sample of Somali refugees in Dadaab, Kenya to better understand the development of displaced 4-12-year-olds. Then, it was validated in a sample of Syrian refugees in Bekaa, Lebanon. The validity and reliability were measured, and the results demonstrated that HALDO is a useful tool to measure developmental and learning outcomes of children in emergency contexts. Some adaptations were made for the FIERCE project, as the Arabic language spoken in Lebanon is different from the one spoken in Jordan. The HALDO takes 30 to 40 minutes to assess literacy, numeracy, executive functioning (EF) and social emotional learning (SEL) skills. The FIERCE project used the SEL sub-scale which included a total of 16 items and two subdomains in this study: Self-concept (11 items) and empathy (5 items). Interrater reliability was assessed using the intra-class coefficient (ICC) for each subdomain at different time points in which the data was collected. ICC for the empathy subdomain was .97 at T2, and .95 at T3; for the self-concept subdomain, it was .98 at both time-points (T2 and T3).

“Please tell me the name of the country that you live in now”, “Please tell me how old you are”, and “Please tell me your full name” are some example questions for self-concept. Empathy was assessed through two different tasks. The first task involved

showing the participant child a cartoon of a girl crying and asking them how the pictured girl feels and what would the participant child do to help her feel better. A correct response was scored as 1 and an incorrect response as 0. The second task is telling a story about that girl in the first task. The girl in the picture was crying because she was pushed by another child. She fell down and hurt her knee, so she started crying. The participant child is asked what another child would feel after the girl started crying. A correct response was scored as 1 and an incorrect response as 0. The total score is computed by summing up the scores, and ranges from 0 to 16, with higher scores indicating higher levels of socio-emotional skills. Children were directly assessed on this measure at T2 and T3.

3.6 Analytic plan

In preliminary analyses, the total scores for all variables were computed using listwise deletion in case there were any missing data. Data were analyzed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics software.

Next, we computed descriptive statistics, frequencies for the categorical variables and bivariate correlations among all variables. In this analysis, we calculated the means and standard deviations of mother and child age; mother-child interaction quality; mother-reported father-child involvement; father-reported father-child involvement; mother-child closeness; and child social and emotional learning. We assessed the frequency of male and female children.

Then, we checked assumptions including linearity, normality, and outliers before running regression analyses. In our correlation and regression analyses, we utilised

pairwise deletion to reduce the bias of few participants in the event that there were missing data. For the observational data analysis, we used sensitive responding, positive mutuality, disruptive behaviour as separate predictor variables. Before doing regression analysis, we wanted to make sure that the scores from the two different activities (such as shared book reading and free play) of observational data were sufficiently correlated to be combined. We ran a correlation analysis with sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive behaviour scores of the shared book reading task and free play task. Where the correlation was $\geq .60$, we would combine the data of the two tasks to create a combined score. Where the correlation was $< .60$, we would run separate analysis of the sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive behaviour scores of the two different tasks.

To address our first research question, we ran two multiple linear regression analyses to explore prospective and cross-sectional relationships between father-child involvement and child social and emotional learning. Mother age, child age and gender were used as control variables in all regression analyses. The first multiple regression analysis includes mother-reported and father-reported father involvement at T1 and T2 as independent variables, and child social emotional learning at T2 as the dependent variable. The second one consists of mother-reported and father-reported father involvement at T2 as independent variables and child social emotional learning at T3 as the dependent variable.

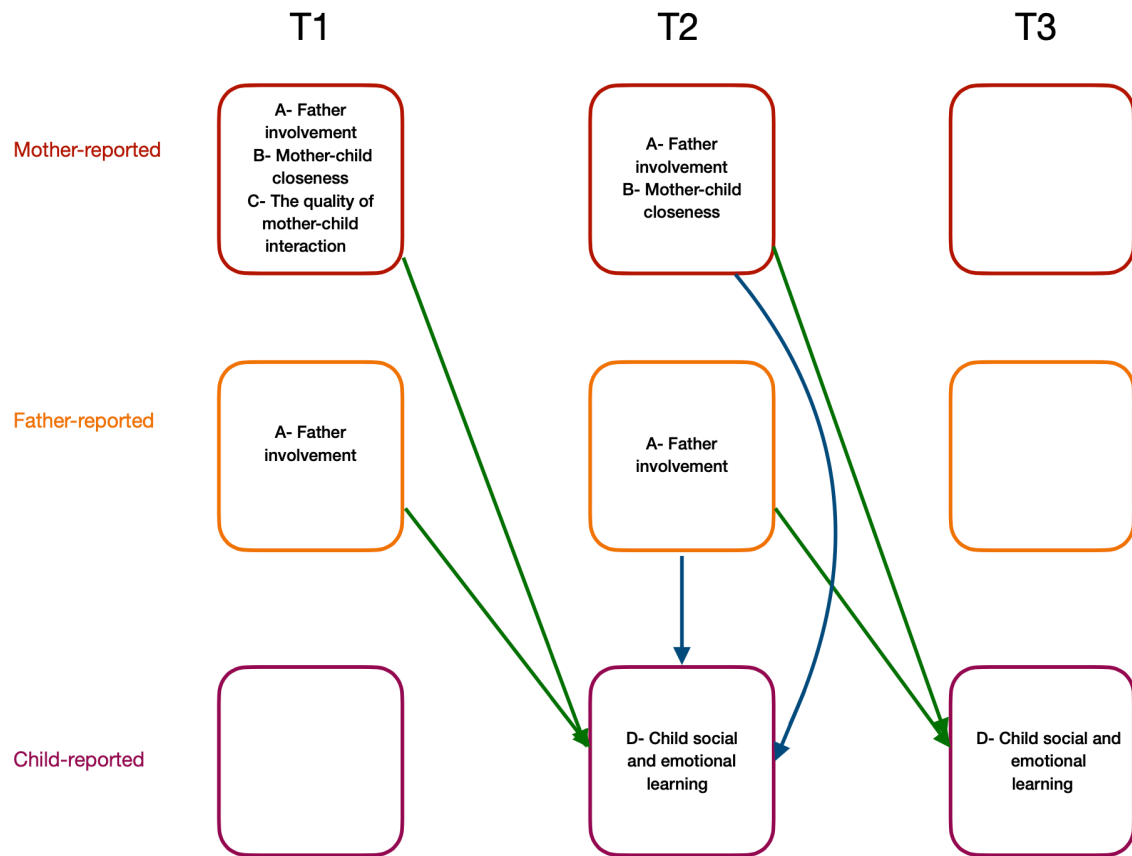
To address our second research question, we conducted a multiple linear regression model with the three dimensions of mother-child relationship quality at T1 as independent variables, child social and emotional learning at T2 as the dependent variable, and mother

age, child age and gender as control variables.

To address our third research question, we ran two multiple linear regression models to investigate the association between mother-child closeness at T1 and T2 and child social and emotional learning at T2 and T3 together with the previously mentioned control variables (mother age, child age and gender).

In all analyses, we controlled for child age, child gender, and mother age. We aimed to examine prospective and cross-sectional associations in this study to understand whether there was a temporal association between these predictors and children's social emotional skills (see Figure 5 for an overview).

Figure 5. *Analytic plan*



Note. T1 = Time-point 1 (baseline); T2 = Time-point 2 (endline); T3 = Time-point 3 (post-endline).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

Means and standard deviations of the study variables as well as their correlations were calculated (See Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of study variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Father Involvement T1- Mother-reported	26.53	5.11	211
Father Involvement T1- Father-reported	30.23	3.81	156
Father Involvement T2- Mother-reported	26.05	4.98	265
Father Involvement T2- Father-reported	30.32	3.49	103
Mother-child Closeness T1	32.87	2.64	310
Mother-child Closeness T2	32.60	2.55	302
Child social emotional learning T2	8.46	3.45	291
Child social emotional learning T3	9.35	3.14	93
Sensitive Responding-Reading	7.36	1.15	212
Positive Mutuality-Reading	5.28	1.60	210
Disruptive Responding-Reading	.78	.83	212
Sensitive Responding-Play	7.38	1.34	194
Positive Mutuality-Play	5.42	1.23	194
Disruptive Responding-Play	.78	.84	195

Table 3. *Correlations among study variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1.Father Involvement T1- M	-													
2.Father Involvement T1-F	.15	-												
3.Father Involvement T2- M	.71**	.28**	-											
4. Father Involvement T2-F	.25*	.69**	.48**	-										
5.Mother-child Closeness T1	.09	.04	.25**	.20*	-									
6.Mother-child Closeness T2	.10	.09	.22**	.10	.29**	-								
7.Child SEL T2	.11	.02	.05	.16	.09	.06	-							
8.Child SEL T3	.00	.05	-.10	-.22	.11	.11	.51**	-						
9.Sensitive Responding-R	-.04	.02	.04	-.03	.07	.01	-.17*	-.02	-					
10.Positive Mutuality-R	-.02	.04	.05	-.05	.14*	.04	-.15*	-.15	.48**	-				
11.Disruptive Responding- R	.02	.04	.04	-.01	.04	-.05	-.19**	-.17	.25**	.22**	-			
12. Sensitive Responding-P	.15	-.08	-.05	-.09	.04	.04	.04	.35**	.18*	.20**	.09	-		
13.Positive Mutuality-P	-.04	-.07	-.11	-.15	.03	.005	-.07	.09	.13	.24**	.006	.41**	-	
14.Disruptive Responding- P	-.12	-.01	-.01	-.10	-.004	.01	-.10	-.19	-.05	.08	.23**	.09	.15*	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. SEL: social emotional learning', M: 'Mother reported', F: 'Father-reported', P: 'Play', and R: 'Reading'.

As can be seen in Table 3, father involvement was relatively stable over time, and maternal reports were significantly associated with paternal reports (except for T1). Moreover, maternal reports of father involvement at T2 were significantly and positively correlated with observed mother-child closeness at T1 and T2. No associations with child social emotional learning or quality of mother-child interaction during the play and reading tasks were found.

Child social emotional learning at T2 was significantly and positively associated with social emotional learning at T3, and negatively associated with the quality of mother-child interaction during the reading tasks, although the correlations were modest. Moreover, social emotional learning at T3 was significantly and positively correlated with sensitive responding during the play task, with a medium-sized effect.

Significant correlations were also found among the indices of quality of mother-child interaction during the play and reading tasks, which will be analyzed in more detail in par. 4.3.

4.2 Father involvement and child social and emotional learning

Father involvement was assessed by a mother-reported and father-reported questionnaire. Data were collected at two different time points (T1 and T2), so we have four predictor variables related to father involvement. The outcome variable, namely child social emotional learning, was measured at two different time-points (T2 and T3). To test the first hypothesis, we conducted two multiple regression analyses including mother age, child age and gender as control variables.

The first model included mother-reported and father-reported father involvement at T1, mother-reported and father-reported father involvement at T2 as independent variables, mother age, child age and gender as control variables, and child social emotional learning at T2. This model was significant, $F(7, 84) = 3.899, p < .001$, explaining 24.5% of the variance in child social emotional learning at T2. However, none of independent variables predicted child social emotional learning at T2. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Regression analysis summary for father involvement at T1 and T2 predicting child social emotional learning at T2

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	0.006	[-0.09, 0.10]	.01	0.12	.899
Child age	1.23	[0.64, 1.82]	.42	4.18	.0001
Child gender	0.22	[-1.08, 1.52]	.03	0.33	.737
Mother-reported father involvement (T1)	0.10	[-0.08, 0.28]	.15	1.09	.276
Father-reported father involvement (T1)	-0.12	[-0.36, -0.11]	-.13	-1.01	.311
Mother-reported father involvement (T2)	-0.10	[-0.31, 0.10]	-.15	-0.98	.327
Father-reported father involvement (T2)	0.25	[-0.04, 0.54]	.25	1.70	.092

Note. $N = 84, p < .001$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

The second model included mother-reported and father-reported father involvement at T2 as independent variables, mother age, child age and gender as control variables, and child

social emotional learning at T3 as the outcome variable. However, this model was not significant, $F(5, 19) = 1.524, p > .05$, explaining 28.6% of the variance in social emotional learning at T3. In addition, either mother-reported father involvement or father-reported father involvement were not significantly associated with child social emotional learning at T3. (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Regression analysis summary for father involvement at T2 predicting child social emotional learning at T3*

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	-0.01	[-0.20, 0.17]	-0.02	-0.14	.890
Child age	1.31	[0.18, 2.45]	0.49	2.42	.025
Child gender	0.11	[-2.44, 2.67]	0.01	0.09	.924
Mother-reported father involvement (T2)	0.01	[-0.28, 0.30]	0.01	0.01	.946
Father-reported father involvement (T2)	-0.25	[-0.67, 0.16]	-0.28	-0.28	.221

Note. $N = 19$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

Hence, at the multivariate level, father involvement was not related to child social emotional learning at any time-point.

4.3 Correlations between observational tasks

The quality of mother-child interaction was assessed by two different tasks: Shared book reading and free play activities. Even though data from these activities were coded based

on the same guidelines, before running our analyses we assessed possible associations among the variables derived from coding of these two tasks. We therefore conducted a correlational analysis considering sensitive responding, positive mutuality and disruptive responding for each activity. Most of the data were not normally distributed, so we used Spearman's correlation test. Results are reported in Table 7.

Table 7. *Correlations between variables derived from the two observational tasks*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1.Sensitive Responding - Reading	-					
2.Positive Mutuality - Reading	.51**	-				
3.Disruptive Responding - Reading	.26**	.21**	-			
4.Sensitive Responding - Play	.15*	.15*	.09	-		
5. Positive Mutuality - Play	.14	.24**	.01	.37**	-	
6.Disruptive Responding - Play	-.07	.06	.19*	.10	.16*	-

Note. Reading task: $n = 212$; Play task: $n = 195$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

We found a small correlation for sensitive responding and for positive and disruptive responding between shared book reading and free play data.

As a consequence, we conducted subsequent analyses on the quality of mother-child interaction separately. The observational data including mother-child dyads who attended

the shared book reading activity is termed “reading dyads”, whereas the observational data of dyads who participated in the free play activity is termed “play dyads” from this point onwards.

4.4 Quality of mother-child interaction and child social emotional learning

To address our second research question, we ran two multiple linear regressions to explore whether there was an association between the quality of mother-child interaction and child social emotional learning. We examined short term longitudinal relationships because variables were collected at two different timepoints and considered the reading and play data separately.

Variables from the reading dyads at T1 were used in the first model as predictors, in addition to mother age, child age and gender as control variables, and child social emotional learning at T2 as an outcome variable. The independent variables included sensitive response, positive mutuality, and disruptive responding. The model was statistically significant, $F(6, 187) = 9.426, p < .001$, and explained 23.2% of the variance in the outcome variable. However, sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive responding were not significantly associated with child social emotional learning at T2. Results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Regression analysis summary for sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive responding from reading activity at T1 predicting child social emotional learning at T2

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	-0.004	[-0.07, -0.06]	-0.01	-0.11	.908
Child age	1.27	[0.87, 1.67]	0.43	6.26	.0001
Child gender	0.15	[-0.72, 1.03]	0.02	0.35	.722
Sensitive Responding	-0.09	[-0.54, 0.35]	-0.03	-0.42	.668
Reading					
Positive Mutuality	-0.23	[-0.55, 0.08]	-0.10	-1.43	.153
Reading					
Disruptive Responding	-0.20	[-0.76, 0.35]	-0.05	-0.72	.468
Reading					

Note. $N = 187$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

In the second model, we included the same independent variables (sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive responding) from the play dyads at T1 and considered child social emotional learning at T2 as the outcome variable together with the previously mentioned control variables (mother age, child age and gender). Again, the model was significant, $F(6, 169) = 8.348$, $p < .001$, explaining 22.9 % of the variance in the outcome variable. Yet, none of the dimensions of mother–child interaction was found to be significantly associated with child social emotional learning (see Table 9).

Table 9. Regression analysis summary for sensitive responding, positive mutuality, and disruptive responding from play activity at T1 predicting child social emotional learning at T2

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	-0.01	[-0.08, 0.05]	-0.03	-0.43	0.66
Child age	1.36	[0.95, 1.78]	0.46	6.53	.0001
Child gender	0.17	[-0.74, 1.10]	0.02	0.38	0.70
Sensitive Responding Play	0.35	[-0.02, 0.72]	0.13	1.83	0.06
Positive Mutuality Play	-0.23	[-0.65, 0.17]	-0.08	-1.13	0.25
Disruptive Responding Play	-0.13	[-0.69, 0.43]	-0.03	-0.45	0.64

Note. $N = 169$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

Hence, in either task, the quality of mother-child interaction was not significantly associated with child social emotional learning at any time-point.

4.5 Mother-child closeness and child social emotional learning

To address the third research question, two multiple regression analysis were run to explore whether there was an association between mother-child closeness measured at T1 and T2 and child social emotional learning at T2 and T3.

In the first model, we included mother-child closeness at T1 and T2 as independent variables, mother age, child age, and child gender as control variables, and child social

emotional learning at T2 as the outcome variable. This model was statistically significant, $F(5, 271) = 14.911, p < .001$, and explained 21.6% of the variance in the outcome variable. However, mother-child closeness at T1 and T2 were not associated with child social emotional learning at T2. Results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. *Regression analysis summary for mother-child closeness at T1 and T2 predicting child social emotional learning at T2*

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	-0.01	[-0.07, 0.03]	-0.03	-0.62	.531
Child age	1.35	[1.02, 1.67]	0.46	8.24	.0001
Child gender	0.17	[-0.56, 0.91]	0.02	0.46	.644
Mother-child closeness T1	0.07	[-0.07, 0.21]	0.05	0.96	.338
Mother-child closeness T2	0.03	[-0.11, 0.18]	0.02	0.49	.623

Note. $N = 271, p < .001$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

In the second model, mother-child closeness at T2 was included as independent variables, mother age, child age and gender were analysed as control variables, and child social emotional learning at T3 was the dependent variable. This model was also significant, $F(4, 86) = 6.085, p < .001$, explaining 22.1% of the variance in the dependent variable. However, mother-child closeness at T2 were not significantly associated with child social emotional learning at T3 (see Table 11).

Table 11. Regression analysis summary for mother-child closeness at T2 predicting child social emotional learning at T3

	<i>B</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother age	-0.01	[-0.07, 0.03]	-0.03	-0.04	.965
Child age	1.35	[1.02, 1.67]	0.46	4.60	.0001
Child gender	0.17	[-0.56, 0.91]	0.02	0.04	.962
Mother-child closeness T2	0.03	[-0.11, 0.18]	0.02	0.96	.338

Note. $N = 86$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval for *B*.

Consistent with the previous analyses, in this study mother-child closeness was not associated with child social emotional learning at any time-point.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 General comment

The current study investigated the role of paternal involvement, mother-child closeness, and the quality of mother-child interaction in levels of child social emotional learning (in terms of empathy and self-concept) among Syrian refugee families resettled in Jordan. Specifically, we conducted a secondary data analysis based on the FIERCE project coordinated by Dr. Kristin Hadfield (Trinity College Dublin), which aims to assess effectiveness of a reading intervention ('We Love Reading') targeting refugee families resettled in Jordan. The current study used observational and survey data from a total of 325 Syrian refugee families living in either Amman or Za'atari including fathers, mothers and their 4–8-year-old children. Data were collected at three different timepoints over a year in 2021.

Our first research question aimed to explore prospective and cross-sectional associations between father involvement and child social emotional learning. Father involvement was assessed at T1 and T2 through both mothers' and fathers' reports, while child social emotional learning was measured at T2 and T3 via children's own reports. Based on previous research with community samples (Novita & Jovanka, 2016; Yoon et al., 2021), we expected father involvement to be positively associated with child social emotional learning. Although correlational analyses indicated that father involvement was relatively stable across the two time points and agreement between the two parental

figures was moderate-to-high, our results did not reveal any prospective or cross-sectional relationships between father involvement and child social emotional learning. Additionally, none of the control variables - except for child age - predicted child social emotional learning.

It is important to note that studies exploring the relationship between father involvement and child social emotional learning have not been conducted in a refugee context. An exception might be a study by Hein et al. (2020), who investigated father involvement and its association with maternal well-being and distress among Syrian refugee families in Lebanon. Contrary to our findings, they suggested paternal involvement might have a positive impact on children through the mediating role of maternal well-being. However, we used a direct measure of child social emotional learning rather than assessments of maternal well-being to explore the relationship between father involvement and child development outcome, therefore, possibly leading to different results.

Another explanation of our null findings is related cultural factors, since the current study focused on Syrian fathers and children, whereas most extant studies were conducted with fathers and children from Western countries (Culp et al., 2000; Yoon et al., 2021). For instance, there is evidence that authoritarian and harsh parenting are more common in Eastern families than in Western families (Dwairy, & Achoui, 2010), and fathers tend to be overall less involved in childcare. This pattern might have affected the expected association between paternal involvement and child social emotional development. Interestingly, Fagan (2000) found that paternal involvement was significantly associated

with child development among Puerto Rican American families, but not among African American families due to different parenting practices within cultures. This result also highlights the importance of culture to assess the impact of parenting practices in child development. Bokszczanin (2008) also suggested that paternal involvement may not be associated with child outcomes after a disaster, because children might interpret fathers' involvement with them as paternal control. Therefore, further research exploring parenting styles in humanitarian contexts is warranted to shed light on possible cultural/contextual effects.

Methodological issues might play a role in explaining our null findings. Father involvement is assessed via a questionnaire. It includes nine items to assess father involvement with the child, which might not be enough to elaborate father involvement in deep. In addition, child social emotional learning was reported by children on themselves. The sample includes children as young as the age of 4, which could also raise a concern about comprehension of items included in the measurement.

The second research question investigated whether there was an association between the quality of mother-child interaction and child social emotional learning. It was expected that a higher quality would be linked to increased child social emotional learning, as suggested in the existing literature (Laible & Song, 2006). However, our findings did not reveal any significant associations among the variables under study, with the exception of age (i.e., older children had better social emotional competence).

We ran a correlational analysis to see associations among all study variables without control variables in regression analyses. Interestingly, the quality of mother-child

interaction during shared book reading activity showed some significant relationships with child social emotional learning. Specifically, disruptive responding was negatively associated with child social emotional learning, consistent with previous findings (Sim et al., 2018), but both sensitive responding and positive mutuality were also significantly and negatively related to child social emotional learning, which was surprising. However, effect sizes were small, and this pattern was not present for the same variables coded during the free play task. Since the interaction might vary during these two different activities, each component of dyadic interaction can have different outcomes. For example, dyads are more active while playing with toys, whereas they become more passive during the shared reading book task.

A possible explanation of these null findings is related to the measurement of the quality of mother-child interaction. CARP is validated in the United Kingdom, whereas adaptation of this measurement, S-CARP, is validated in Australia (Bennetts et al., 2020). In this study, S-CARP is used for coding the interaction between Syrian mothers and their children. As it discussed before, differences between Western and Eastern parenting behaviours might play a key role. Sensitive responding and positive mutuality could be expressed in different ways than those coded based on the manual, such as autonomy or turn-taking during the conversation. Additionally, our sample consisted of Syrian refugee families who were resettled in Jordan. Taking environmental factors into consideration, these families might not have enough resources to normally play or read with their children and interact with them in different ways or settings. Other needs might come first, as refugee families face a considerable poverty after displacement (Hanmer et al.,

2020). Furthermore, mother-child play is not common across all cultures, especially in collectivistic contexts where children mostly play with their siblings or peers and are involved in the family household (Roopnarine, 2011).

Regarding the literature on mother-child interaction, previous research has found a positive impact of the quality of mother-child interaction on child development, in particular cognitive development (see Laude, 1999), and one study with refugee mothers and children involved in an interactive book reading task reported a positive effect on language development (Barnes et al., 2022). Hence, it is possible that child outcomes other than social emotional competence could be related to the quality of mother-child interaction within a refugee context.

The third research question examined if there was a relationship between mother-child closeness and child social emotional learning. Two analyses were run to see if there was a prospective link between these variables. However, the results revealed that there was no association between mother-child closeness and child social emotional learning. Past research has found a significant association between mother-child closeness and child social emotional development in terms of self-esteem (Amato, 1994). Hence, it is possible that using different outcome variables instead of empathy and self-concept may lead to different results. From a methodological perspective, the questionnaire used to assess this maternal variable showed low levels of internal consistency, pointing to possible cross-cultural differences in the meaning attributed to closeness and in how it is expressed by Syrian mothers. Furthermore, closeness might be more difficult to experience due to the stressful living conditions of resettled refugee mothers (Scharpf et

al., 2023). Although the mother-child relationship can play a protective role in refugee children's health and development, more research is needed to better understand the subjective experiences of mother-child closeness in such a specific and highly challenging context.

5.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results.

First, limitation of the current study is limited number of fathers participating at all timepoints and for children at timepoint 3 limits statistical power and the generalizability of results. Although refugee populations are highly mobile, longitudinal studies are extremely challenging in humanitarian contexts, and fathers are rarely involved in this kind of studies, future research may include a larger number of fathers to increase the robustness of results.

Second, the limited duration of observations concerning mother-child interaction might not enable to fully capture the nuances of maternal and child behaviour exhibited during the specific tasks, therefore not providing a sufficiently complete picture of the quality of mother-child interaction. Moreover, even though data were collected in a natural setting (i.e., participants' home), the dyads were aware of being recorded during the task, raising concerns about social desirability. For example, mothers could refrain from being harsh towards their children in order not to be judged. Another concern is methodological, since all the observational data were already coded by other researchers, but not all of them were double-coded. Hence, coder bias may have influenced the results

to some extent. In future research, longer observational periods as well as more independent judges should be used to increase the validity of findings.

Third, the capability of measures utilised in this study is limited to assess the study variables broadly. The low number of items included in the questionnaires, and cultural appropriateness of measures (e.g., Child-Parent Relationship Scale) could have an impact on the accuracy of assessments of the study variables, and in turn the findings of associations among them. In addition, collecting observational data could cause some limitations. For example, mother-child dyads were video-recorded which can result in bias in the participants for the awareness of being recorded. Even though data were collected at the natural setting, participants' homes, the content of mother-child interaction (e.g., free play and shared book reading) might also not be usual way of mother-child interaction among Syrian refugee families. Therefore, future research may include additional different measurements considering into accuracy and bias.

5.3 Implications for future research

Although the multivariate findings did not reveal any significant associations among parenting-related variables and child social emotional learning in this sample of Syrian refugee families, some lessons can be learned that can inform future research and interventions conducted in humanitarian settings.

First of all, the literature suggests that interventions can promote the positive impact of parent-child interaction on boosting positive parenting and, in turn, child development and wellbeing (Lakkis et al., 2020). Additionally, the importance of social emotional

learning-based interventions and practices in the school setting is underlined (McClelland et al., 2017). In a recent study, Al-Janaideh et al. (2023) emphasized that refugee children's social emotional capacities can play a role as protective factors to build resilience and to have positive outcomes in mental health and academic life against risk factors and the adversity they face. Hence, there is a need for tailoring interventions towards refugee children's social emotional learning for the promotion of resilience.

Secondly, fathers are still missing in the literature on child development and family dynamics, especially in a refugee context. As the importance of the father's role on child well-being has been demonstrated (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 1997), interventions and studies should include fathers as caregivers as well. Importantly, even though refugee context has just started to be investigated recently, refugee fathers should be involved in the literature as the number of refugees are increasing in the world. They cannot be excluded from either practice or research because they are a critical part of children's lives.

Thirdly, extant research on parenting and children's socio-emotional competence mainly targets people from Western cultures, limiting the understanding of other people within different contexts. The current study investigated child social emotional development with Syrian refugee families resettled in Jordan, so there can be many confounding factors to explain parents' involvement with the child and child social emotional learning. Displacement, cultural differences, financial consequences of war or resettlement, and living in a refugee camp might be some examples of possible factors affecting families in the current study. Therefore, the literature needs to take the role of

cultural and contextual factors into consideration while investigating concepts or validating measurements.

5.4 Conclusion

Refugee children struggle with the consequences of war and displacement. Children who are exposed to war during their mothers' pregnancy show developmental delays (Qouta et al., 2021). However, parents play a key role in refugee children's well-being and development in the face of these adversities (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

In the current study, we investigated the association of father involvement, the quality of mother-child interaction, and mother-child closeness with child social emotional learning while controlling mother age, child age and gender within Syrian refugee families resettled in Jordan. The findings did not reveal any prospective or cross-sectional relationship between father involvement and child social emotional learning. Moreover, the quality of mother-child interaction was not related to child social emotional learning which is not expected; a similar result emerged for mother-child closeness.

However, these results should be interpreted considering the limitations of this study in relation to both methodology and cross-cultural validity. Hence, there is a need to replicate this study to better understand how parental involvement may contribute to children's emotional development among refugee families in order to improve family relationships and ultimately enhance resilience.

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