

## Gaza's Generation Born Under Bombs: What Happens to Childhood Amid War?





In a famous quote, Sigmund Freud the founder of psychoanalysis said: “The child is the father of the man,” meaning that childhood experiences, conflicts, and fears shape one’s personality and influence behavior in adulthood.

Psychological complexes, Freud argued, originate in early childhood. So when that childhood is marred and distorted, we can only imagine the extent of psychological turmoil a person may endure later in life.

In Gaza, a war-torn reality filled with fear, loss, human fragility, scarce services, and the collapse of basic care, children have spent the past two years enduring deep psychological trauma.

They grow up in an environment defined by insecurity, where their nervous systems remain in a constant state of hyper-vigilance.

This heightened state of alarm shapes a new kind of awareness an existential fear that distorts children’s perception of the world and redefines childhood in Gaza as a perpetual state of dread in a world stripped of meaning.

### An Abnormal Beginning to Life

I remember in 2023 hearing about the first cesarean section performed without anesthesia on a woman in Gaza. The pain I felt in my own womb at the thought was unbearable. Even now, I struggle to process the reality that during the war, doctors have had to cut open women’s bellies without anesthesia.

I say this as someone who experienced the pain of a cesarean after waking from anesthesia while giving birth in one of the best-equipped hospitals. The agony those women endured was incomprehensible to me.

Now imagine Gaza's hospitals turned into battlefields where women go into premature labor from the sheer stress of war. They give birth without anesthesia, amid the sounds of airstrikes, fearing for their own lives and those of their unborn children—if they survive at all. And that's in the best-case scenario. Many women don't even make it to a hospital in time.

In Jabalia, a pregnant woman named Aya Deeb went into labor but could only reach the hallway of a small clinic. Behind a curtain hastily drawn for privacy, and far from her husband, she gave birth to Yara amid the roar of warplanes.

The baby received no birth certificate, no vaccinations, due to the complete collapse of medical supplies in the Gaza Strip. Yet despite all this pain and peril, births have not stopped. The very act of continuing to have children is a defiant assertion of existence a will to remain normal in an utterly abnormal world.

Babies are born innocent, stirring in everyone who sees them a fear for their fate in this merciless war that spares neither child nor adult, civilian nor fighter. Instead of lullabies, they fall asleep to the whine of drones, the thunder of airstrikes, and the screams of terror.

They wake to explosions. Surrounded by flames, hunger, medicine shortages, and the denial of even basic needs due to the blockade, the fear for these infants' survival only grows. Stories abound of mothers losing their breast milk due to malnutrition and the relentless exhaustion of living in tents, on the move from one place to another. Add to that the psychological burden of grief, fear, and trauma from the loss of loved ones.

Childbirth in Gaza has become a tragedy. In 2025, UNICEF reported testimonies from Nasser Medical Complex in southern Gaza where new mothers and their newborns lie on hospital floors due to overcrowding. With severe shortages, doctors are forced to place multiple premature babies on a single oxygen machine.

Some babies are born with physical deformities caused by the toxic chemicals inhaled by pregnant women in the Gaza envelope. Others are delivered after their mothers are killed.

One such case was Sabreen Al-Sakani, pregnant with a baby girl when an Israeli airstrike killed her, her husband, and their three-year-old son in Rafah. Miraculously, doctors were able to perform an emergency cesarean and rescue the unborn baby who was later named Roh Sabreen (The Soul of Sabreen).

Orphaned before she even drew her first breath, she was born from the body of a martyr. The trauma of giving birth under such dangerous, terrifying conditions surrounded by blood, explosions, and insufficient care profoundly affects a mother's sense of safety, and with it, her bond with her child.

These children, born amid ruins and death, know nothing of war, yet they feel it in their first breath of smoke and gunpowder, their first hunger pangs in the cold of displacement tents. Yet every new life is a testament to the resilience of Gaza's people, their refusal to give in, and their insistence on carving life from death.

### The Vanishing Face of Childhood

The war has left deep scars on Gaza's children scars that may take years to heal, if they are ever afforded the chance to return to normal life. The psychological, social, and educational development of an entire generation has been shattered.

#### – Play:

Play is a vital tool for children's cognitive and emotional growth. Through play, children express themselves, exercise imagination, and develop memory and social skills. But in Gaza, war has distorted even this most basic childhood activity. In one viral video from a shelter school, children are seen playing a game called "martyr and burial."

They lift one child aloft, pretending he's dead, and chant prayers. These games are subconscious attempts to process trauma acting out horror as a way of regaining control. In another game, children simulate bombings and choose who dies, reclaiming if only briefly a sense of power over their fates.

Other games reveal their yearning for normalcy, such as pretending to be a family having an ordinary day with food, warmth, and safety a heartbreaking performance of a life stolen from them.

#### – Stolen Innocence:

Language itself betrays how deeply trauma has entered their lives. Words like "martyr," "airstrike," "displacement," and "where are the Arabs?" have replaced cartoons and school talk. Many children, hardened by repeated tragedies, echo the stoic words of adults, consoling their grieving mothers after the deaths of fathers or siblings.

This isn't wisdom it's forced maturity, robbing children of their developmental stages. We're left in awe at their strength, yet it's a strength forged through suffering, placing impossible burdens on fragile minds.

#### – A Shattered Worldview:

Childhood is the phase in which we build our mental model of the world safe or

unsafe, just or cruel. In Gaza, that model is broken from the start. The trauma devalues their sense of self-worth, love, and care.

In videos I've seen early in the war and just three months ago the collapse of self-image and worldview among Gaza's children is evident. In one, a child picks up an orange from the ground to eat but quickly throws it away when he sees a camera, ashamed to be seen. In another, a boy eats rice off the ground and, unfazed by the camera, motions for the photographer to keep filming.

Such moments reflect a tragic desensitization. These children have lost even the instinct to preserve their dignity they believe they are living the worst life imaginable, unsure if they'll survive the next day.

This fragile understanding of life, formed so early, breeds existential anxiety and feelings of unworthiness. Many may lose the ability to envision a future. This deep insecurity affects their capacity to form healthy emotional attachments even to their own parents.

Their feelings may swing between anxious dependence and cold emotional withdrawal, a psychological wound that, if left untreated, may define their adult relationships.

The psychological toll on Gaza's children the theft of their childhood, the trauma inflicted during their most formative years is immeasurable. Healing will take decades, and only if they are first given the safe space to rediscover the childhood they lost to death, hunger, deprivation, and war.

These children have borne witness to horrors. That memory will never leave them. But helping them now might preserve what remains within them offering, however small, a chance to recover from the atrocities they continue to endure.