

# Stijn de Leeuw

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE AND BACK.

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE AND BACK.

# Who Am I?

**PhD Candidate** at the University of Cape Town,  
Department of Psychology.  
Researcher at the Drakenstein Child Health Study (DCHS)

Thesis:  
Investigating protective factors that boost resilience in a  
South African birth cohort study.

But also:  
**Founder and CEO of Little Lions Child Coaching**, a  
community-based organisation in Cape Town that offers  
free mental health workshops and support to children and  
parents in townships.

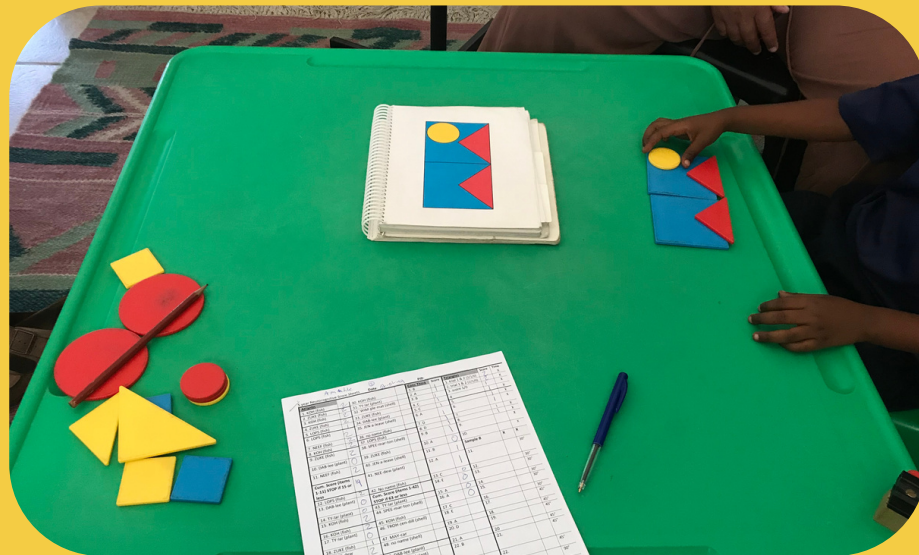


# Theory

Investigating maternal and child health in two under-resourced communities - longitudinal tracking from 0-11years.

## Unique study:

- investigating multiple risk factors
- LMIC
- Physical & Mental health



# Practice

A multitude of risks, but no available resources for support!

## **Child Exposure to Community Violence:**

72-75% exposed to violence before the age of 6, with 49% reporting poly-victimisation.\*



- Tsunga et al. ,2023, Early Childhood Violence Exposure Patterns in The Drakenstein Child Health Study (DCHS)



# A lot of missing factors

**Two** factors stood out for me, both during my research days as in the last few years with Little Lions

## Local language is missing the vocabulary

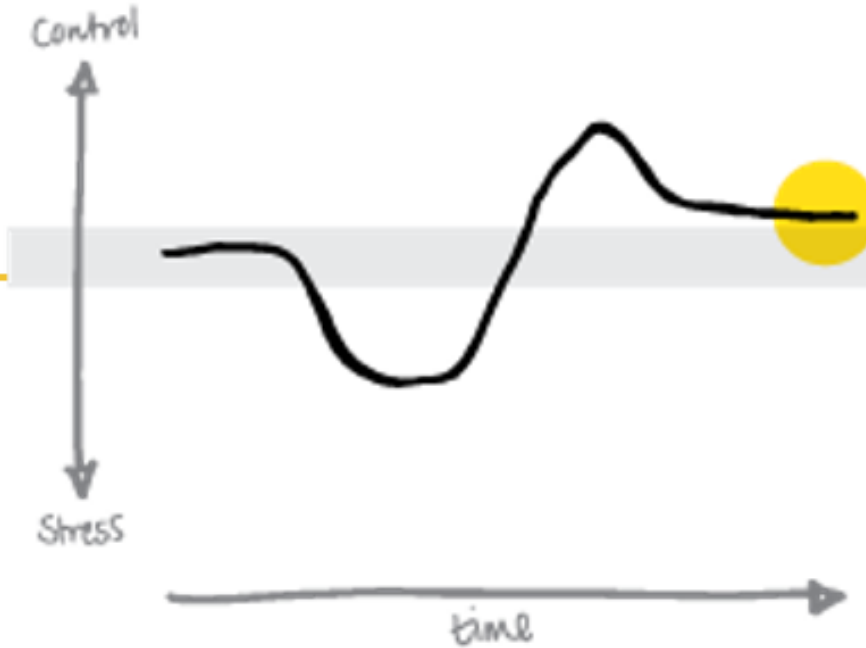
Children grow up in environment where isiXhosa and Afrikaans are their first language. There are simply not enough words yet to describe emotions, qualities, or other mental health terms.

## There are no mental health conversations

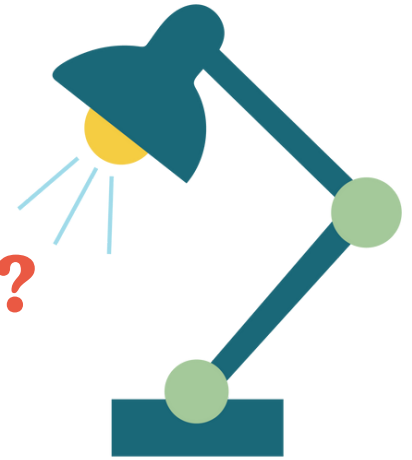
When children are exposed to 6-8 traumatic events **yearly**, is there still (head)space to even have these conversations? Or is there a sense of **resilience**?



## Resilient



## What is resilience?



The ability to bounce back after adversity,  
and adapt positively!

Two core concepts stand out  
**Adversity** vs **positive adaptation**

But - the majority of research was done in the  
Global North, and adults/adolescents.

# The 3 Most Important Protective Factors that Boost Resilience in Children in LMICs.



**Social Support**

**Emotional Regulation**

**Caregiver Mental Health**

## Scoping review\*



- Only 26 studies that mentioned (protective factors that boost) resilience **and** children **and** LMICs.
- Only 16 employed a direct measurement
- Non measured adversity
- No longitudinal data beyond 2-time points

\*De Leeuw & Malcolm-Smith, 2023, Investigating protective factors that boost resilience in children from low- and middle-income countries: a scoping review

# The Little Lions Way

**P**

## Professional

- Psychologically backed
- Professional tools
- Prevention and promotion programme

**R**

## Resources

- Role models
- Local language
- Nutrition

**I**

## Inner Lion

- Building your mental health
- Normalising mental health conversations
- Ability to express your feelings

**D**

## Dynamic

- Collaborations with child, parents, community

**E**

## Easily Accesible

- We come to you
- Free workshops
- Inclusive

**S**

## Safe Places

- Small groups
- Fun
- Non-judgemental





## Our Mission

In the shadows of economic disparity, we stand as a beacon of light to the children who will lead South Africa into its future. Our mission pulses with compassion and resolve – to sculpt a future where every child, regardless of their circumstances, emerges as a resilient and empowered individual.



Meditation

Arts

Dance

Craft

## The 4 Legs of The Little Lions Programme



Building Emotional Awareness

Finding and Boosting Qualities

Coping with Difficult Situations

Boosting Resilience



# The Inner Lion Programme

An enriching journey designed for organisations like yours that work with (and for) children. This initiative offers a unique opportunity to seamlessly integrate mental health into your curriculum, fostering a generation of empowered young minds.

## What Does That Mean?

In just 12 sessions, the abundance of psychologically-endorsed games, meditation, and arts & crafts becomes the backdrop for empowering conversations that normalise mental health - creating a wellspring of confidence, resilience, and emotional awareness.





# From Practice back to Theory

## Pilot Study

Our journey to Kenya provided us with a resounding affirmation of the **effectiveness** of our Inner Lion program as a **robust, comprehensive, and accessible** initiative for **promoting and preventing mental health issues**.

But what if...

... we aren't really measuring **resilience**?

The work with Little Lions has shown me the complete numbness that children portray - which is also known as **Alexithymia**.

Unclear whether this is a state or a trait, but no research is done yet with children in LMICs that endured traumatic events from birth.

We set up an effectiveness study in **Eldoret** at the **Kip Keino school** in May 2023. We trained teachers and social workers and they become mental health coaches.

The intervention group has **significantly** grown in their emotional regulation and resilience compared to the control group.



# Lets get in touch!

Research in Resilience and/or  
Alexithymia in children in LMICs

Become an implementing partner  
of the Inner Lion Programme!

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