

## **Chapter 11. Psychological Support for Children Living through the Experience of War**

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Children living in a war environment are exposed to continuous danger, uncertainty, and loss. Even when they are physically safe, their psychological world is profoundly affected. Teachers often ask how they can support children emotionally when they themselves are exhausted, anxious, and living under the same conditions.

This chapter focuses on how teachers can provide psychological support to children without turning education into therapy, and without demanding emotional stability from children. Drawing on Morita Therapy, we emphasize supporting children's daily functioning and development while fear and anxiety remain present.

### **1. How War Affects Children's Psychological World**

Children experience war differently from adults. They often lack the language and cognitive capacity to clearly describe fear, loss, or anxiety. As a result, psychological distress is frequently expressed through behavior rather than words.

Common reactions observed in children during wartime include:

Silence or withdrawal

Avoiding eye contact or turning off cameras during online lessons

Apathy, lack of motivation, or refusal to participate

Irritability, aggression, or excessive joking

Difficulty concentrating and remembering

These reactions should not be immediately interpreted as pathology. From the perspective of Morita Therapy, they are natural adaptive responses to a threatening environment. Children, like adults, experience fear of death and loss of safety, but they often express it indirectly. Importantly, such reactions do not mean that a child is "weak" or "broken." They reflect a child's effort to survive psychologically in abnormal circumstances.

## 2. What Not to Do When Supporting Children

In crisis situations, teachers often feel pressure to “do something” to reduce children’s fear. However, certain well-intentioned approaches can unintentionally increase psychological burden.

Teachers do not need to:

Force children to talk about their feelings

Encourage children to “calm down” or “stop being afraid”

Push positive thinking or optimism

Expect emotional recovery before learning can continue

From a Morita Therapy perspective, trying to eliminate fear or anxiety directly often intensifies distress. Excessive attention to emotions can trap children in a cycle of self-monitoring and avoidance.

Silence, avoidance, or limited participation should be respected as part of a child’s coping process.

## 3. Morita Therapy–Based Principles for Supporting Children

Morita Therapy offers a framework that can be translated into educational support for children living in war conditions. The focus is not on changing emotions, but on supporting life and development with emotions present.

### 1) Accept Fear and Anxiety Without Trying to Eliminate Them

Children do not need to feel calm, brave, or positive in order to learn or live.

Helpful messages include: “It is okay to be afraid.”; “You can study or play even when you feel scared.”; “Fear comes and goes.”; Acceptance does not mean resignation. It means recognizing fear as a natural reaction to real danger, without judging or suppressing it.

When fear is accepted rather than fought, it is less likely to dominate attention.

## 2) Support Purpose-Oriented Action

In Morita Therapy, action is not a tool to remove fear. Action is a way to continue life despite fear.

For children, purpose-oriented action may include:

Participating in lessons

Completing small tasks

Creating something (drawing, writing, crafting)

Helping classmates or teachers

Keeping simple routines

The key point is that action does not wait for emotional readiness. Children are allowed to act while feeling anxious, tired, or sad. Over time, the accumulation of “I did something today” becomes a source of quiet confidence.

## 3) Maintain Ordinary Daily Life

Ordinary life plays a crucial psychological role during war. School routines, lessons, seasonal topics, and everyday conversations provide children with a sense of continuity.

Daily educational activities function as: Psychological anchors, Proof that life continues, A structure that holds children when emotions are unstable.

From this perspective, education itself becomes psychological support. Teachers do not need to add special therapeutic interventions; maintaining ordinary schooling is already meaningful.

## 4. Communicating with Children Who Do Not Respond

Some children remain silent, avoid communication, or refuse to participate. This often causes teachers great concern.

It is important to understand that:

Silence is also a form of communication,

Withdrawal may protect children from emotional overload

Readiness to engage differs from child to child

Teachers can: Continue inviting participation without pressure, Offer choices rather than demands, Accept partial engagement (listening without speaking), Maintain a predictable presence, Respecting a child's pace allows trust to develop naturally.

## 5. Protecting Teachers While Supporting Children

Supporting children during war places teachers under significant emotional strain. Teachers absorb children's fear while carrying their own.

Morita Therapy emphasizes that teachers:

Do not need to understand or heal everything,

Do not need to feel emotionally strong,

Are not responsible for eliminating fear,

What matters is the continuation of role. Teaching, guiding, and being present—imperfectly but consistently—supports both children and teachers.

Supporting children does not require emotional heroism. It requires steadiness.

### **Discussion Note: Voices from the Group**

#### 1. Problems Teachers Face in the Educational Process

Teachers described a wide range of difficulties that directly affect classroom practice under ongoing war conditions. These challenges are not isolated problems but are interconnected and cumulative.

Emotional and behavioral instability among students

Teachers reported increased student aggression, agitation, apathy, and emotional withdrawal. Many students lack warmth, attention, and a sense of safety, which makes sustained engagement in learning extremely difficult.

#### Severe difficulties with concentration and motivation

Constant rocket attacks—sometimes several times a day—leave students exhausted and unable to concentrate. Many students refuse to answer questions, and teachers feel they cannot force participation. Motivation to study has significantly declined.

#### Dependence on mobile phones and constant exposure to news

Both students and teachers rely heavily on phones and the internet to follow the news. While this provides a sense of control, it also increases anxiety and distractibility, making it harder to remain present in lessons.

#### Balancing gentleness and structure

Teachers struggle to find an appropriate balance between being emotionally gentle and maintaining necessary boundaries and structure. Excessive strictness risks harming already fragile students, while excessive leniency may lead to further disengagement.

## 2. Positive Practices Observed by Teachers

Despite these difficulties, teachers also shared meaningful positive experiences that indicate resilience and adaptive educational practices.

#### Strengthening teacher–student relationships

Some teachers noticed that students began to thank them for lessons and express appreciation more openly. A partnership-based relationship—rather than a hierarchical one—was seen as especially effective.

### Maintaining socialization even in shelters

Teachers reported that children continue to socialize and connect with each other even during lessons held in shelters. Simply being together in the same physical space was described as psychologically supportive.

### Creating small spaces for reality-oriented dialogue

Short, structured discussions about current events (e.g., 3–5 minutes) helped students feel acknowledged and reduced anxiety. Students wanted to hear “good news” and needed reassurance that adults were aware of reality.

### Encouragement and emotional safety

Praising students for small successes, allowing mistakes, using humor, and creating a non-threatening learning atmosphere helped reduce fear and resistance to participation.

## 3. Voices from Group Discussions

Teachers’ group discussions highlighted deeper psychological and social dimensions of students’ experiences.

Teacher A reported that many boys experience constant fear related to the prospect of fighting. Students feel disoriented and uncertain about their future. Meaningful activities such as volunteering were seen as a way to restore a sense of purpose.

Teacher B emphasized that children’s fear is often intensified by parents who constantly talk about danger. Teachers felt a strong need to work with parents to help them reduce fear rather than amplify it. A key unresolved question was how to accept war, absurdity, and death without losing psychological stability.

Teacher C described disruptions in children’s biological rhythms: many students stay awake at night due to fear and sleep during the day, making learning

almost impossible. Teachers also noted that they often hide their own difficulties, which increases internal strain.

Teacher D highlighted widespread apathy and lack of motivation, as well as strong dependence on mobile phones as a means of escaping reality. One teacher shared the belief that reclaiming life requires small, step-by-step changes initiated by oneself.

Teacher E discussed the difficulties faced by children who had lived abroad and later returned to war-affected regions. These students often struggle to readapt to wartime conditions. Despite this, teachers expressed continued hope and a strong commitment to supporting students, even while experiencing their own suffering.

This discussion reveals that education under war conditions is not merely a pedagogical challenge but a deeply psychological and relational one. Teachers are required to teach while simultaneously containing fear, loss, exhaustion, and uncertainty—both their own and their students'. At the same time, small relational actions, emotional presence, and realistic expectations emerge as powerful resources for sustaining education and human connection amid crisis.