Effects of War and Terrorism on Children

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When examining war and armed conflicts throughout history, one often thinks of significant battles rather than the people effected by them. One often pictures a war as a young man dressed in a uniform whose fighting in trenches or cities, but rarely does one focus on the blows conflict deals to families and civilians. Textbooks do a great job of only providing names, dates, and statistics of significant battles, but almost never discuss the loss experienced by families. Those most susceptible to these physical and emotional losses are children. The experiences they face will forever be imprinted into their minds if they happen to survive the ordeal. Children in war-torn countries are those struck by terrorism face psychological problems, and may become enveloped in the conflict themselves. Children who experienced conflicts or terrorists in their countries are at risk from suffering severe psychological problems for the rest of their lives. In some cases, children do not even have to experience these traumatic experiences for themselves. Parents can be effected by the war or conflict, and how they act after those experiences can impact the child’s upbringing. Many parents who served in the armed forces experience PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Many veterans who have PTSD isolate themselves from society and family, and can often make a child feel unwanted or neglected in their household. Unfortunately, this disorder doesn’t affect veterans. Children can experiences horrifying incidents as well. There are several risk factors that can lead to PTSD in children. If the child is continually exposed to the conflict and within geographic proximity, he or she have an increased chance of PTSD (American Psychological Association, n.d.). The child would constantly have to worry about the conflict reaching their home. This explains why so many children with PTSD have a heightened alertness to their surroundings (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2013). A more significant risk factor that is worse than constant fear is witnessing the death of an immediate family member in the conflict (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This image will be forever burned into the child’s mind. This traumatic event can often lead replaying the event constantly in their mind and lead to frequent nightmares when they sleep (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2013). The emotional and psychological torture is obvious. However, it might come as a surprise to many that these effects can effect personal health. The child may try to avoid sleep altogether, knowing that they will experience the traumas in their dreams. Other physical symptoms include angry outbursts, acting younger than their age, and constantly worrying they will die at a young age (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2013). The traumatic experience might be long gone, but the emotional, psychological, and physical impacts it leaves on the children will persist for a while, if not a lifetime. War and terrorism presents a deadly new opportunity: child soldiers. There are around 250,000 child soldiers in the world that act as ground troops, spies and sex slaves (War Child, 2014). Many children and adolescents are forced into armies and insurgent groups. It is important to note that children never volunteer to become a child soldier (United Nations, n.d.). Many governments kidnap and beat children until they become soldiers (United Nations, n.d.). One of the ways in which they force children into armies is the killing of one’s own family member. The group gives the child a choice: kill or die. If they take the option to kill part of their own family they are shunned by the rest of their community and forbidden to return (War Child, 2014). On the other hand, it is true that they may willingly join an army, but they do it with several different motives in mind. Certain ethnic groups face serious discrimination, which require everyone in the group, including children to take up arms (United Nations, n.d.). Other children become soldiers for honor and vengeance. Children might experience the death or defilement of a family member. This in turn leads to a child joining a side simply to exact revenge on the offenders and defend his or her family (United Nations, n.d.). In short, there are several different ways in which children are effected by war and terrorism. These traumatic experiences can lead to PTSD in children, which lead to emotional and physical pain well after the events. War can also force children into becoming soldiers. Even if they are not physically forced into armies, they join for several different reasons, such as defending their livelihoods in ethnic groups or exacting revenge on those that killed or embarrassed their family. There will always be conflicts and wars in the world, but it is up to society to save these children from them and help them transition to peaceful lives.

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