

# PARENTING SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN WARTIME

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**"I CAN'T HELP BUT WORRY IN WHAT WAYS MY CHILDREN MAY BE AFFECTED BY LIVING THROUGH THIS WAR." CHANA, BEIT SHEMESH**

In a 1996 Study after Hurricane Andrew, Dr. Annette La Greca and colleagues coined a term called "Coping assistance" which highlighted 3 cornerstones to help children process traumatic events:

- Facilitating Emotional Processing
- Returning to Routine
- Distraction with Positive Activities

Drawing upon that foundation, here are practical suggestions to help your children cope with the war in Israel:



## 1. Acknowledge.

Help them process the reaction of the adults around them. You can say "this is a difficult time for all of us. There will be times that you may see some grownups cry, or be angry; but they're not angry with you. It's normal and OK to feel sad or to cry."



## 2. Give Over Facts

The unknown is scarier than the known. It is important that you tell your children, each on their level, what is happening. For young children it could be as simple as "Bad people are trying to hurt us and the Israeli army is protecting us." Use age appropriate and concrete language. Focus on what is being done to keep them safe. Give your children an opportunity to ask questions. Be comfortable if sometimes you may need to answer "I don't know."

## 3. Interpret

They say that children are excellent observers and poor interpreters. It is important to not only give them factual information, but to help create some kind of narrative around these events. ie; We're under fire because we're holding on to this Holy Land that Hashem gave us. Give them a sense of historical perspective of the Jewish struggle ie; From the beginning of time, the Jewish people have faced enemies and have triumphed. We have experienced loss and we have rebuilt. This is a scary time and Hashem will protect us.





#### 4. Express

Encourage talking and playing out thoughts and feelings. Avoid terms like “you have to be brave,” or “show us what a big boy you are.” Don’t say “don’t worry.” Instead, try “how can we help ourselves feel safe despite the bad/scary things that are happening?”



#### 5. Telling their story

Give your children opportunities to tell their story. It will help them organize their chaotic and disordered feelings. Young children may tell their story through play. Toy soldiers, figures and blocks are all conducive for this purpose. Don't be put off if they want to play war games with you or each other: understand this is normal and will help them gain mastery over their fears. Older children may tell their story through talking. When relatives call from overseas, let your children tell their story of what happened, where they were, what they did. Let them tell their story to you. Look for openings that may happen organically. Be curious about what they say and draw them out.



#### 6. Creativity

Give them multiple mediums for expression. Coloring, art projects, playing with clay, writing in a diary are all great outlets for children.

#### 7. Document

Give them opportunities to document their experiences by journaling, drawing or video recording themselves and your family. Let them create a narrative around what you are experiencing and how you are coping to get through these times.



#### 8. Read

Reading (or being read to) is a great way to spend time with children, reinforce a sense of normalcy and security, and connect with them. It is a good idea to select books which feature child characters who are clever and resourceful, which reinforce children's sense of their own agency.

#### 9. Routines

Adhere to routines to the extent possible. Create a new normal within the abnormal context of war. Set gentle but firm limits for acting-out behaviors.



#### 10. Tradition

Honor family traditions that bring them close to the people they love, e.g., Shabbos & holiday celebrations, using rituals, family mementos, photo albums and objects. Giving them a sense of the familiar and a perspective of their family traditions and memories, will help ground them during this difficult time.

#### 11. Helpers

Focus on the helpers- the people around the world that are helping Israel right now. Tell them stories about the Tefillin being sponsored, the supplies being gathered, the Tehillim being said, and the incredible outpouring of support from Jews around the world.



#### 12. Let them help

Give children ideas for actionable responses. Writing letters or drawing pictures for the soldiers, saying Tehillim and taking on extra mitzvos will empower children and give them a sense of their role in this crisis. One mother told her children that every time they do a mitzvah, it creates an angel that stands in front of a soldier for protection.

#### 13. Pen Pals

First through third grade children may benefit from having pen-pals who live around the world, to connect them to children who are supporting them during this time. They can write about their experiences and receive message of support in return. This can be done informally by exchanging letters with cousins or family friends.

#### 14. Resilience

Trust in your child's resilience. They will be affected by living through wartime, but they need not be damaged by it. Know that by being present (not perfect), loving and encouraging them, you are giving them the tools they need to get through this difficult time.

