

IMPACTS OF WAR ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Münevver MERTOĞLU

Istanbul Kultur University-Education Faculty, CEHAMER - Head of Research and Prevention of Violence in Schools. ORCID: 0000-0002-5900-7106 m.mertoglu@iku.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Many children have lost their lives in wars in recent years. Those who survived witnessed extraordinary violence. Many children lost their parents and relatives, and almost all their homes and buildings were destroyed. Children and their families are denied safe access to food, water, electricity, medicine, and hospitals. Hospitals and schools were bombed. Especially children and adolescents are psychologically affected by all these negativities. The degree of impact varies depending on the degree of violence experienced in the war, the age of the children, their upbringing, their financial situation, and whether similar vulnerabilities have been experienced before. Another important issue is that the problems of children and adolescents do not end with the end of the war and emerge as post-traumatic syndrome later in life. One of the impacts of war on children and adolescents is that the violence applied by the authorities becomes legitimized for children. For these reasons, the necessary treatment and psychosocial support should be provided to children and adolescents, as well as to those responsible for the care of children and teachers.

Keywords: Adolescent, child, psychosocial support, war, war victim.

INTRODUCTION

War is a serious public health issue. Particularly in modern times, wars are closely followed by countries worldwide through the media and social platforms, and their devastating consequences negatively affect everyone. However, children form the most impacted group. The 2022 UNICEF report highlights that children who survive war experience severe trauma (UNICEF, 2022). While 90% of those who died in World War I were soldiers, recent wars have seen the majority of casualties being civilians, including women and children, underscoring the urgent need for international measures. According to a United Nations report from 2018, the number of children killed or injured in wars and conflicts in 2018 reached 12,000 (the highest number since 2005). In 2021, 2,515 children were killed, in 2022, 2,985, and in 2023, by December 14, a total of 19,453 people, including 8,000 children in Gaza, had lost their lives. The Geneva Conventions, signed on August 12, 1949, with the aim of regulating the rules of war and protecting war victims, is one of the most significant legal documents related to human rights (<https://tr.euronews.com/2019/08/12/cenevre-sozlesmeleri>). The fourth of these conventions, known as the Geneva Conventions, specifically addresses the protection of civilians during war. Despite this, in recent wars, many civilian children and adults have been killed, and their homes and service buildings have been almost entirely destroyed. Children and their families' access to food, water, electricity, medicine, and hospitals has been obstructed, and hospitals and schools have been bombed. The situation in the Gaza-Israel war, where 10 children are reportedly killed every minute, is even more dire. Historians express sadness and astonishment in the media, noting that such cruelty was not witnessed even in the distant past when warfare technology was less advanced. Sadi Bereke, a 63-year-old cemetery worker in Gaza, told an Anadolu Agency (AA) reporter that they buried 600 women and children in a single day, exceeding the total number of burials in Gaza over the past five years (<https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/gazzedeki-mezarlik-gorevlisi->). Children and adults in war zones experience violence the most. In other words, war is one of the greatest disasters that can befall humanity. Beyond the physical harm of death and injury, children may witness armed attacks, explosions, the deaths of their loved ones, deprivation of basic needs and exposure to extreme cold or heat can have an even more traumatic impact. Children who survive face the difficult reality of being orphaned, displaced from their homes and countries, and subjected to complex issues that are difficult to resolve. Many children also experience psychological, physical, economic, and sexual abuse during and after war, with some describing these conditions as more painful than death itself. Children are the most vulnerable group in war environments, where injured individuals cannot be helped and proper care for existing diseases is unattainable. Furthermore, babies born in unhealthy environments due to the lack of necessary healthcare increase the risk of infant mortality.

The Physical and Psychological Effects of War on Children and Adolescents

The victimization of children and adolescents in war can be evaluated in two ways. **In primary victimization**, children directly experience the adverse effects of war. They suffer significant physical harm through injury, death, the loss of family members, and lack of access to shelter, food, care, and medical treatment. **In secondary victimization**, while not directly exposed to these negative events, they witness the overall adverse consequences of war. Fear and a lack of safety are prominent feelings. Children and adolescents are psychologically affected by the physical consequences of war, and the degree of this impact varies based on the level of violence, the children's age, upbringing, socioeconomic status, and whether they have faced similar vulnerabilities before.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

A key issue is that the negative effects of war on children and adolescents do not cease when the war ends. The traumatic nature of modern warfare leaves lasting psychological scars on children and adolescents. Many of these effects are called as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), continuing for long periods. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines trauma as the intense stress individuals experience in response to threatening events. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological disorder that threatens the physical and mental health of the individual, creates a sense of terror, fear, insecurity, anxiety and helplessness, causes inadequacy in coping and whose effects continue for a long time. Besides, this condition can also lead to problems in social and professional life. Anxiety, nervousness, sleep disturbances, nightmares, and changes in appetite are common in children who experience war-related PTSD. More importantly, persistent fears, worries, and insecurity about the future emerge, often associated with guilt that the events will happen again, that the person will be left alone and defenseless, and that they will be punished for their wrongdoings (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Studies on the Effects of War on Children

Even when children affected by war are provided with shelter, education, and financial support, the impact of their traumatic experiences can last for a long time. In a study conducted on 232 children affected by war, most were found to suffer from PTSD as well as behavioural disorders, anxiety, stress disorders, and attention deficits. Another study involving 4,365 children affected by war, conflict, and terrorism reported similar findings, with children developing stress reactions such as PTSD, behavioral and emotional problems, depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, and phobias (Betancourt et al., 2009; Cohen & Eid, 2007; Comer & Kendall, 2007). Furthermore, another study found that children experienced sleep and psychosomatic problems after war. Similar issues were observed in the results of a study conducted by Khamis (2016) on 205 families and their children who had been directly affected by war. Another study reported that 98% of children with worsening psychological conditions after war exhibited symptoms such as crying, screaming, disrupted sleep patterns, unhappiness, and bedwetting. Despite a partial reduction in post-traumatic stress symptoms after the war, most studies on this subject indicate that childhood traumas have a lasting impact on cognitive, moral, and personality development, as well as interpersonal relationships and coping abilities (Barath, 2002; Dubow, Huesmann & Boxer, 2009). Children who are displaced from their homes, schools, and friends, and who lose all their belongings, including toys and personal items, often experience deep sadness, pain, and anger, feeling powerless and insecure. These children may face difficulties in social and marital relationships and could develop substance or alcohol dependence.

Children and Adolescents Aged 0-6 Affected by War

Children aged 0-6 need parental care. The disruption of an environment of love and security can cause children to face serious problems both after the war and in the future. Adolescents affected by war may struggle to make plans for the future. Their concerns about the future can negatively affect their expectations, academic success, and zest for life. Problems in relationships with family, school, and the environment can negatively impact their adjustment to their surroundings. As a coping mechanism for the traumatic events they have experienced, adolescents may engage in risky behaviors that harm themselves and others. Their tendencies toward violent, aggressive behavior may increase. They may also experience intensified feelings of insecurity and disruptions in their sense of self.

The Social Effects of War on Children

The physical, psychological, and social effects of war are closely related. Having to live with and defend oneself for a long time against violence, especially in wartime environments, can establish the belief that violence must be met with violence. It may even legitimize violence. Research shows that in countries where war has persisted for a long time, homicide rates have increased by between 10% and 79% (Archer & Gartner, 1976). War can also negatively impact the moral development of children. In the moral collapse created by war, children may struggle

to distinguish between right and wrong. They may begin to believe that the violent actions displayed by authority figures are morally acceptable. The feelings of revenge and hostility experienced by children who have lost loved ones and homes in the war and have been forced to migrate may trigger the development of a culture of violence. This undermines the cultural norms of peace, security, solidarity, and charity. Consequently, children may experience difficulties in friendship, marriage, and other social relationships. Children who witness the violent behaviors of role models may learn to resort to aggression to protect themselves (Gökler, 2001). Moreover, the angry adults around them may reinforce these aggressive behaviors. Children raised in today's war-torn environments may have the potential to become active perpetrators of violence in the future.

Measures to Be Taken for Children and Adolescents Affected by War

The physical, psychological, and social support that can be provided to children affected by war varies depending on the degree of victimization and the ages of the children. Regardless of their age group, the priority is to create an environment that offers love and security, allows them to quickly return to their routines, and meets their physical, psychological, and social needs. Ensuring that they can continue their academic lives and participate in sports and artistic activities plays an important role in overcoming the traumatic process.

Support for Children Aged 0-6

Under normal conditions, the environment in which children aged 0-6 grow up, as well as the behaviors and communication styles of their parents or caregivers, play a crucial role in their physical, emotional, and social development. Being exposed to war or similar environments during this period can negatively affect their development, academic and professional lives, as well as personal and social relationships. Children aged 0-6 who have been in war zones may experience crying fits, waking up startled or crying, sleep disturbances, bedwetting, and bowel problems. Parents or caregivers are expected to be conscious and supportive in this regard. Despite all the difficulties, it is important to create a stable environment for infants, meet their basic needs (especially breastfeeding), ensure that caregivers for babies who have lost their parents do not change frequently, and provide familiar items and toys to help them adapt to the new environment. Physical intimacy, love, and security are crucial. Regular health check-ups and vaccinations must be carefully monitored. Play plays a significant role in the rehabilitation of war-affected children from the age of one. They should be given the opportunity to play in their environment. As they grow older, activities like music, drawing, storytelling, and drama, in addition to play, should be encouraged to help them express themselves and have fun (Bellamy, 2005).

Support for Adolescents Affected by War

Adolescents have a higher level of awareness and a better ability to understand events and foresee consequences compared to younger children. Therefore, they may need more attention and support. Parents, relatives, or specialists should listen to adolescents and share their fears and concerns. Creating a communication environment where adolescents can feel confident and encouraged is important. More importantly, ensuring their participation in activities that can eliminate the sense of hopelessness brought on by war is crucial.

Support for Parents and Teachers

Parents and teachers who are victims of war also need support in providing help to children. Therefore, it is necessary to include them in the psycho-social support programs designed for children and adolescents (Caffo and Belaise, 2003). In traumatic environments, children need the support of their parents and teachers more than ever. This is why the primary therapy is often aimed at families. In necessary situations, trauma can be addressed with cognitive, behavioral, and personal therapies. Children and adolescents should be kept away from violent news and images during wartime, not just in war-torn countries but around the world. Governments are also expected to take the necessary measures in this regard. If, despite these precautions, children witness scenes of war, it is important to be there for them, answer their questions, and try to provide explanations. Educating parents and teachers about the unusual reactions that children may develop after trauma is crucial for mitigating the long-term negative effects of war. It may not be easy for teachers to monitor children's unusual reactions while also maintaining education, cultural, and sports activities at school, so it is essential to remember that they also need support and training.

Psycho-social Support for Children Traumatized by War

Providing individual or group psycho-social support to traumatized children is important. Sharing experiences among children who have been exposed to common traumas helps them feel less alone and promotes solidarity, hope for the future, and learning from positive examples on how to cope with difficulties. In the first stage of psycho-social support, children should be informed about how war environments affect people and the reactions that may occur during this process. These explanations can support children in expressing their emotions and controlling their fears and anxieties. Calming techniques, such as breathing and relaxation exercises, can also be used to help children cope with stress. After the war, it is crucial to create environments where children and

adolescents do not feel they have lost everything and can look toward the future with hope. Supporting them in developing a positive outlook is extremely important (Yule & others, 2000). In all forms of support provided to children after war, their best interests must be considered.

CONCLUSION

In modern wars, many children die, and those who survive face severe physical and psychological problems. The inability to meet their most basic needs, access care and treatment, and the trauma of witnessing the deaths of loved ones and explosions profoundly affect them. More importantly, the problems that children face do not end with the cessation of war, as they often experience post-traumatic syndromes. It is necessary to provide treatment and psycho-social support to children and to those responsible for their care and education. However extensive and intense the psycho-social interventions for children after war may be, it is very difficult to completely erase the traces of violence. Therefore, it is essential to resolve ongoing political conflicts as soon as possible and keep civilians and children away from these conflicts. Considering the profound negative impact of war on children's entire lives, political leaders and societal authority figures must take on significant responsibilities to prevent new wars from breaking out.

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