



The Psychological Consequences of War on Syrian Children

Introduction:

War is one of the most painful and terrifying experiences one can go through, especially children. They are the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of war on their physical, psychological, and social well-being. Children lose their loved ones, homes, schools, and friends. They are exposed to violence, injuries, displacement, hunger, poverty, and more. They witness horrifying scenes of death, destruction, and murder, which can cause psychological traumas that may last a lifetime.

War children in Syria are an entire generation who have known nothing but war since its outbreak in 2011.

Impacts of War on Children:

About 14.6 million Syrians were affected by the war, including 6.1 million children inside Syria and 2.5 million refugee children in neighboring countries. These children have faced grave violations of their rights, including killing, injury, recruitment, exploitation, mistreatment, and deprivation of education, health, and food.

According to a UNICEF report, around 900 children in Syria either lost their lives or were injured in 2021, a 35% increase from 2020. About a third of

these injuries resulted from landmines and unexploded ordnance, increasingly used in the conflict. About 2.45 million children in Syria and an additional 750,000 Syrian children in neighboring countries are out of school, and more than half a million children – under the age of five – suffer from stunting due to chronic malnutrition.

Physical injuries weren't the only harm Syrian war children suffered; they also bore psychological scars. A study conducted by the "Save the Children" organization on 450 Syrian children both inside and outside Syria showed that 71% of them suffer from high levels of psychological distress. 48% have sleep problems, 78% experience fear and anxiety, 59% feel sadness and depression, and 41% struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. The children expressed a desire for psychological and social support to help them overcome their painful experiences.

The Need to Address These Psychological Consequences:

Addressing the ramifications of war on the health and well-being of Syrian children is both a humanitarian and ethical priority. These children are the future of Syria and the world, and they need protection, care, and rehabilitation. For this reason, UNICEF, for instance, and its partners offer vital services to children affected by the war. These services range from distributing food, health, and educational aid, to demining efforts and the removal of unexploded ordnance. Additionally, they provide psychological and social support to children and their families, rehabilitate children who have been recruited or exploited, and work on the resettlement or integration of refugee children into their host communities.

In the same context, the Syrian Future Movement, through its programs directed towards children in Syria, has been keen on returning dozens of them to their educational seats, enabling them to obtain their right to education. They also support these children by organizing continuous relief programs targeting their health stability and food security, in addition to allocating specific sessions for their psychological support and emotional stability.

However, these efforts alone are not enough to address the problem of war children in Syria! It is imperative to find a comprehensive and permanent political solution to end the war, establish peace and security across the entirety of Syrian territory. The international community must also increase its commitment to support the rights and needs of Syrian children and pressure all warring parties to stop human rights abuses, especially against children. They do not deserve to be victims of a war they did not choose; instead, they deserve to be heroes of peace that we choose for them and on their behalf.

Children of war are among the most in need of psychological support to overcome the negative consequences of war on their health and well-being. Some steps can be taken to help children cope with the traumas of war, such as:

- Providing a safe and loving environment where the child feels acceptance, belonging, and trust.
- Offering personal care and support from specialists, like embracing, nurturing, praising, and encouraging.
- Building a relationship based on trust and respect with the child, carefully listening to and addressing their complaints and feelings.

- Using therapeutic play as a medium for expressing emotions and internal conflicts, and developing their motor, emotional, and cognitive skills.
- Encouraging children to participate in physical activities, handicrafts, drawing, coloring, and other beneficial activities that channel their energy productively and enhance their level of achievement and creativity.
- Planning regular follow-ups with the child, evaluating their progress, identifying their needs, and involving their family, surroundings, and community in their support.

The role of schools in addressing the psychological effects on children of war:

The role of schools in alleviating the effects of trauma on war-affected children is central, important, and vital. Schools are considered a safe and motivating haven for children who have suffered from war and torture. Schools offer children the opportunity to learn, grow, and interact with their peers, and to move past the painful images they have witnessed in their lives. Schools also provide psychological and social support for children through teachers, counselors, and educational and recreational programs.

Participation in the education sector can contribute to improving the health and well-being of children affected by war, and schools can be spaces for healing and recovery. Education increases children's confidence in themselves and their abilities, strengthens their sense of identity and belonging, and motivates them to achieve their goals and aspirations. Education also equips children with the skills and knowledge that help them adapt to changes in their lives, avoid risks, solve problems, and make decisions.

Moreover, education provides an opportunity to rebuild social bonds among children themselves, and between them and the community. Communicating with friends and colleagues alleviates children's feelings of loneliness and isolation, and instills in them values of solidarity, cooperation, and peace. Interaction with teachers and counselors helps provide care and a sense of security to children, guiding them to available resources for psychological support.

However, for schools to play their role in mitigating the effects of trauma on war-affected children, they must be equipped with the necessary capabilities and strategies. It is essential to provide a safe, healthy, and inclusive educational environment for all children, regardless of their gender, race, religion, or disability. Teachers must be trained on how to deal with children suffering from psychological trauma or physical disabilities, and how to provide appropriate early interventions. Additionally, curricula and educational activities must be developed to align with the needs and interests of the children, and to promote values of human rights, citizenship, and democracy.

The Role of Parents in Mitigating the Impact of War on Children:

The role of parents and the family in mitigating the impact of war on children is a decisive and fundamental one. Parents and families are the primary source of support, protection, and care for children amid the challenging circumstances imposed by war. Parents and families can provide children with a safe, loving, and cherished environment, helping them overcome fear, anxiety, and trauma they experienced or were exposed to because of the war. They can also offer children guidance, direction, and education, enhancing their adaptability, learning, and development. Moreover, they can provide

emotional and social support to improve the children's health, well-being, confidence, and sense of belonging.

Here, it's essential for parents and families to be aware of the effects of war on children and address them appropriately. Children's reactions might vary depending on their age, personality, and circumstances. Some children might become withdrawn, silent, or shy, while others might become emotional, angry, or aggressive. Some might feel exhausted, frustrated, or bored. Physical symptoms like headaches, insomnia, or loss of appetite might also appear in some children.

Therefore, parents and families should be sensitive and patient with children, listening to their problems and complaints, respecting their feelings and opinions, and encouraging them to talk about their painful experiences without forcing or humiliating them. It's also essential to provide children with a daily routine, like studying, eating, and sleeping, to instill a sense of discipline and control. Engaging them in recreational activities, like playing, singing, and drawing, promotes feelings of joy and creativity.

If children's conditions don't improve or if their suffering intensifies, parents and families should seek professional help from experts in mental and social health, such as doctors, teachers, counselors, and humanitarian organizations. These experts can provide the necessary diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment for children, depending on their state and needs. They can also offer support and training to parents and families to enhance their ability to deal with children.

The Role of the International Community in Addressing the Impact of War on Children:

As the world has become a global village, the international community bears a responsibility to help alleviate the effects of war on children. Here are some steps the international community should take to protect the rights of war-affected children in Syria:

- **Financial Support:** Increase financial support and resources for humanitarian and relief organizations working to provide essential aid and services to children in Syria and neighboring countries, such as UNICEF and the War Child project.
- **Pressure on Warring Parties:** Exert pressure on all conflicting parties in Syria to halt all forms of violence and violations against children, criminalize their recruitment, adhere to international humanitarian law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and work towards establishing peace and security in Syria.
- **Rebuilding Infrastructure:** Support efforts to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the war, such as schools, hospitals, electricity, and water systems, to improve living conditions for children and their families in Syria.
- **Education for Refugees:** Provide educational and developmental opportunities for Syrian refugee children in host countries and facilitate procedures for their resettlement or integration into local communities.
- **Mental Health Development:** Support the development of mental health fields in Syria, strengthen the capacities of Syrian psychologists, establish specialized psychological centers to care for war-affected children, such as the

Counseling Center for Children and Families, and ensure medical and physical therapy centers, especially for those who lost limbs in the war.

- **Justice for Victims:** Uphold justice for war victims in Syria by conducting a comprehensive and transparent investigation into all human rights violations committed against children, holding those responsible accountable, and providing compensation to the victims.

The tragedies and challenges faced by children in conflict zones like Syria require concerted and collective efforts from the global community. Prioritizing children's well-being and rights is not only a moral obligation but also essential for ensuring a stable and peaceful future for these countries and the world at large.

Conclusion:

At the end of this article, we in the Syrian Future Movement would like to emphasize the importance of examining the effects of war on children. It is crucial to activate the role of Syrian psychologists and the necessary psychological centers in Syria to address all the phenomena resulting from the war and its continuation, as well as other psychological phenomena caused by the war. Children are the first victims of wars; they suffer from psychological, social, educational, and ethical issues that affect their reality and cast shadows on their future and the future of their country.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon us all to work on protecting their rights and well-being, providing them with the necessary support and treatment, and reintegrating them properly into society. The Syrian Future Movement believes that the issue of war-affected children in Syria is a quintessential humanitarian

and ethical dilemma. It calls for urgent and comprehensive intervention. We cannot allow these children to suffer in silence while the roaring sounds of aircraft and continuous bombardment drown out every other voice in our day today!

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