

Research Article



## The relationship between emotional availability of the mother and behavior problems in the child

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the relations between emotional availability of the mother during free play and behavioral problems of the child in early childhood. Participants included 30 mothers (mean age 31.67 years,  $SD=5.18$ ) and their children (mean age 2.9 years, ( $SD=0.53$ )). The research uses two scales of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and observations of emotional availability (Biringen 2000). Results revealed that heightened sensitivity and lack of intrusiveness on the part of the mother was related to a reduction in problems on the part of the child. The research increases knowledge regarding the links between emotional availability of the mother and behavioral problems on the part of children. Its results will have implications for intervention programs on the part of therapeutic personnel who come in contact with parents and children.

**Keywords:** child behavior checklist, child behavior, early childhood, emotional availability, mothers



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**Public Interest Statement**

This research points to the critical influence of parental approaches to their children on their children's behavior. By providing an instrument to measure parental emotional availability, this research suggests intervention where appropriate. As such daycare administrators are encouraged to consider initiating parent intervention programs to support an increase in emotional availability to the benefit of the children.

*Danny entered the kindergarten accompanied by his mother, as he did every morning. For a moment, I thought that I would again witness a heartbreaking situation, in which Danny weeps and refuses to let go of his mother's skirt. However, this time, I had a surprise. At the entrance of the kindergarten, the mother leaned towards her son, whispered something in his ear, hugged him and turned away. Danny entered the kindergarten and went to his favorite book corner. Without thinking twice, I turned to the mother and asked her, "What just happened here?" The mother immediately replied with a spark in her eyes, "It finally worked! After all the advice and hard work, I managed to spend a long afternoon with Danny, in a joint activity, in which both of us were together, Danny in his pursuits and me with him, accompanying every step, sometimes relating, sometimes adding something of my own. Today, the moment has come that Danny was able to say goodbye to me, and I to him. I reminded him that now he arrives at kindergarten and we would both miss each other, but we would meet again at the end of the day." (Personal note following a training observation).*

In the above description, the mother illustrates how, thanks to the training that she received, her emotional availability to her son had a positive effect on his considerable behavior difficulties. The relationship between children's behavior and the emotional availability of their mother is especially significant in early childhood. During this time, the parent is the most significant figure for the child and serves as an anchor, encouraging the child's resilience, particularly in times of crisis.

**Emotional availability in a parent-child relationship**

Emotional availability is one of the characteristics of a parent-child relationship. It relates to the quality of the emotional communication between the parent and child, and focuses on their availability and the ability to read one another and to respond to each other's communication (Emde & Easterbrooks, 1985). The term 'emotional availability' includes components relating to parental behavior, as well as components relating to the child's behavior as part of a dyadic structure of relationship (Biringen & Robinson, 1991). This relationship structure includes emotional expression and responsiveness of both people in the dyad, and focuses on the accessibility of the two partners towards each other. Thus, researchers are required to observe both members of the dyad (Aviezer et al., 1999; Bornstein et al., 2006). Emotional availability enhances the mutuality of the parent-child relationship and the need to view the behaviors of parent and child as interdependent and bi-directional (Biringen & Robinson, 1991).

The expressions of emotional availability are different between parents and children. Parents are perceived as emotionally available for their child when they demonstrate sensitivity and warmth towards the child, provide plenty of space for expression in all sorts of situations, and provide a supportive presence that is neither intrusive nor hostile. The parent is perceived by the child as a secure basis for exploring and as an active partner, participating in their social and play activities

and responding to them. Children are considered emotionally available when they respond to their parents emotionally, physically, and socially after the parents initiate and provide structure, and also when children express interest, involve the parent in the game, and add the parent to the interaction (Emde, 1989). In interactions with optimal emotional availability, each partner expresses a wide range of emotions and the interaction is characterized by positive emotions, such as pleasure and interest. In contrast, interactions without optimal emotional availability are characterized by limited and more rigid emotional expressions, and there is evidence of distress, a lack of involvement, or avoiding interaction (Emde, 1989).

Emotional availability can be measured using the emotional availability scales developed by Biringen (2000). These scales represent a universal method to describe the quality of the emotional relationship between the parent and the child, and they are associated with the pleasure of dyadic interaction and mutual responsiveness, including mutual regulation, a desire to share various situations and activities, and an attempt to perceive emotional aspects in a dyad towards each other by focusing on the behavioral contributions of both partners (Ziv et al., 2000). A lack of these attributes may be associated with negative child outcomes such as behavior problems.

### **Behavior problems in early childhood**

Behavior problems in childhood include violation of rules, resistance to authority, restlessness and distractibility, lack of cooperation, seeking attention, quarrels, resistance, and aggression. Between 10 and 15 percent of children exhibit behavioral problems; five percent of them between the ages of four and six at a moderate-severe degree and five percent of them exhibit behavioral problems that will not decrease with age (Rutter et al., 2006). In general, behavior problems during early childhood have moderate stability over time. They are associated with severe symptomatology throughout development, such as difficulties in adjusting at school, dropping out of educational frameworks, delinquency, social rejection, low self-image, and a lack of internalization of social norms.

Several theoretical approaches point to the importance of aggressive behavior, which is usually defined as a behavior intended to cause harm or damage to a person or property (Solberg, 1995). Freud assumed that every person has internal aggression that must flow out, and when it undergoes refinement processes, it will help the individual to release its oppressive stress and find a productive place in society (Storr, 1989). Shapiro (1999) strengthened the Freudian approach and claimed that aggression is innate and has a primary role in humans' continuing existence. According to Shapiro, aggression is essential for existence and reflects a primary impulse that appears at an early stage of child development and can be expressed because of frustration or dissatisfaction. Tal (2018) noted that expressions of aggression appear more frequently in young children than in adults, and that physical aggression is more prevalent, and it develops into verbal aggression with increasing age. Tal also claimed that aggression focused on objects is replaced by aggression focused on people.

Research has demonstrated a link between the behavior of the parent and family atmosphere and the self-esteem and aggressive or restrained behaviors of the child (Solberg, 1995). In families with a positive parent-child relationship, where great acceptance is imparted, this relationship serves as a resilience factor with regard to the prevalence of violence during adolescence (Yaffe, 2005). In contrast, in neglecting families where children have no boundaries, the children learn that aggressiveness pays off and aggressive behavior problems may emerge. Further, high parental control, including severe punishment and lack of warmth and support, as well as inconsistency in emotional satisfaction and parental supervision, are related to the child's aggressive behavior.

Chess and Thomas (1984) note that children who are considered to have a bad temper in

their childhood may develop behavior problems and manifest aggression at an older age. They also claim that due to the difficulty in controlling these children's behavior, the parents are dragged into using discipline methods that increase the manifestations of aggression. Therefore, parenting that includes many restrictions, numerous punishments, and little peaceful and calm interaction with the child leads to more aggression. Baumrind's (1991) research examining the relationship between parenting style and specific dimensions in child adaptation (such as hyperactivity, aggression, and resenting behavior), revealed that adaptation problems in children are associated with high levels of punitive parenting. Many other studies found a link between low parental involvement, low levels of parental warmth, punitive parenting, and inconsistent parenting and the development of behavior problems in children (Baumrind, 1991; Brar, 2003; Fletcher et al., 2008; Harper, 2010; Maccoby, 1992; Palmer, 2009; Sommer, 2007).

### **Emotional availability & child functioning**

In studies that examined the effect of the mother's emotional availability on the functioning of the child, the researchers used emotional availability scales and referred to emotional availability as a multi-dimensional characteristic related to the child, the environment, and the parent (Ziv et al., 2000; Kang, 2006). The researchers claimed that parental behaviors of sensitivity and responsiveness have a positive effect on the functioning of the child. That is, supportive and understanding behavior by the parent encourages forming new cognitive schemes, new motoric abilities in the child, and new ways of interacting with the world (Kang, 2006). As such, it was found that the degree of emotional availability between the parent and child is associated with the cognitive development of the child.

According to Kassidy, emotional availability has an effect on the child's emotional regulation (Kassidy, 1999), and a caregiver who is emotionally available is an essential element in helping an infant or toddler achieve effective regulation of his emotions. Subsequently, Sroufe (1996) described emotional regulation in early childhood as a process of transition from dyadic regulation between baby and caregiver in the first year of a baby's life to autonomous emotional regulation. This ability develops until final internalization of emotional control is achieved during the kindergarten years. In emotionally available relationships in which the parent is sensitive and not hostile or intrusive, the parent is able to respond to a wide variety of emotions and to accept them and thus, to enable the child to cope with and experience a wide variety of expressions in diverse situations. This experience strengthens the child's ability to regulate emotions and behavior and to respond to the parents and others in a responsive and involved manner (Biringen, 2000; Biringen & Robinson, 1991). A study that examined the relationship between emotional availability and emotional regulation, found that children in less emotionally available dyads tended to experience more difficulties in emotional regulation during conditions of emotional challenges, in comparison to children with more emotionally available dyads (Lital & Karter, 2005). It was also found that children with high emotional availability and children whose parents were rated as having high emotional availability, tended to experience fewer externalized and introverted behavior problems (Kang, 2006).

Biringen (2000) claimed that optimal emotional availability is associated with secure attachment. Going away from the parent is possible because the child has confidence in the availability of the parent and the return towards the parent is possible because the child is confident that the parent will accept him back when he returns. Aviezer et al. (1999) found that mothers of children with secure attachment were more responsive and more structured than mothers of children with insecure attachment.

In addition, it was found that young children between the ages of 2:6 and 3 with a secure attachment were more responsive and involved than children with an insecure attachment (Ziv



et al., 2000). However, a recent study also pointed to the other side of the correlation between emotional availability in the parent-child relationship and developmental results and showed that a low level of emotional availability in the parent-child relationship is associated with behavior problems among children (Stams et al., 2005).

### Current Study

The goal of the current study is to try to characterize the relations between characteristics of mothers' emotional availability during free play and characteristics of the behavior problems of the child in early childhood.

We hypothesized three research hypotheses:

1. Mother-child interactions characterized with higher maternal sensitivity will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior, and behavioral problems in general.
2. Mother-child interactions characterized with high maternal structuring will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior and behavioral problems in general.
3. Mother-child interactions characterized by low levels of intrusiveness on the part of the mother will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior and behavioral problems in general.

### Research Designs and Methods

#### Participants

The study included 30 mothers and their children, who were sampled in a convenience sample in a large central city in Israel. The average age of the mothers was 31.67 years ( $SD=5.18$ ) and the average age of their children was 2.9 years ( $SD=0.53$ ). Table 1 presents the demographic data of the sample. It can be seen that despite the attempt to reach a balanced sample, the sample included more boys than girls. The sample also included a considerable percentage of educated mothers (70% have an academic education) and a majority of traditional and religious families (86.7%). The large majority of the families were categorized as middle to high SES (70%).

Table 1

*Prevalence of Demographic Variables (N=30)*

Variable	Values	Prevalence	Prevalence in %
Child's gender	Male	18	60.0
	Female	12	40.0
Mother's origin country	Born in Israel	29	96.7
	Born overseas	1	3.3
Father's origin country	Born in Israel	28	93.3
	Born overseas	2	6.7
Child's position in the family	First	14	46.7
	Second	7	23.3
	Third	6	20.0
	Fourth and more	3	10.0
Family status	Married	28	93.3
	Divorced	2	6.7

Mother's education	High school	7	23.3
	Academic	21	70.0
	Professional	1	3.3
	Other	1	3.3
Degree of religiosity	Secular	3	10.0
	Traditional	5	16.7
	Religious	21	70.0
	Orthodox	1	3.3
Net monthly income per family in NIS	0-4,500	4	13.3
	4,501-7,300	1	3.3
	7,301-12,000	4	13.3
	12,000 and more	21	70.0

## Measures

**Emotional Availability** ([EA] Biringen, 2000) is an observation tool based on a 30-minute observation of a play interaction between a child and an adult caregiver. The measure includes six subscales, four related to components in the emotional availability of the mother towards the child (sensitivity, structuring, lack of intrusiveness, and lack of hostility) and two scales related to components in the child's availability (responsiveness and involvement) towards the mother.

The current study used three subscales out of the four parent sub-scales: sensitivity, structuring, lack of intrusiveness. These scales were chosen because of their relevance to the research questions. One scale, **parental sensitivity**, is defined as the ability to negotiate controversial issues and the dyadic ability to express a range of emotions. The emphasis in parental sensitivity, according to Biringen & Robinson (1991), is on the emotional qualities – the parent's ability to detect correctly the child's condition and to respond authentically and appropriately. A sensitive parent will meet the child's needs and desires and thus will form a relationship that enables the child to view himself positively. From the child's perspective, sensitivity is experienced as a special bond with the caregiver that includes the basic emotional characteristics of warmth and acceptance. The parent's sensitivity towards the child will help the child to view himself as a worthy, valuable person, who is interesting to the other.

The **parental structuring subscale** relates to the parent's ability to appropriately support the child's play, learning, and exploring. The parents do so by providing cues and rules and creating a framework for the interactions, while regulating the relationship.

Finally, the **lack of intrusive parenting** subscale relates to the parent's ability to be available, attentive, and emotionally present while accepting the child's autonomy so the child can continue with his activities and benefit from his attempts.

The tool was found valid and reliable (Biringen, 2000). Even though the maximum possible coding of each subscale is 29 points, in this study, the average coding ranged from 0 to 7 points, with 7 points representing the highest level of the feature that is being measured by the subscale.

**Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL]** Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) – the questionnaire is used for the assessment of behavior problems as they are perceived by the parent or another person who knows the child well. The questionnaire contains 113 statements describing problematic behaviors and feelings (for example: "defecates outside the toilet", "complains about loneliness", "does not eat well" and "quarrels a lot"). Statements are rated on a scale of 0-2 representing the extent to which the description is correct for the child (0=Not true [as far as I know], 1=True sometimes or to a certain degree, 2=Very true or often). The tool was found to be valid and reliable (Achenbach &

Edelbock, 1983). The Hebrew version of the questions was found to be valid and reliable in Israel (Zilber et al., 1994).

This study used two of the scales that appear on the questionnaire: **problems of resisting behavior** and **aggressive behavior**. In addition, a general score was calculated, which represents **behavioral problems in general**. Reliability was found to be high for all three scales, with Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.73$  for the "resisting behavior" scale, Cronbach  $\alpha=0.85$  for the "aggressive behavior" scale, and Cronbach  $\alpha=0.92$  for the "general behavior". **Demographic questionnaire** – the scale included 8 items. The questions related to demographic details, such as country of origin, age and years of education, family status and number of children, as well as some details relating to the child -- age, gender, and position in the family.

### Procedure

Recruitment of the mothers included an introduction of the study and a suggestion to participate out of interest and without any remuneration whatsoever. The mothers who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form, and then, a date was set for filming an interaction of free play between the mother and child. Collecting the data for each mother-child dyad took approximately 40 minutes. During the first half-hour, a video clip was filmed of shared free play between the mother and child. During the next 10 minutes the mother completed the CBC and demographic questionnaires. The interaction that was filmed during the game was coded by a professional, qualified in coding the emotional availability (EA) observational tool, after interactive training on the internet.

### Results

The results of this study relate the EA attributes of the parent and the child to the quality of their interactions in a free play situation. The EA scores of the parent include the scores on the three subscales. The average score on the "parental sensitivity" scale was 3.68 ( $SD = 0.36$ ); the average score on the "parental structuring" scale was 3.48 ( $SD = 0.38$ ), and the average score on the "lack of parental intrusiveness" scale was 3.38 ( $SD = 0.52$ ). On the CBCL, the average score on the "resisting behavior problems" scale was 2.03 ( $SD = 1.84$ ), the average score on the "aggressive behavior" scale was 2.6 ( $SD = 3.26$ ), and the average of general behavior problems was 15.3 ( $SD = 12.68$ ). To characterize the relationship between the mothers' EA during free play and characteristics of a child's behavior problems in early childhood, as indicated by the mother's report, Pearson correlations were run between the mothers' scores on the three scales of parental sensitivity (sensitivity, structuring, and lack of intrusiveness) and the mothers' reporting on the three scales of the behavior problems of the child (problems of resisting behavior, aggressive behavior, and general behavior problems). The values of the correlations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

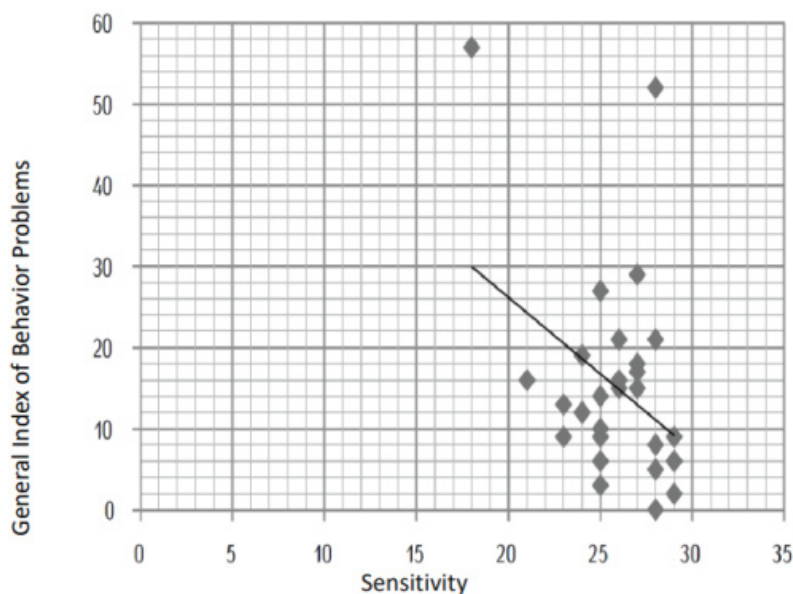
*Pearson Correlations Between Components of Mothers' Emotional Availability & Reported Child Behavior Problems (N=30)*

Components of emotional availability	Aggressive behavior	Resisting behavior	General index of behavior problems
Sensitivity	-.24	-.18	-.38*
Structuring	-.03	-.13	-.01
Lack of intrusiveness	-.29	-.33	-.40*

\* $p < 0.05$

The first hypothesis was that mother-child interactions characterized with higher maternal sensitivity will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior, and behavioral problems in general. As can be seen in Table 2, results partially confirmed this hypothesis, with a moderate significant negative correlation found between the mother's sensitivity and a general index for the mother's reporting about behavior problems on the child behavior questionnaire ( $r = -0.38, p < 0.05$ ). That is, the more the interaction between mother and child was characterized by higher maternal sensitivity, the more likely the mother was to report fewer behavioral problems in general on the child behavior questionnaire (CBCL). This correlation is depicted in Figure 1.

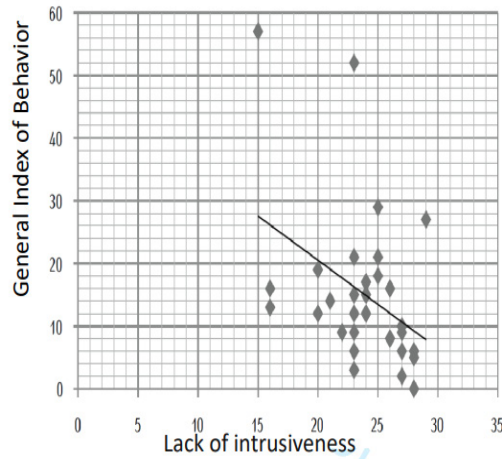
Figure 1: Correlation Between Mothers' Sensitivity and Reports of Children's General Behavior Problems (N=30)



Results did not confirm the second hypothesis that mother-child interactions characterized by high maternal structuring will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior, and behavioral problems in general. Results partially supported the third hypothesis that mother-child interactions characterized by lack of high intrusiveness on the part of the mother, will be associated with reports of less resisting behavior, aggressive behavior, and general behavioral problems. Table 2 shows that a moderate significant negative correlation was found between the mothers' sensitivity and a general index for the mothers' reporting of behavior problems on the child behavior questionnaire ( $r = 0.40, p < 0.05$ ). This correlation is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Correlation Between Mothers' Lack of Intrusiveness and Reports of Children's General Behavior Problems (N=30)



## Discussion

This study examined the relationship between the mothers' emotional availability to their child during free play and the children's behavior patterns. Results partially supported the hypotheses, and revealed that greater sensitivity by the mother was associated with fewer behavior problems in the child. Also, the less intrusive the mother, the fewer behavior problems she reported in the child. However, in contrast to the second research hypothesis, no statistically significant correlation was found between mothers' structuring and children's behavior problems.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological model, children learn adapted social behavior from the family system in which they grow up, as well as from the wider context. The results of this study support this model, showing that children's behavior problems are negatively correlated with their mothers' emotional sensitivity during play interactions. The findings obtained in this study are in line with previous studies, which found that parental behaviors of sensitivity and responsiveness have a positive effect on the child's functioning (Kang, 2006).

As stated by Kang (2006), in an emotionally available relationship in which the mother is sensitive and is not hostile or intrusive, she is able to respond to a wide variety of emotions and to accept them. This enables the child to cope with diverse situations and experience them with a wide variety of expressions. The confirmation of the third hypothesis in regard to the correlation between lack of intrusiveness and fewer behavioral problems among children, supports previous studies that found that children whose parents were rated as having high emotional availability tended to experience fewer externalized and introverted behavioral problems (Kang, 2006).

Interestingly, no support was found for the second hypothesis that higher parental structuring will be associated with fewer behavioral problems. These findings are in agreement with the work of Thomas and Chess (1984), who claim that parenting that includes many restrictions, a lot of punishments, and little calm interaction with the child leads to more aggression. Similarly, a positive correlation was found between punitive and inconsistent parenting and the development of behavior problems in children (Baumrind, 1991). On the other hand, more recently, researchers have supported the claim that a structuring behavior on the part of the mother encourages forming

new cognitive schemes, new motoric abilities in the child, and new ways for interacting with the world (Kang, 2006). In light of the contradictory findings in this field, there is a need for future research that will examine the components of parental structuring in depth, while differentiating between parenting that provides a supportive framework and parenting that is restrictive and even punitive.

### Limitations

A number of limitations exist to the current study's findings. The current study focused on mothers' emotional availability. However, it is important to expand the knowledge base and conduct studies that also include fathers, diverse cultural groups, and non-traditional family structures, such as single parents, same sex families, and polygenic families. Furthermore, it is important to note that this study examined the nature of the relationship between the variables mentioned above, and since causality cannot be indicated, we cannot speculate whether the emotional availability of the mother is the cause for a decrease in the behavioral problems of the child or whether a child with fewer behavioral problems leads to more emotional availability on the part of the mother; alternatively, perhaps both of these are interdependent. Longitudinal studies should be conducted that can explain the developmental process of the relationship between the tested variables.

### Implications

This study is another milestone in the development of knowledge about the relationship between mothers' emotional availability and behavior problems among young children, and its findings may have a variety of implications. First, it suggests recommendations for a prevention policy, since we have shown in this study that there is a strong connection between maternal emotional availability and fewer behavioral problems in children. For example, it is possible to guide nurses in pediatric clinics, pediatricians, physicians in primary screening departments, daycare workers and their instructors, education and teaching personnel, and others, to be aware of the issue of emotional availability. The importance of maternal emotional availability indicates that it should be incorporated as part of early detection and prevention systems. In the future, it will be possible to develop several screening questions, such as: "please describe a play situation with the child that you have experienced recently", so the professional could learn about the emotional availability of the mother and if necessary, refer her for parental guidance. Future research can develop an effective and efficient screening tool and then examine the effect of its use in the various treatment systems.

The study also has implications regarding treatment policy and practice. The skills of emotional availability can be imparted to caregivers as a successful strategy for treating behavioral problems of the child. Future studies can examine the effectiveness of treatment based on this strategy.

We conclude with the words of Lea Goldberg (Rubinstein, 2003), in her poem "To the Image of Mother", which indicate the great importance of the emotional availability of the mother for the daughter:

You did not marvel, did not get angry, when I came to you  
Day in day out and said: "Give!"  
Everything you brought me with your own hands  
Just because I am - Me

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### **Author Bionote**

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### **Authorship and Level of Contribution**

Yaara Shilo designed the research and collected the data. Yan Sardtse joined her in analyzing the data and together they wrote the article.

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