

# Caregiver Mental Health and Early Childhood Development in Conflict Affected Settings

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IPA Webinar – January 2026



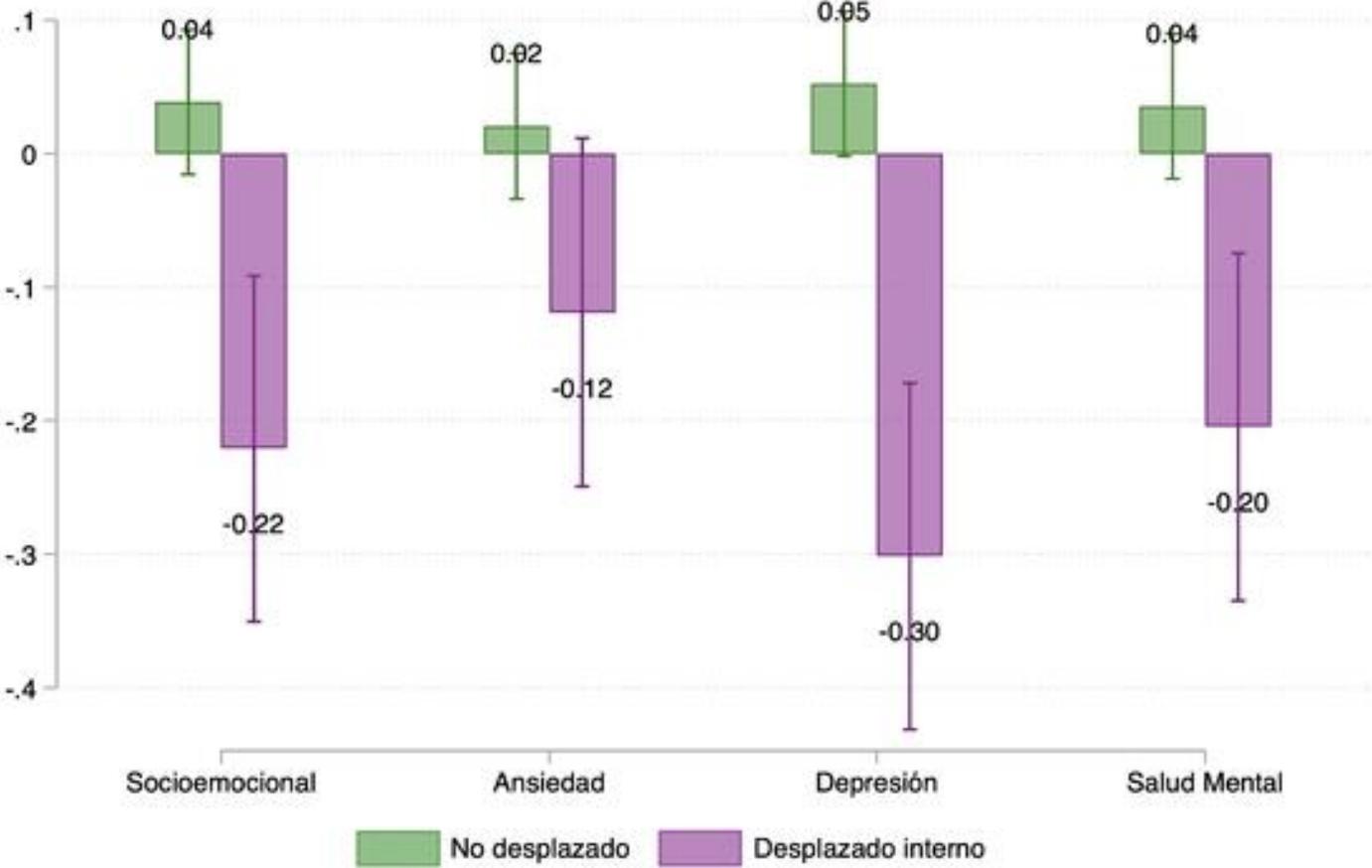
# What does it mean to be born and raised in conflict-affected settings?

- ▶ 2 billion people in conflict-affected settings
- ▶ 117 million displaced persons
- ▶ ~18% of children under five years globally



Photo: Jesus Abad Colorado

# Large gaps in socioemotional development and mental health relative to non-displaced children



- ▶ Even for children born years and even one generation after displacement
- ▶ Highlights the intergenerational transmisión of trauma and poverty

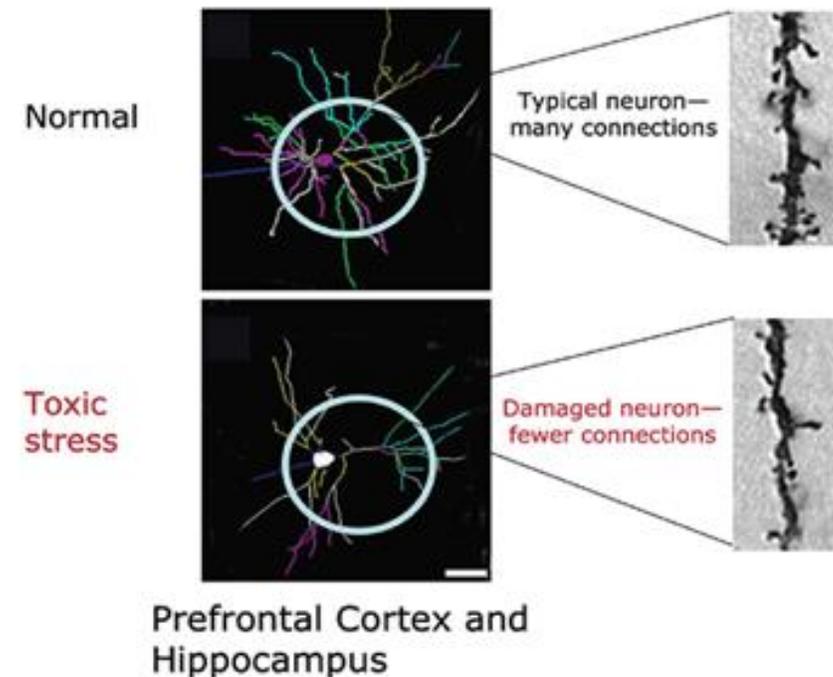
Source: Hiller, Moyay Rozo (2025)



# Early childhood is the most unique and magical stage in our life -- also the most sensitive period to stress

- ▶ Extreme adversities + deficits in sensitive care trigger the overactivation of different biological systems.
- ▶ Affects brain architecture, skill acquisition, and physical and mental health.
- ▶ ... with life altering effects
- ▶ But, sensitive caregiving can buffer the physiological effects of stress

## Persistent Stress Changes Brain Architecture



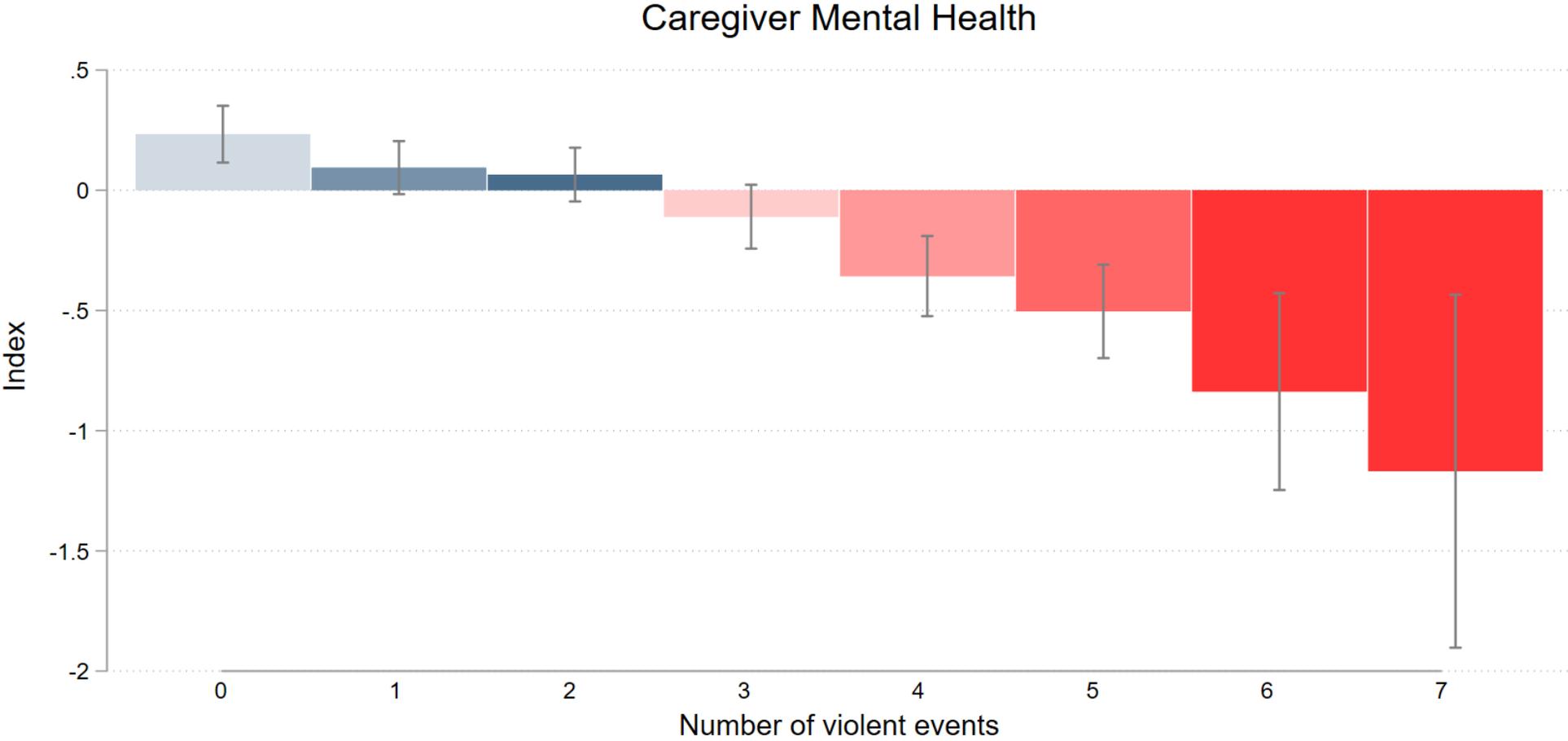
Source: Radley et al. (2004); Bock et al. (2005)



Aren't we expecting too much from caregivers when we ask them to better care for their children while enduring conflict, displacement, and trauma?

*Photo:* Federico Rios

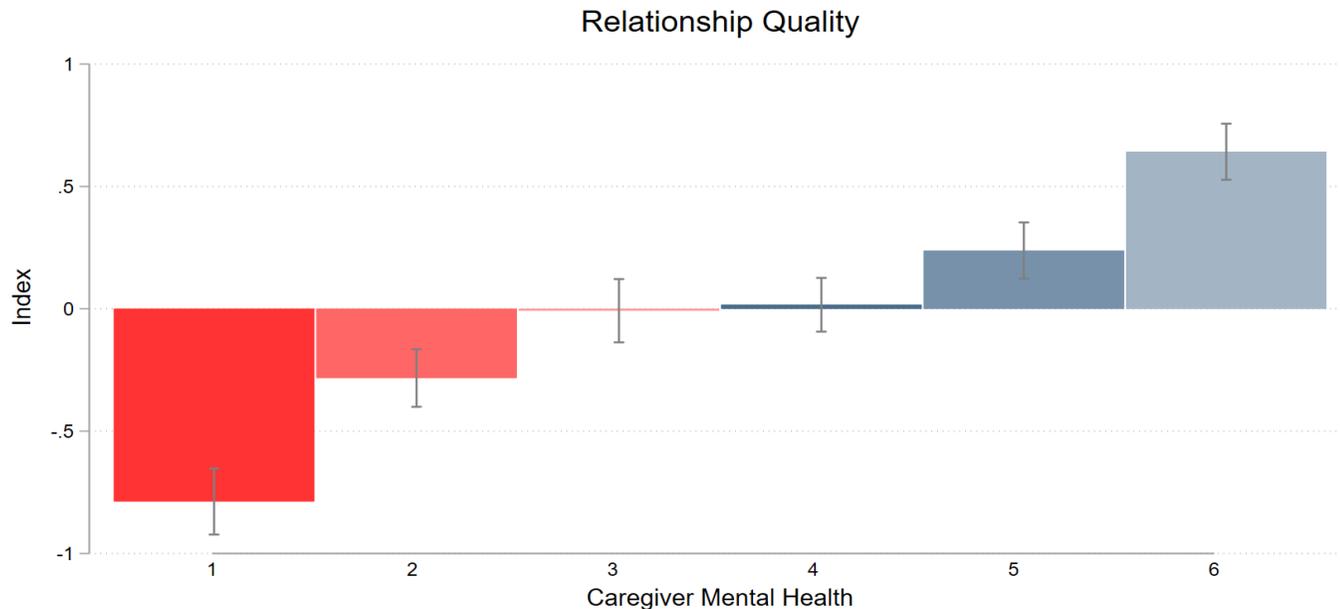
# Conflict and displacement affect caregivers mental health



Source: Moya and Vlasak (2026)



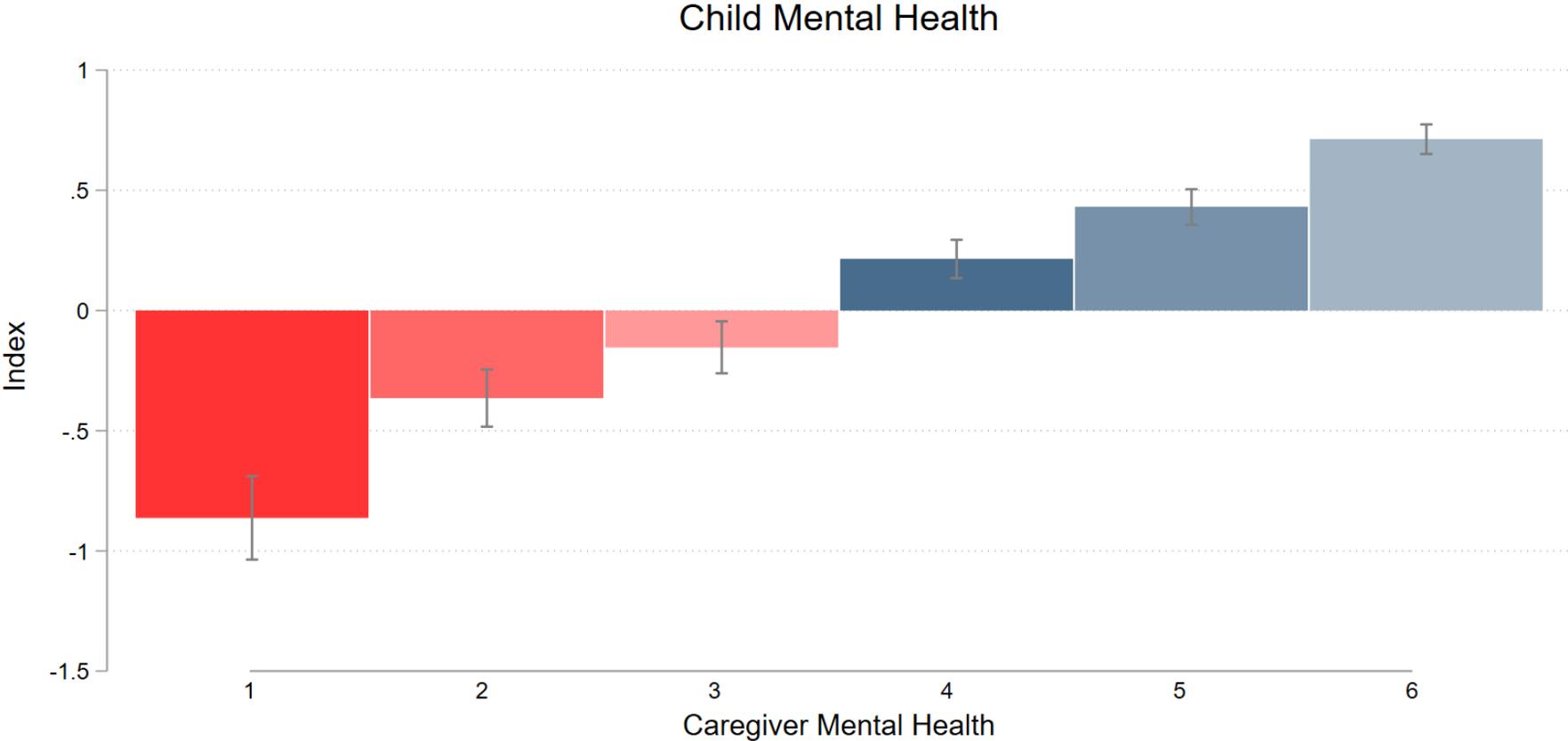
# Caregiver mental health problems affect the quality of the relationship with children



Source: Moya and Vlasak (2026)

- ▶ Hinder the capacity to identify and respond to children's emotional needs
- ▶ Relationships are characterized either by excessive control and fear or by emotional
- ▶ Disrupt healthy emotional co-regulation

# Caregiver mental health problems childrens early development



Source: Moya and Vlasak (2026)

# Caregiver mental health mediates a large share of the effect of conflict on young children

TABLE 1— CONFLICT AND CAREGIVERS' AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

	Long-run conflict		Recent conflict		Truce	
	Caregivers (1)	Children (2)	Caregivers (3)	Children (4)	Caregivers (5)	Children (6)
<i>Panel A. Reduced-form estimates</i>						
Conflict exposure	-0.17 (0.016)	-0.11 (0.015)	-0.19 (0.031)	-0.16 (0.033)	0.08 (0.044)	0.06 (0.046)
Observations	1,376	1,376	1,317	1,317	1,317	1,317
$R^2$	0.12	0.19	0.46	0.44	0.44	0.42
$F$ -test	7.36	11.90	21.78	16.87	19.88	15.47
<i>Panel B. Mediation analysis</i>						
Average mediation effect		-0.09 [-0.109, -0.069]		-0.07 [-0.097, -0.059]		0.03 [0.003, 0.063]
Total effect		-0.11 [-0.144, -0.083]		-0.13 [-0.19, 0.072]		0.05 [-0.043, 0.137]
Percent of total effect mediated		0.78		0.55		0.46

Source: Sánchez, Cuartas and Moya (2023)

# A missing link: standard parenting interventions have ignored caregivers' mental health

- ▶ Standard programs address cognitive constraints: why and how to promote responsive care and stimulating environments.
- ▶ Only 12% of 478 ECD impact evaluations measure maternal mental health (Evans, Jakiela, and Knauer 2021).
- ▶ A tiny fraction of resources is invested at the intersection b/w maternal mental health and early childhood development.

# Breaking the intergenerational transmission of trauma and poverty



# Semillas de Apego

## Model

- ▶ 15 weekly sessions (2.5) hours;
- ▶ 15-20 caregivers;
- ▶ Led by community facilitators.

## Core dimensions

- ▶ Caregiver mental health;
- ▶ Early childhood development;
- ▶ Child caregiver relationships;
- ▶ Sense of belonging and collective agency.



# Semillas de Apego

## Reflective approach:

- ▶ Promote emotional awareness and regulation;
- ▶ Reframe the traumatic experiences of conflict and displacement;
- ▶ Recognize and reframe the challenges of caregiving in these contexts

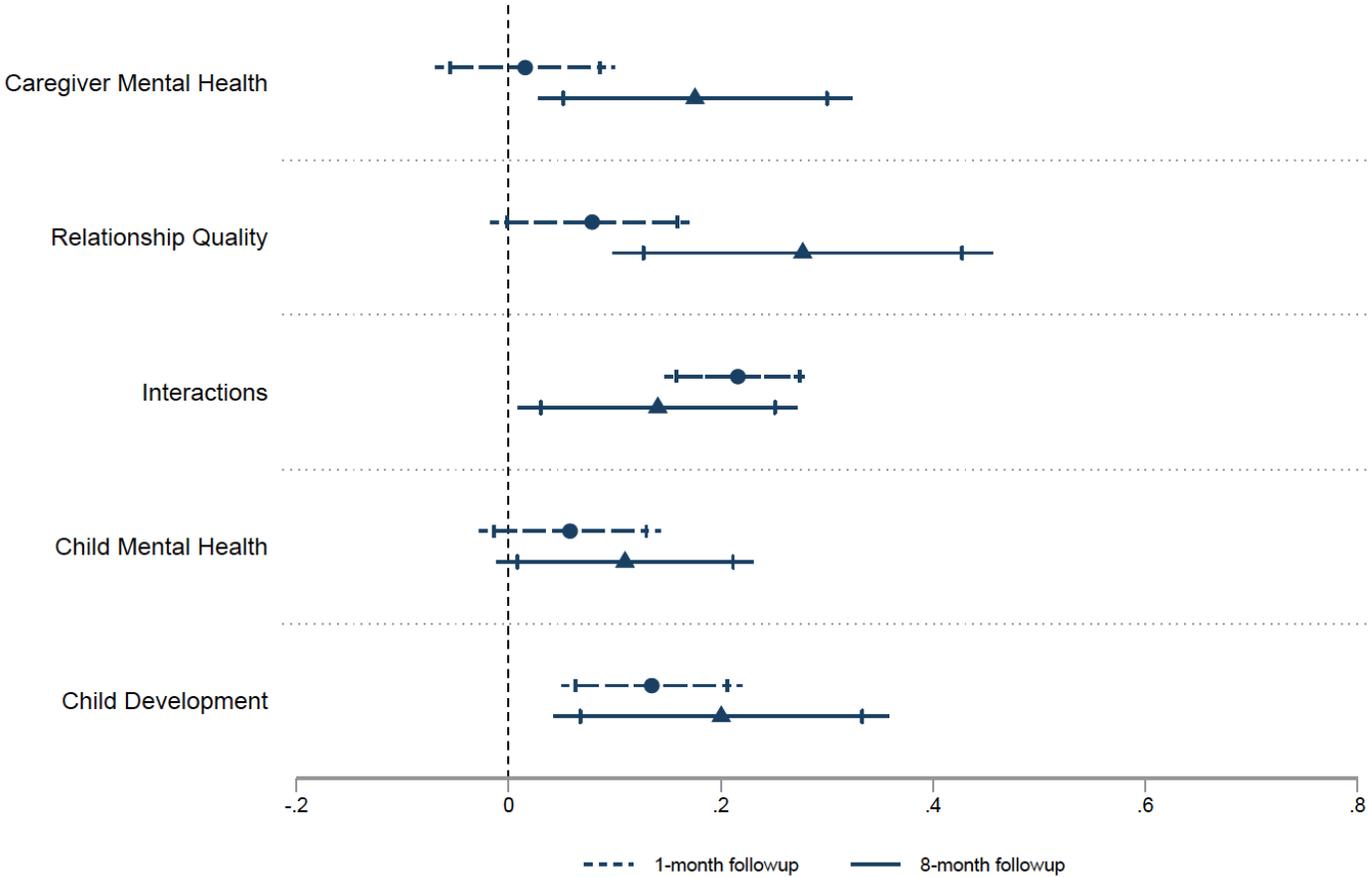
## Community and group model:

- ▶ Address and overcome stigma;
- ▶ Peer learning;
- ▶ Support networks.



# Evidence of Impact

Moya et al. 2026



**46%**

reduction in the likelihood of at-risk symptoms of caregiver anxiety and interpersonal sensitivity

**38%**

reduction in likelihood of at-risk levels of parenting stress.

**36%**

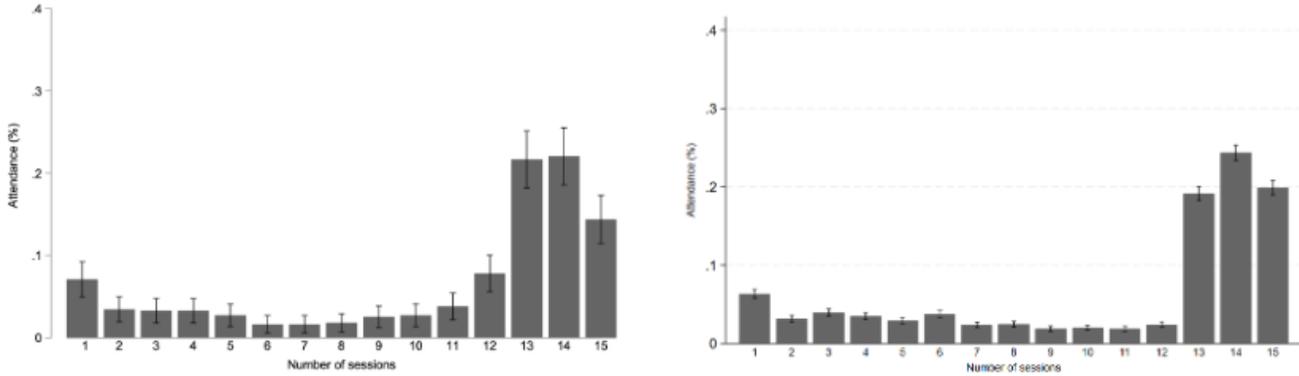
reduction in likelihood of at-risk levels behavioral problems.

# Impact at scale – 12 municipalities, 4,000 caregivers per year

Bonet et al (2026)



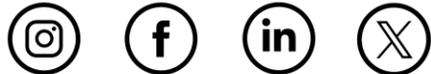
Figure 3: Program Dosage



(a) Small-scale Impact Evaluation

(b) Scale-up

Thanks!



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