More than 20 wars are being waged at this moment throughout the world. They range from full-scale civil conflicts to multiparty conflicts and incipient guerrilla insurgencies. Children's exposure to (and even their participation in) war varies dramatically, as does the ability of parents, communities and nations to protect children from warfare.

Some children bear arms and/or come under direct fire; some are kidnapped, tortured, brainwashed. As a result, some die or are physically handicapped for life; some children watch in horror as parents, brothers, sisters or friends fight, flee or die; other children see the conflicts only on the television screen. Although basic survival needs take priority over psychological needs in time of war, there is growing concern that such overwhelming experiences will have a damaging impact on the development of these children, their attitudes towards society, their relationships with others, and their outlook on life in general.

Some parents or communities have been able to shelter their children from war. Most families, however, drained of their resources after many years of warfare, feel helpless about protecting their children from events beyond their control. Until we know how to prevent wars, the international community will want to do all it can to empower parents, communities and nations to protect their children from the most serious physical and psychosocial effects of war. In fact, protecting children in areas of armed conflict is not only humanitarian in its own right, but it may also be among the few viable strategies to end the generational transmission of violence that exists in some parts of the world.

When parents, communities and nations cannot be the agents for protection, direct efforts by the international community may become necessary to protect children's rights under conditions of war. These rights and the national and international responsibilities are articulated fully in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This international treaty came into force on 2 September 1990, and confers the philosophical and political legitimacy that is required to work on behalf of children. But do we have the knowledge to act wisely in our efforts to protect children from war?

Children are all too often innocent victims caught in the crossfire of armed conflicts. Urgent action is needed to protect a generation of children who have lost their sense of safety, are haunted by terrifying memories and hold a pessimistic view of the future.

Traumatic effects

Let us look briefly at the kinds of traumatic experiences that children face when growing up in war-torn countries, and the impact of such experiences on their psychosocial development. Understanding these will also help to identify those factors in the life of a child that can mitigate the long-term effects of war. Recent research into the effects of political conflict on children has emerged from conditions as varied as Lebanon, Mozambique, South Africa and Central America. Most researchers indicate that the war-related experiences of children living under armed conflict are diverse and multiple, and can occur repeatedly over long periods of time.
In Lebanon, a national war trauma profile compiled in 1988 showed that, on average, a Lebanese child has experienced five to six different types of traumatic events during his or her lifetime. The most common traumatic experiences for children in Lebanon were exposure to shelling or combat (90%), displacement (68%), extreme poverty (54%), and witnessing violent acts such as watching the intimidation, injury or death of someone close to the child (50%). As a result of the Gulf War, similar high numbers of children living in Kuwait and Iraq were exposed to such traumas.

In Mozambique, children were more directly implicated in the atrocities of the war. A survey conducted in 1989 showed that many Mozambican children had been physically abused or tortured, or abducted from their families. Some abducted children had been trained for combat and forced to kill.

Under apartheid and the State of Emergency in South Africa, and under Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, children have grown up amidst continuous social, economic and political discrimination. They have witnessed the detention or murder of community leaders, the destruction of their homes and schools, and have actively participated in resistance movements.

Finally, violence increasingly and persistently victimizes poverty-stricken families in Central America. Thousands of children have suffered the loss of family members, forced separation from family and community, pervasive fear and social injustice.

Bitter consequences

Whether originating in bereavement, displacement or shelling, children’s initial reactions to traumatic events have a great deal in common. Most children will suffer from nightmares and disturbed sleep, difficulty in concentrating (especially on school work), repetitive and unsatisfying play involving traumatic themes, diminished interest in enjoyable activities, emotional detachment from parents or friends, and an increased state of alertness (such as extreme nervousness and hyperarousal). Unfortunately, most children continue to suffer for a long time after the occurrence of the trauma.

Armed conflicts can have even more far-reaching effects on children’s psychosocial development. These may take several forms. During wartime, children experience a sense of “betrayal” when they watch such authority figures as parents, teachers or local heroes — those role models they have learnt to trust and respect — repeatedly breaching the expected moral standards of behaviour. This deep sense of betrayal may affect the moral development of these children. Basic assumptions about what is right and wrong are thoroughly shaken.

Having “lost” their childhood, war children may grow up wanting to compensate actively for that loss. The material and psychological deprivation that these children feel is expected to have a profound effect on their personality formation. Some develop a resentment and anger leading to a chronic suspicion of others, while others develop an altruistic self-sacrificing attitude. Both transformations of the self-image may influence the child’s later occupational choice, and his or her relationships with others.

The random and unpredictable nature of war alters children’s sense of safety and trust. Parents are often unable to protect their children from harm. As a consequence, the insecurity these children feel is intensive; they become anxious and over-dependent. They often display a diminished capacity to trust in themselves or others, and harbour intense feelings of vulnerability.

Some children, mainly older ones, become pupils of war when they are recruited as militia fighters. This is often associated with heavy indoctrination programmes that glorify violence. For many of these children, violence becomes a way of life, a “drug” to cure feelings of grief and hopelessness.

Finally, a chronic war situation leaves children uncertain about their future. Many convey a pessimistic view of what life may bring them. Some go on harbouring catastrophic expectations, while others, interestingly enough, live with the conviction that they are “protected for life by some supernatural forces”. The latter may become prone to high-risk behaviour.

Children who have only known times of war show an unhealthy interest in the tools of death.
Learning to cope

The extent to which children are negatively affected by war or are resilient depends in part on the potency of mediating factors, such as certain developmental processes within the child, the availability of the parents, and the solidarity of the community. Young children who have secure attachment relationships with their parents or carers; school-age children who are taught to cope competently with stressful events; and adolescents who develop a strong sense of personal identity tied to their role in the armed conflict—all these may come through the experience of war less damaged than other children. These developmental achievements seem to be associated with certain parenting and child-rearing practices and values that could become the target for intervention work with families and communities.

There is some evidence suggesting that if parents (mothers mostly) are not pushed beyond their stress tolerance capacity and maintain a positive sense of self, and if they can sustain a strong attachment to their children and offer them a semblance of normality in day-to-day living, and if they are taught to identify stress reactions and problem behaviours and offer children some guidance, then their children will manage to cope. Older children are less dependent on the capacity of parents to buffer the impact of war. Rather, they rely on their communities and peers. Communities can buffer the impact of destabilization and violence by offering constructive educational and social activities for adolescents—activities that give youth the opportunity to address the violence around them in a constructive way, such as youth peace camps, class discussions on war and violence, relief work with local organizations and so on.

Children are all too often innocent victims caught in the crossfire of armed conflicts. Their lives are affected by the violence and the atrocities they experience on a daily basis. We have seen how war traumas significantly and persistently burden children’s psychosocial development. Urgent action is needed to protect a generation of vulnerable children who have lost their sense of safety, who have acquired a high tolerance for violence, who are haunted by terrifying memories, mistrustful and cautious of others, and who hold a pessimistic view of the future.

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