

# Beyond Survival: Understanding Resilience in Adolescents Facing Family Violence

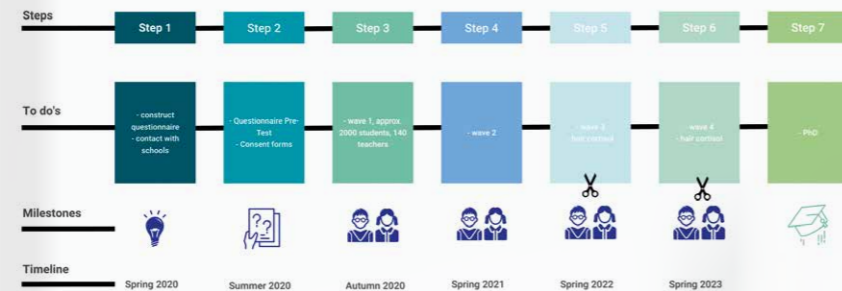
★ We spoke to **Prof. Dr. Wassilis Kassis** about his pioneering research project, “Understanding the Resilience Pathways of Adolescent Students with Experience of Physical Family Violence.” This study examines how exposure to physical abuse affects adolescents’ resilience, focusing on the interplay of individual, family, and school factors.

**Parental physical abuse** remains a disturbingly pervasive issue with deep-seated repercussions on mental health. Internationally, one in five adolescents experiences physical family violence. Despite experiencing such adversity, some adolescents do not exhibit expected behavioral problems or display internalizing symptoms such as depression or dissociation, which traditionally would classify them as “resilient”. Prof. Dr. Wassilis Kassis is the principal investigator of the project “Understanding the Resilience Pathways of Adolescent Students with Experience of Physical Family Violence.” This SNF-funded project aims to explore how exposure to physical family violence affects adolescent resilience over time, focusing on the interplay of individual, family, and school class risk and protective factors. The project defines resilience as the ability to maintain well-being despite adverse experiences.

The main questions this project is researching are: How stable is resilience over time? How do different risks and protective and protective factors interact and affect resilience over time? How do these factors operate across different groups of adolescents who show resilience?

## Behavioral Outcomes of Parental Physical Abuse In Adolescents

In his research, Dr. Kassis and his team, Dr. Dilan Aksoy and Dr. Céline Anne Favre identified two primary types of behavioral responses in adolescents who have experienced parental physical abuse: internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Internalizing symptoms refer to behaviors and emotional responses that are directed inward. They include depression, anxiety, and dissociation. Adolescents displaying internalizing symptoms might suffer from feelings of sadness, fear, excessive worries, feelings of worthlessness, or detachment from reality. Despite being a source of psychological distress, these symptoms might not be immediately apparent to others. Internalizing symptoms can significantly affect an adolescent’s emotional and psychological well-being.



The longitudinal design of our design.

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Externalizing symptoms, on the other hand, are outward-directed behaviors that are usually more observable. These include aggressive behaviors, acting out, and difficulties in controlling impulses. In this study, aggression toward peers is specifically highlighted as an externalizing symptom. Externalizing behaviors are typically disruptive and can be a call for help as the adolescent struggles to cope with emotional pain through outward expression.

## Exploring Family Violence Resilience Through The Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health

Understanding the resilience of adolescents who have faced physical family violence is a challenging task. Resilience isn’t just about bouncing back from adversity; it’s about thriving despite it. This complexity in defining and measuring resilience is partly because it involves a variety of factors at individual, family, and school levels, requiring a comprehensive approach. One innovative way researchers are tackling this issue is by using what’s known as the “dual-factor model” of mental health. Traditionally, mental health was often defined merely by the absence of mental illnesses like depression or anxiety. However, the dual-factor model expands this definition by considering not just the absence of negative mental health symptoms but also the presence of positive well-being indicators. This model helps in understanding resilience by showing that being resilient isn’t just about not feeling bad—it’s also about

feeling good and functioning well in daily life. For adolescents, this means not only dealing with the scars of abuse but also developing a sense of well-being that includes happiness, a purpose in life, and effective functioning in their environments like school. As Dr. Kassis explains, resilience involves a dual aspect of feeling good and doing well, which includes both hedonic (emotional well-being) and eudaimonic (functional well-being) components. Hedonic resilience is characterized by high self-esteem and low levels of depression and anxiety, reflecting the adolescent’s ability to maintain positive emotions. This emotional resilience is crucial as it supports the adolescent’s overall sense of worth and helps buffer against the psychological impact of abuse. On the eudaimonic side, resilience involves positive functioning in social and academic settings. This includes strong self-efficacy, fulfilling relationships, and effective academic performance, which are essential for adolescents to feel competent and autonomous. The ability to navigate school demands and build positive relationships are seen as key indicators of an adolescent’s capacity to adapt and thrive despite their challenging experiences. “We believe that just as the absence of war isn’t peace, the absence of negative symptoms doesn’t mean well-being. It’s about more than just surviving; it’s about thriving,” says Dr. Kassis.

The researchers conducted a longitudinal study in two waves that involved seventh-grade students. This study sought

to determine whether the resilience observed initially in students who experienced parental abuse remains stable over time or changes. The researchers used sophisticated statistical methods, including latent class and latent transition analysis, to identify different patterns of resilience and predict how these patterns might evolve. They analyzed how factors such as socio-economic status, migration background, and gender might influence these resilience patterns.

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Dr. Kassis highlights that family violence is a widespread issue affecting all levels of society, not just marginalized or less affluent groups. He argues that societal perceptions often incorrectly attribute family violence to low socioeconomic status, poor education, or specific demographic factors such as migration background. However, his research findings challenge these assumptions, showing that family violence crosses all socioeconomic and educational boundaries. Factors like being wealthy or having a higher education do not prevent occurrences of family violence. “We have published multiple papers conducted internationally and we keep getting results that show that family abuse is not connected to education, socioeconomic status, or having a migration background. This is not a minority problem, but a main issue in our society” he emphasizes.

Additionally, Dr. Kassis discusses protective factors in the context of school environments and their influence on students who have experienced family violence. Personal connections between teachers and students have a significant role. Academic support coupled with personal relationships can have a profound impact on the resilience of students. In his research, Dr. Kassis has identified three main pillars as protective factors. The first protective factor is personal acceptance and teacher support. When teachers are able to integrate academic support with personal connections, it greatly aids students in coping with their experiences of violence. Inclusivity in the school environment is another essential protective factor. Making schools more inclusive can help integrate students who might otherwise be isolated due to their experiences or symptoms related to abuse. And lastly, encouraging students to openly discuss their problems and seek help is crucial. This involves creating an environment where

students feel safe to express their family problems and personal struggles. These factors, according to Dr. Kassis, are critical in creating a supportive school environment that can help mitigate the negative impacts of family violence on children and help them develop resilience.

In their most recent study, the research team investigated the interplay between psychological and biological markers - specifically, resilience, cortisol level, and their impact on brain function and morphology in

adolescents exposed to physical abuse. The study focuses on the relationship between enduring stress, indicated by elevated cortisol levels (a stress hormone), and its physical effects on the brain. The researchers measured cortisol levels through hair samples, which reflect long-term cortisol exposure rather than immediate stress reactions. This method allows for an assessment of chronic stress impacts, which are more indicative of the ongoing stress experienced by physically abused adolescents. Elevated cortisol levels are associated with significant changes in brain function and structure. These biological changes have broad implications. Affected adolescents show altered brain functions that could impact their ability to handle stress and emotional regulation. This alteration necessitates different approaches in interventions and support systems, as traditional methods may not be as effective due to these underlying physiological changes. “Adolescents who are experiencing physical abuse have far higher cortisol levels. We thought we could run a general prevention program and just ask these adolescents to learn how to deal differently with their emotions. However, if you already have skyrocketing cortisol levels, you can’t do that. Just imagine having a short-sighted adolescent student but instead of giving them glasses or offering them a seat at the front of the classroom, we demand they push themselves to just read the content of the board. We would never do that. But in terms of brain changes, this is exactly what is happening with this adolescent. They are always so high in terms of stress that they can’t behave, relate, and develop emotionally and academically in the expected way. We have to develop new intervention programs that will target specifically abused adolescents” he concludes.

## UNDERSTANDING THE RESILIENCE PATHWAYS OF ADOLESCENT STUDENTS WITH EXPERIENCE OF PHYSICAL FAMILY VIOLENCE

Understanding the resilience pathways of adolescent students with experience of physical family violence: The interplay of individual, family and school class risk and protective factors.

### Project Objectives

The SNSF-funded project examines how repeated physical domestic violence affects the resilience development of over 2,000 Swiss adolescent students. Despite prevalent parental abuse, some show unexpected resilience without typical behavioral issues. The study redefines resilience as maintaining well-being rather than just being symptom-free. It explores resilience stability, the interplay of risk and protective factors, and variations among resilient adolescent groups.

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Prof. Dr. Wassilis Kassis



**Wassilis Kassis** is a trained educational psychologist and full professor at the FHNW School of Education, where he heads the Research and Development department. His research focuses on social and academic resilience and examines the individual, social and societal risk and support factors that promote the positive development of children and young people.

