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Risk of severe mental disorders in adults separated temporarily from their parents in childhood: the Helsinki birth cohort study.

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Abstract

In a large, prospective epidemiological study we tested whether exposure to **severe** early life stress increases the **risk of severe mental disorders** in adulthood, and whether childhood socioeconomic background and sex modify these associations. Among the 12,747 participants of the Helsinki Birth Cohort Study, born 1934-1944, 1719 were recorded as **separated temporarily** from their **parents** in childhood. The separations took place during World War II when Finnish children were voluntarily evacuated unaccompanied by their **parents** to temporary foster care abroad (mean age at and length of separation 4.6 and 1.7 years, respectively). **Severe mental disorders** were identified from the Finnish Hospital Discharge and Causes of Death Registers between years 1969 and 2004. Compared to the non-**separated**, the **separated** had higher risks of **mental**, substance use and personality disorder (P-values ≤ 0.05). The **risk of any mental** and substance use disorder was, however, highest in the **separated** and lowest in the non-**separated** with an upper childhood socioeconomic background; individuals with a lower childhood socioeconomic background showed an intermediate **risk** regardless of their separation status (P-values for interactions ≤ 0.05). Temporary separation from **parents** poses a **risk of severe mental disorders** later in life. Children with an upper childhood socioeconomic background may be particularly sensitive to this type of early life stress, while for children with a lower childhood socioeconomic background it may not add to the **risk** already associated with lower socioeconomic position in childhood.

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