

Children living with fear: Recognizing and healing the trauma

By Linda Goldman

Ordinary fears are a normal part of a child's developmental growth, and children create internal and external mechanisms to cope with these fears. But a child's "ordinary fears" can be transformed into very real "survival fears" in the face of severe trauma. Today's kids live in a world of school shootings, extreme bullying, gang violence, natural disasters, threats of biological warfare, and random terrorism. These events can cause panic, stress, and extreme anxiety in kids' lives, and the feelings are heightened with each new instance reported in the media.

The terror that grips our children in these circumstances emerges from situations that suddenly overwhelm them and leave them feeling helpless, hopeless, and unable to cope. Trauma is defined by the Encarta® World English Dictionary as "an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock and may have long-lasting psychological effects or a physical injury or wound to the body." This unexpected and shocking event destroys a child's ability to cope and function in a normal way.

Children witness untold traumas in their homes, schools, communities, and nations. Many children suffer from a state of trauma that can develop into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, in which present events trigger memories of trauma resulting in panic, anxiety, disorientation, fear, and all the psycho-physical feelings associated with the traumatic memory. These symptoms are not easily understood. They often appear out of context with the objective reality of the child's situation. Both the child and his or her caretakers can be perplexed by these reactions and may easily misinterpret them if the connection to the underlying trauma is not recognized.

Signs of traumatized children

Caring adults need to recognize the signs of grieving and traumatized children, and they need to be aware of the techniques and resources available to help bring safety and protection back to the child's inner and outer world. For example, listening to children's thoughts and feelings and providing a safe means of expression helps teachers, parents, and educators reinforce their ability to ensure a safe and protected environment.

Traumatized children tend to re-create their trauma, often experiencing bad dreams, waking fears, and reoccurring flashbacks. Young children have a very hard time putting these behaviors into any context of safety. Many withdraw and isolate themselves, regress and appear anxious, and develop sleeping and eating disorders as a mask for the deep interpretations of their trauma.

Young children engage in post-traumatic play by compulsively repeating some aspect of the trauma. After Tommy witnessed a school shooting, he began wetting the bed and having nightmares and stomachaches. Each time he came to therapy he would repeatedly take a toy gun and pretend to shoot it. It became a regular activity on each visit. Ten-year-old Jane's mom died in the World Trade Center disaster. Jane repeatedly blamed herself. Her mom had felt sick that morning, and Jane believed, "If only I had made her stay home, she would still be alive."

The most common identifying factors that children are re-experiencing the event are play reenactment, nightmares, waking memories, and disturbing thoughts and feelings





about the event. Sometimes kids avoid reminders of the traumatic event and show little conscious interest. Many traumatized children exhibit hyper-arousal by increased sleep problems, irritability, inability to concentrate, startle reactions, and regressive behaviors.

When caring adults can identify traumatized kids, they can normalize grief and trauma signs and develop ways kids can express their feelings and emotions. Parents, educators, and other caring professionals can model, present, and support comfortable ways to bring safety and protection back into kids' lives.

Children and magical thinking

Young children may employ "magical thinking" after traumatic events – they believe that they somehow "caused" the problem, whether it is the death of a goldfish or an assault upon America. Parents can reassure their children that there was nothing they could have done to cause or prevent terrorism.

Some kids may also feel survival guilt. They may think, "Why am I living when so many others have died?" Adults can reframe guilt and magical thinking from "What could I have done?" to "What can I do now?"

At-risk behaviors

Children may begin to exhibit at-risk behaviors after a traumatic event. The frequency, intensity, and duration of these behaviors are important factors to

consider. Children may experience post-traumatic stress, revisiting the traumatic event through outside stimulus like photos, music, and the media, or by reliving the sights and sounds of the tragedy in their minds. Expect children to re-experience a degree of their original trauma on the anniversary of September 11.

The following behaviors may be indicators that a child may benefit from professional help:

- Sudden and pronounced change in behavior
- Threat of suicide or preoccupation with suicide, evidenced through artwork or writing
- Harmful acts to other children or animals
- Extreme confusion or incoherence
- Evidence of substance abuse – drugs, alcohol, etc.
- Sudden change of grades
- Avoidance or abandonment of friends
- Angry or tearful outbursts
- Self-destructive behavior
- Inability to eat or sleep
- Over-concern with own health or health of a loved one
- Giving away important possessions
- Sudden unexplained improvement in behavior or schoolwork
- Depression, isolation, or withdrawal

Activities that help kids express thoughts and feelings

Helping children to establish a sense of order in an ever-changing and chaotic world is important. Not only do we want our kids to realize they are survivors of a difficult event, but they also need to know that their life still has continuity and meaning. Parents and educators working with traumatized children should keep to the daily routine as much as possible. This allows kids to feel a renewed sense of security. Establishing family activities also has a reassuring effect on children. Preparing meals together, eating dinner as a family, reading stories aloud, or playing

family games can help to reestablish a sense of normalcy to kids' lives.

It is important to initiate safe places for kids to express their ideas. This can be done by finding quiet times at home, in the car, or on a peaceful walk. Being with children without distractions can produce a comfortable climate to begin dialogue. Bedtime should be a reassuring time, too. Often this is the time children choose to talk about their worries. Parents can consider an increase in transition time, storytelling, and book reading to create a peaceful, uninterrupted nighttime environment.

Hope for the future

Our children are living with fear, stress, anxiety, and grief caused by events like bullying and gang violence, car crashes and earthquakes, school shootings and global terrorism. One goal of trauma work with children is to restore safety and protection to all children who have experienced trauma within their homes, schools, and community. Another goal is to provide parents and youth workers with information, understanding, and skills related to the issues creating trauma. With these tools we can help our children become less fearful and more compassionate human beings, thereby increasing their chances of living in a future world of increased inner and outer peace. 🙌



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