

# PARENTING YOUNG CHILDREN IN WARTIME

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**"I UNDERSTAND, FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME, THAT ALTHOUGH IT IS MY JOB TO KEEP MY CHILDREN SAFE, I CANNOT DO THAT." - RIVKA, JERUSALEM**

*There are no words to adequately convey the horror of these times we're living in. The loss of life is unimaginable. The sadistic, gruesome images are seared in our minds. Yet we need to carry on.*

## **For ourselves. For our children.**

How can parents of young children do this? Your children rely on you for their every need. Yet at the same time you are suffering. How can you be the parent that your child needs you to be? Where can you even start?

### **The Early Years**

The early years of childhood, especially 0-5, is a very significant time of development. A child's sense of safety and trust is being developed. Young children who experience trauma can be particularly at risk because their rapidly developing brains are vulnerable.

The good news is that very young children are largely inured to what is going on around them. They are indeed impacted by their environment. **Yet it is critical to understand that the most important thing in their environment is YOU- the caregiver. Your hugs, your eye contact, your smiles, the cooing and back and forth of nurturing interaction - that is the single most influential factor in helping your child develop in a healthy manner despite the war raging around them.**

In their seminal 1943 book, War and Children, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham write that in the event of an attack, such as a bombing, "when small children are in the care either of their own mother or a familiar [caregiver], they do not seem to be particularly affected by [it]. Their experience remains an accident, in line with other accidents of childhood."

Dr. Charles Nelson, a psychologist and neuroscientist who researches childhood adversity, writes "[Parents] provide this layer of protection between the child and this awful world that's going on around [them]."

The parental relationship is the single most influential protective factor for kids coping in the face of trauma. You as parents play a crucial role in establishing a sense of safety and healthy attachment, creating routine and modeling ways of coping.





Here are some practical suggestions to do that during this unimaginably painful time.

## For Preschool Children:

### 1. Create Safety

The world outside is unsafe and scary, and we can't control that. What you can control is this: you can create safety in your home environment. Spend time, playing, talking, maintaining routines and connecting with your children. Play music, read books, sing songs, look at photos together and find opportunities to create moments of joy and connection within all the chaos.

*In our work with hurricane survivors who lost their homes and were living in temporary shelters with no privacy, parents took a roll of tape and mapped out a physical square in the small room they had. They presented this marked off square space to their children to have a bounded and safe space to play. There was very little they could control, but within that little square, they created safety.*



### 2. Play

In time of war, parents understandably lose the ability to be playful with their children. Play serves an important purpose - it is the language of children. It gives you insight into their world and creates attachment between caregiver and child. Playful moments create joy. Parents who communicate joy to their children at being in their presence strengthen the bonds of attachment. As hard as it is, try to spend 5 minutes each day connecting and playing with your children, preferably 1:1. Just 5 minutes a day can actually make a world of difference.

### 3. Self Check

Before you do this, it is important to check in with yourself to see whether you're in a healthy place to interact with your child. You may not be able to do so, and that's ok for now. Take the steps that you need to feel calmer and in a better position to spend that kind of time with your children. Seek support from people who you believe will be able to provide the compassionate response that you deserve.

### 4. Co-regulate

Co-regulation is the warm and responsive interactions of the adult that provides support and modeling to the young child. Co-regulation is regulating with your child, rather than expecting your child at this stage in their young lives to regulate by themselves. Managing your own heart rate, slowing your voice, getting down to your child's level to soothe, and breathing deeply together, are all effective ways to co-regulate when you are both in distress.



### 5. Model Communication

As attachment theorist John Bowlby famously said, "what cannot be communicated to the mother, cannot be communicated to the self." One of the important roles of parenting young children is the creation of an environment where emotions are honored and respected rather than ignored and dismissed. There should be space made for young children to experience all emotions. Your job as parents is to bear witness to these feelings - to see, hear and name these feelings, creating similar language in the child.

There was a study of children who lost their father in the Yom Kippur War. The research found that mother's ability to talk of their sadness in front of their children predicted better child outcomes.

Model expression of feelings like worry or sadness. It is ok to express feelings of sadness and worry to your children - as long as you are also modeling coping with that sadness. This creates a feelings vocabulary for your children and helps them identify their feelings too.





## 6. Be Aware of Non Verbal Communication

With preschool children what you say is not as important as how you say it. Your voice, tone, body language can make more of an impression than your actual words.



## 9. Take Care of Yourself

The last but most important tip on this list: Make sure you take good care of yourself. Not just for your child's sake but for your own. Remember to HALT- getting Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired can put you more at risk for feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage. Find distractions for yourself, preferably activities that you find replenishing or meaningful. Speak on the phone or spend face time if possible, with people who support and love you.



## 7. Increase Nurturing and Physical Affection

Young children during wartime will need increased hugs, physical closeness and affection. Hugging releases oxytocin, which literally reduces stress and will help both you and your children feel better. When you feel you can't play, can you just hug?



## 8. Forgive Yourself

You are not always going to get it right. These are unimaginably stressful times and you are doing the best you can. Making mistakes is part of growing as a parent. It is less about the mistake than how you recover from them. Sharing that recovery can be the healthiest of parenting moments.

Remember the famous quote by Dr. Seuss, creator of joy through his books to countless young children:

**“To the world, you may be one person, but to one person- your child- you are the world.”**

Dedicated to my beloved nieces and nephews, and all the parents of young children in Israel. You are valiantly waking up each day and doing the holy work of parenting and building the next generation. You are creating safety amidst insecurity, demonstrating love in a sea of hate and building trust in the aftermath of the deepest betrayal. You are so brave! Know that our hearts are with you, every moment of every day.