

Effects of War on Children and Child Development

Conclusions from Diverse World Literature by Ann Masten

- War and other massive trauma experiences can have devastating effects because of effects on parents, survival needs, and harm to fundamental systems that nurture and protect child development
- When danger and devastation end and basic needs are met, children show remarkable resilience and recovery from disaster
- Responding to trauma is normal; it is not uncommon for severely traumatized children to appear stunned, numb, unresponsive, mute, hyper-vigilant, hyperactive, or frantic
- The greatest effects on children occur when parents are killed, harmed, terrified, or unable to function and when the child experiences violent harm to self or loved ones, threats of such violence, or engages in harming others
- Responses will vary by the developmental level and personality of the child as well as the situation
- Effects vary by degree of exposure, degree of damage to basic systems for human development, and degree of understanding by the individual child; as well as previous traumatic experiences
- For young children, quality of care is the most important protective factor; caregivers play a critical shielding role as does the lack of understanding or awareness of the full meaning of the situation
- Younger children may show more dramatic immediate effects, particularly if there is temporary separation from parents and other attachment figures, but the lasting impact may be greater for older children and adolescents because their exposure to trauma may be far greater
- For older children, the nature and degree of trauma exposure is also critical, as is their greater understanding of the situation
- Children of all ages will experience anxiety, and in some cases panic, if separated from the people who represent their “secure base” ~ usually parents; older youth (and even “emerging adults” around 18 to 25) will seek contact too, though in more mature forms
- Adults sometimes underestimate the impact of trauma on children and youth
- Resilience is facilitated by meeting survival needs and restoring basic protective systems for child development, by safety, quality parenting, daily routines, opportunities to go to school and play, etc.
- Agency and opportunities for meaningful action are increasingly important as children grow older

Examples of Age Differences

Compiled by Ann Masten

Vulnerabilities, Common Symptoms

Assets and Protective Factors

Infants & Toddlers

Very sensitive to quality of care
Severe separation distress, crying
Clinging, sleeping and eating problems
Sensitive to emotions of caregiver

Responsive to adult care
Comforted by attachment figures
Likely to elicit adult intervention
Immaturity limits exposure

Key to intervention: Good care from consistent parent figures

Preschoolers

Sensitive to quality of care & change
Regression & loss of new skills
Believe they cause bad things to happen
Nightmares, fearfulness, vigilance
Sensitive to visual images of horror
Play shows trauma themes

Responsive to adult care
Respond to routine, stability
Tolerate some separations
Can talk, understand stories
Can express through drawing
Can play more independently

Keys to intervention: Good care, stability, routines, play

Young Schoolchildren

Awareness of death and injuries
Growing capacity for worrying
Disturbing thoughts and images
Nightmares, sleeping problems
Mutilation and bodily-harm fears
Anger, aggression, irritability
Noncompliance, acting out
Headaches, stomach aches
School problems
Depression, withdrawal

Larger network of supports
Can gather & use information
Hero and rescue fantasies
Can seek help more effectively
Can help others more
Better at self-regulation
Friends
Structured activities
School resources

Keys to intervention: Safety, monitoring, stable care & routines, opportunities for self-efficacy, control, prosocial activities, peers

Adolescents

Much greater exposure risk
Understanding of now, future
Capacity for hopelessness, despair
Sensitivity to disillusionment
Aggression & antisocial behavior
Risky & reckless behavior
Disturbing images, thoughts
Depression risk higher
School problems

Greater independence, mobility
Cognitive skills
Physical skills and strength
Passion for causes, common good
Friends are more capable
Romantic partners
More means of self-expression
More collective action

Keys to intervention: Meaningful involvement in important tasks; prosocial peer activities; opportunities for expression and validation; taken seriously by adults