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## **The Role of Coping Mechanisms in Child Development During Wartime: A Psychological Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

This research article dives into the different coping strategies that children, especially those in conflict zones, use to navigate the psychological and emotional fallout from trauma. It looks at both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping methods, shedding light on how kids adapt to trauma depending on their age, cognitive abilities, and the support they receive. The findings suggest that children can find emotional stability during times of inner turmoil by engaging in vital coping strategies like play, creative activities, and forming attachments. The article also weaves in cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) and Freud's defense mechanisms to create a framework for understanding how children process stress.

Moreover, it discusses how CBT can be a valuable tool in addressing emotional vulnerability and cognitive distortions that arise from trauma. By helping children reshape negative thought patterns, CBT enhances their coping skills and builds resilience, ultimately paving the way for emotional recovery and better long-term psychological health.

**Key words:** Coping mechanisms, Cognitive schemas, Trauma, War and childhood development

### **Introduction:**

Coping mechanisms are the different ways we respond to stress and difficult emotions. They're essentially the tools we use to help us get through challenging situations, whether it's feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or dealing with life's curveballs. These strategies can be conscious or unconscious, and they tend to vary depending on who we are, our past experiences, and the specific stressor we're facing. Broadly speaking, coping mechanisms

can be broken down into two main types. Problem-focused coping and Emotion-focused coping mechanism. Problem-focused coping mechanism is all about tackling the problem head-on. This type of coping is most helpful when you feel like you can actually control or change the situation. In emotion-focused coping, the things causing us stress are beyond our control, like the loss of a loved one or dealing with a health issue. In these cases, the focus shifts from solving the problem to managing the emotions that come up.

Both of these strategies—problem-focused and emotion-focused—are useful, but which one works best really depends on what an individual is going through. For example, if one is facing a challenge at work, it might help to use problem-focused coping by getting organized and breaking things down. However, if one is grieving, emotion-focused coping, like seeking emotional support or allowing ourselves to feel sad, might be more effective. The coping strategies we choose can be influenced by a range of factors like our culture, values, past experiences, and personality. For example, some people naturally reach out to others for emotional support, while others prefer to handle things on their own. Studies have also shown that men and women sometimes cope differently—women may be more likely to lean on emotional support, while men might focus more on solving the problem.

Kids often rely on coping strategies, which are mostly instinctive ways to handle stress, anxiety, or tough emotions. These methods play a crucial role in their emotional growth and can be either helpful or unhelpful. For example, children often use distraction techniques to take their minds off stressors, like playing games, watching TV, or engaging in creative activities. They can also learn to process and understand their feelings by talking about them with parents or caregivers. Another common coping strategy is avoidance, where kids shy away from tough situations or ignore their feelings to avoid discomfort. While this might provide temporary relief, it doesn't really address the root of the stress. As children grow older, they may start using problem-solving skills to tackle the issues that bother them. This ability to evaluate situations and seek solutions shows their developing emotional intelligence. Younger kids might lean more on physical coping methods, like crying or clinging to a parent, reflecting their reliance on others to help manage their emotions. Ultimately, the support a child receives and the skills they develop over time shape how effective their coping strategies are. Kids who adopt healthy coping mechanisms are generally better equipped to face life's challenges and build emotional resilience.

#### **Coping mechanisms of children affected by war:**

Children endure profound emotional and psychological scars from war, and these wounds can linger long after the fighting has stopped. In conflict zones, kids face trauma that includes losing family members, being uprooted from their homes, experiencing violence, and witnessing the destruction of their communities. As they navigate these harrowing experiences, finding ways to cope becomes essential. Factors like age, cognitive development, and the support systems available to them all play a role in how they manage their feelings. Understanding these coping mechanisms is vital for providing the right psychological and emotional support. For younger children, especially those under ten, processing their emotions can be particularly challenging, and they might struggle to find the

words to express what they feel. Instead, they may resort to instinctive coping strategies such as acting out, withdrawing, or mimicking behaviors they've observed. It's not uncommon for them to regress to earlier developmental stages, like bedwetting or thumb-sucking, as a way to seek comfort and security.

In times of fear and uncertainty, these behaviors often signal a deep need for emotional stability. While it might seem trivial, play is a crucial coping mechanism for young children. Even amidst the chaos of war, kids continue to play, often creating scenarios where they can exert some control over the turmoil surrounding them. This can manifest in their imaginative games where they pretend to be soldiers or reenact battles with makeshift toys. Through this play, they not only confront their fears but also strive to reclaim a sense of normalcy. By using everyday objects, even in the absence of traditional toys, they can weave narratives that give them a fleeting sense of agency. Additionally, children often lean on their social environments to cope. The bond with caregivers—especially parents—is vital in helping to cushion the impact of trauma. A nurturing caregiver can provide the emotional support needed to mitigate the psychological damage caused by conflict.

Conversely, children who lack these supportive relationships may experience increased anxiety, loneliness, and distress. Support from the community can also help kids cope. Peer groups, extended families, and local support networks can all help reduce feelings of loneliness. Art and creative expression are crucial coping mechanisms for young children in conflict areas. Through storytelling, painting, and drawing, children can process emotions that they are still unable to articulate. Through these activities, traumatized children can communicate their confusion, dissatisfaction, and fears nonverbally. Research has shown that children who engage in art therapy often show a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and **PTSD(Post-TraumaticStressDisorder)**.

According to data from United Nations research conducted in conflict areas like Syria and Yemen, about 70% of children display signs of trauma and distress. In these areas, 40% of kids stated that play was their primary coping mechanism, and 30% of kids claimed that talking to their caregivers gave them comfort. These numbers highlight the importance of creating environments where children can freely express themselves through conversation, creative endeavors, or social support. Although children who experience conflict suffer greatly, they often demonstrate resilience by learning coping mechanisms that enable them to survive their ordeal. Essential elements of trauma management include play, social interaction, regression, and artistic expression. It is imperative that these coping mechanisms be encouraged and supported as we continue to address the needs of kids in conflict areas, giving them the chance to recover and reclaim their childhoods.

#### **Sigmund Freud's Theory of Defence Mechanisms:**

The idea of defense mechanisms, which is central to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, sheds light on how individuals deal with stress, anxiety, and internal conflict. Freud claimed that the ego employs these unconscious strategies to protect itself from unpleasant ideas, feelings, or desires. Although Freud was the first to describe the concept, later psychoanalysts—including his daughter Anna Freud—developed it further and provided a

more comprehensive understanding of these mechanisms.

Freud's defense mechanism theory is based on the dynamic interplay between the id, ego, and superego. While the superego stands for moral standards and the id for instincts and desires from the primordial realm, the ego acts as a mediator between the two, negotiating the demands of reality. The ego uses defense mechanisms to alleviate psychological stress when faced with worry, whether it is brought on by external forces or internal urges.

Denial, rationalization, displacement, projection, and repression are some of the most recognized defense mechanisms we use. Repression involves burying distressing memories or thoughts deep in our unconscious so we don't have to face them consciously. When we project, we take our own unwanted feelings or thoughts and attribute them to others, which helps ease our internal conflicts. For example, displacement occurs when someone redirects their anger from a threatening source, like a boss, towards a safer target, such as a friend. People often rationalize their actions with what seem like logical explanations to dodge feelings of guilt or shame. Denial, on the other hand, is when we refuse to accept the reality of a situation to shield ourselves from emotional pain.

Sigmund Freud's theory of defense mechanisms provides an explanation for significant factors regarding the ways in which individuals, and especially children, react to extreme stress and trauma. Children who are exposed to war will likely experience mental distress because they are constantly exposed to excessive brutality, displacement, and loss. Freud's defense mechanisms provide a foundation for understanding how young children unconsciously defend themselves against psychological trauma brought about by war under such extreme circumstances.

Defense mechanisms are mostly used to lessen internal conflict and worry. Freud's defense mechanisms may be used by children who see the atrocities of war to protect themselves from the intense sadness and terror that these events evoke. Kids' reactions to violence and loss suffered by them when they are caught up in conflicts are significantly impacted by denial, which is one of the protection mechanisms. Kids who are denying can deny the reality of the destruction that is happening around them. Without fully comprehending the dangers and the destruction, a child can play or pretend that the war hasn't touched their life. Extended denial can hurt their ability to process trauma and adapt to post-war realities, although it may temporarily assist them in adapting to their immediate environment. Displacement also occurs when a child redirects their emotional responses to an individual or object that is safer. An adolescent who has been taken from his or her parents, for example, may direct his or her anger or sorrow towards a classmate or even a toy or other object. This is sometimes considered a coping mechanism that allows the adolescent to deal with feelings that he or she is emotionally unprepared to express to the individual who inflicted harm upon him or her. The children can attribute their own fears or aggressions onto others, another reason. If a child is feeling helpless when there is a fight, then they can transfer their fear to others and will think that these people are themselves afraid or in no

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position to control the fight. Even though it can end up in impaired relationships with people, this may assist the kid in controlling emotions.

One of the main viewpoints under which to observe how children who had witnessed the horrors of war, such as in the two World Wars, coped with their traumatic experience is that of Sigmund Freud's concept of defensive mechanisms. There were millions of children who suffered loss, tragedy, and displacement during both World Wars. Freud's defense mechanisms were triggered by these traumatic events, which allowed children to shield themselves from the immediate impact of their experiences. Kids in the United Kingdom, for example, who were evacuated to the countryside during World War II under the British government's "Children's Evacuation Scheme" often felt a sense of uncertainty, fear, and isolation. The intense psychological suffering caused by separation from home and the destruction they saw would have been repressed by many of these children. Post-war research discovered that most of these children, on their return home, recalled nothing or little about the evacuation, though the psychological effect was evident in their attitudes.

Youngsters during the wars were also likely to deny. For instance, numerous children in London showed behaviors that signified a denial of the imminence of the danger during an air raid. Some children opted to pretend that the devastation all over them did not exist and play or just carry on with their life without comprehending the life-threatening danger posed by the bombers. As an escape from the dismal reality that they were going through, kids often pretended to be ordinary, e.g., going out and playing during air raids, based on historical accounts given by survivors like those written in the memoirs of novelist Vera Britaint. Despite only for a while, denial eased them out of the constant terror of dying. Displacement was another common defense mechanism. Kids would often divert their emotional response from war injuries to more manageable subjects.

Most of the children displaced from war formed an emotional bond with toy soldiers or even object forms, like toys, based on a study of children in post-war Germany, particularly those separated from their parents due to city bombing. Rather than confronting the horrific nature of the war, these attachments provided children with a more secure outlet for their frustration, anxiety, and anger.

The British Psychological Society's questionnaires and other information regarding the psychological effects of war on children in the World Wars revealed the long-term effects of these defense mechanisms. Children exposed to extreme trauma often manifested delayed emotional development, and most of them ended up being diagnosed with PTSD or other associated disorders. In addition, several studies have established that children who went through evacuation or bombings had higher levels of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal as adults. This is often due to unresolved trauma and defense mechanisms that were not adequately addressed.

These indicate the ways in which Freud's defense mechanisms—displacement,

denial, and repression—were crucial psychological tools through which children survived World Wars and psychologically coped in exceptionally traumatic circumstances.

**Cognitive Behavioural Theory and Childhood development:**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is all about how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are linked. It's really important for kids because it helps them make sense of their feelings and experiences. Children are always learning and forming beliefs about themselves and the world around them. CBT aids kids in spotting harmful thoughts, challenging them, and swapping them for healthier, realistic ones. As children grow, they start building their identities and figuring out how to handle their emotions. CBT is crucial during this time because it promotes good ways to deal with feelings, control urges, and tackle problems. It helps kids become tougher, so they can handle anxiety, sadness, and behavior problems better.

CBT also boosts children's social skills by teaching them how to get along with others, speak clearly, and solve conflicts in a positive way. By changing negative thought patterns, CBT supports emotional growth, helping kids develop a balanced mindset that benefits them throughout life. It's a valuable tool for children, helping them gain important social, emotional, and thinking skills. In tough situations, like war, CBT helps us understand how these stressful events affect a child's mental growth and coping skills. Children in conflict situations may change how they see the world. Bad experiences can lead to unrealistic thinking, like always expecting the worst, believing every situation is dangerous, or feeling powerless in facing trauma. These thoughts can influence how a child reacts emotionally and behaves, making them feel the world is terrifying and they are helpless. CBT guides children to identify and rethink these negative thoughts. For example, a child who has seen violence might think they are always at risk. CBT helps them learn to look at these fears more practically, teaching them not everything is a threat. This therapy helps children manage their emotions better and reduces the anxiety, depression, and PTSD that often affect children in conflicts.

War heavily impacts how children manage their feelings. The strong emotions of fear, anger, and sadness can leave them feeling out of control. CBT assists in understanding the link between thoughts and feelings, and shows them ways to control their emotions better. Techniques like mindfulness, relaxation exercises, and cognitive restructuring help build emotional strength over time. Moreover, CBT focuses on developing healthy ways to cope. After experiencing war, children might resort to harmful coping methods, such as substance abuse, aggression, or avoidance (like isolating themselves). CBT helps replace these with better coping strategies.

Kids can learn alternative coping mechanisms from CBT including social support, constructive self talk and problem solving. CBT helps kids feel a sense of agency and self efficacy by promoting active coping. For example when a kid feels overwhelmed they could be encouraged to use relaxation techniques, talk more openly with trusted adults about their needs or express their feelings through art or writing. By reducing the effects of trauma these

coping mechanisms allow kids to deal with their experiences in a more constructive way. CBT helps kids understand social dynamics and re establish relationships with others as well as develop personal coping mechanisms. Kids are often isolated from their classmates during war and the absence of familiar relationships can exacerbate feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. Kids who receive CBT can learn social skills including empathy, effective communication and conflict resolution that will help them re establish relationships with their peers and feel safe and confident in their social environment.

Research backs up the use of CBT to understand how kids are affected by war. A study in Gaza found that kids exposed to combat had higher levels of PTSD symptoms due to negative cognitive schemas. By questioning these ideas CBT helps reframe these negative schemas (Dardas et al., 2017). Similarly CBT helps kids develop coping mechanisms to deal with anxiety and emotional dysregulation caused by trauma. After conflict exposure CBT helped kids in Sri Lanka control their emotions and reduce depressive symptoms (Tol et al., 2013). In the long run CBT helps kids develop resilience that allows them to process trauma and adapt to stress in a healthier way (Betancourt et al., 2013). So CBT provides a framework to understand the effects of conflict and direct rehabilitation interventions. By focusing on the harmful thought patterns that come from trauma and encouraging more constructive coping mechanisms CBT provides a complete framework to address the psychological effects of war on kids.

### **Conclusion:**

Coping strategies are what get kids through their parents', their communities' and their own stress and emotional upheaval. Especially after witnessing something as horrific as war. Children develop their own ways of processing and navigating those experiences—through emotion-focused or problem-focused solutions—based on where they are developmentally, who they have around them and how much support they get. That's how they build their resilience in conflict areas. Where there isn't enough emotional support, though, that distress can really intensify. Community networks and caregivers play a huge role in that. Children use all sorts of coping mechanisms to deal with that intense emotions of loss, grief, and terror. Play, art, social relationships and regression are just a few. Denial, repression and displacement are some of the defense mechanisms Sigmund Freud said kids use to protect themselves from the psychological damage of conflict. Those processes can actually get in the way of long-term emotional healing and processing.

The treatment of psychological trauma effects in conflict-experienced children relies heavily on CBT as a fundamental approach. Through CBT children develop advanced coping strategies along with emotional control abilities and resilience by learning to identify and alter detrimental thought patterns. The facilitation of emotional development combined with the restoration of children's sense of agency forms a foundation for their sustained growth. Ultimately, we can assist children in conflict areas in regaining their mental health, overcoming trauma, and reclaiming their childhoods by encouraging adaptive coping strategies and offering therapeutic interventions. This will enable them to thrive in the midst of hardship.

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