

Trauma and Children: What Can We Do?

By Linda Goldman

*I never
knew grief
could feel
so much
like fear.*

CS LEWIS

On September 11, 2001, our children, either directly or vicariously, witnessed the terrorist assault upon our nation, watching over and over again as fanatics crashed American planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the fields of Pennsylvania. Our young people witnessed adults running frantically out of control, jumping blindly out of windows, screaming, crying, and appearing bewildered – through black smoke-filled skies and burning buildings – as an insidious and non-locatable enemy emerged to wreak pandemonium and panic upon their lives. The media acted as a surrogate parent and extended family *before* this horrific event, and shared with our children *during* this event visually, aurally, and viscerally. These were sounds and images so graphic that they will forever be imprinted upon their psyche and ours. This unprecedented horror is now a traumatic overlay, potentially triggering all of the pre-existing grief-related issues that our children were carrying before September 11.

Death-related tragedies involving suicide, homicide, and AIDS, and non-death-related traumas such as bullying and victimization, divorce and separation, foster care and abandonment, violence and abuse, drugs and alcohol, and

sexuality and gender identification had left many youth living their lives with overwhelmed feelings and distracted thoughts. After September 11, these issues still prevail, infused with the paradigm of terrorism, war, biological destruction, and nuclear annihilation – ideas that are entirely new for our children, for whom “war” is part of a history lesson. In the adult world our children look to for security and comfort, they now see or sense a world of terror, panic, and anxiety, with too many questions and too few answers about their future.

Children processing their grief and trauma may not necessarily progress in a linear way through typical grief phases. The four phases of grief are shock and disbelief, searching and yearning, disorganization and despair, and rebuilding and healing (*Life and Loss*, 2002). These phases may surface and resurface in varying order, intensity, and duration. Grief and trauma work can be messy, with waves of feelings and thoughts flowing through children when they least expect them to come. Kids can be unsuspectingly hit with “grief and trauma bullets” in the car listening to a song or the news, seeing or hearing an airplane overhead, or watching the video of the New York devastation or the Pentagon crash. A fireman’s siren, a jet fighter, a soldier in

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military uniform, a letter in the mailbox, or a balloon bursting can trigger sudden intense feelings without any warning.

Children's voices

Children's reactions to terrorism, war, anthrax, and the perceived loss of safety and protection provide a window into their psyches and help suggest ways the adults around them can help. Our ability to listen to questions, thoughts, and feelings is paramount in creating a safe zone for our children to process these life-changing times.

Children normally assume they live in a friendly, safe, and caring world. The terrorist attacks of September 11 amplified the pre-existing signs that their world is unprotected, scary, and contains an uncertain future. This deepened loss of the assumptive world of safety for our children creates a new set of voices that all parents, educators, and health professionals must heed.

Five-year-old Tommy, after sitting and listening to his Mom's careful explanation about the terrorist attack, explained why he was really upset about the terrorism: "This is a real tragedy, because I kept searching and searching all day and couldn't find any of my cartoons on TV."

Talking to children about terrorism, trauma, and war

One question weighing heavily on the minds of parents, educators, and mental health professionals is "How do we talk to our children about war, terrorism, prejudice, biochemical attack, and nuclear destruction?"

Sometimes it may help to ask children if they have been "thinking about world events" and if they are, open a dialogue. Some children don't want to talk about it. Some live in fear they will be killed, others say there is nothing to worry about. Some may want to know the facts; therefore we need to choose

words that will help them understand what is happening around them. Because so many of us feel "it's just too big," we need to be able to discuss each piece of this huge experience a little at a time. The following are examples of definitions helpful to initiate dialogue with children.

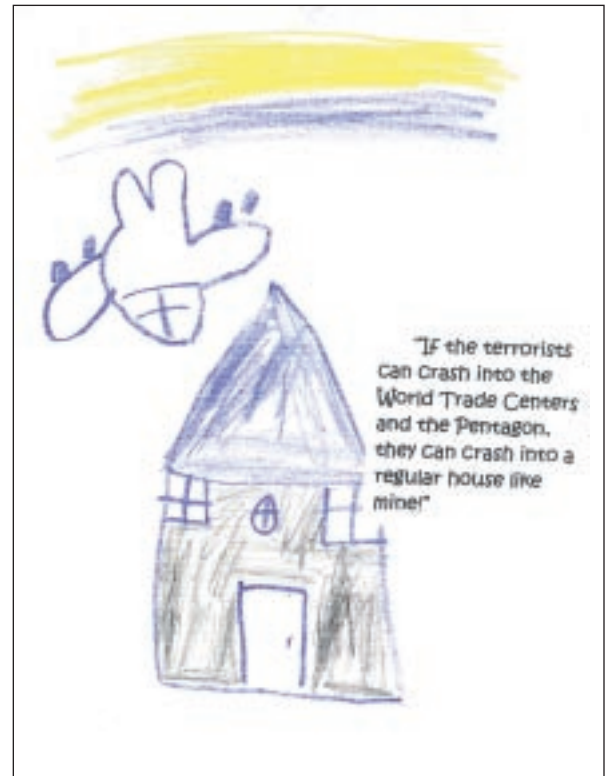
Terrorism is an act or acts of violence, abuse, murder, or devastation against unsuspecting people and countries by a person or group of people that believe their cause is more important than human life or property. Their feeling of "being right" is sometimes more important to them than their own lives. Terrorists can be big or small, black or white, or any color, American or foreign. Their goal is to create terror, disruption, and vulnerability.

Trauma is an experience that can be scary and difficult. It may create feelings of fear, anger, rage, and revenge. A trauma can be a death of someone close to us, caused by a car accident or a terrorist bombing. It can also be from knowing something scary that happened on TV, or to someone we know, or even to a stranger we see on a news video.

Creating dialogues

When creating dialogues with children, use accurate, real, and age-appropriate language, avoiding clichés or denial of their experience. Concentrate on giving the facts, and keep responses to questions simple and age-appropriate. This helps adults follow the lead of children as to how much information they choose to take in. Especially with young children, minimize the scope of the tragedy, without contemplating with them what did or may happen.

Keeping explanations developmentally appropriate allows children to process this experience at their own level. Young elementary school children need simple information balanced with



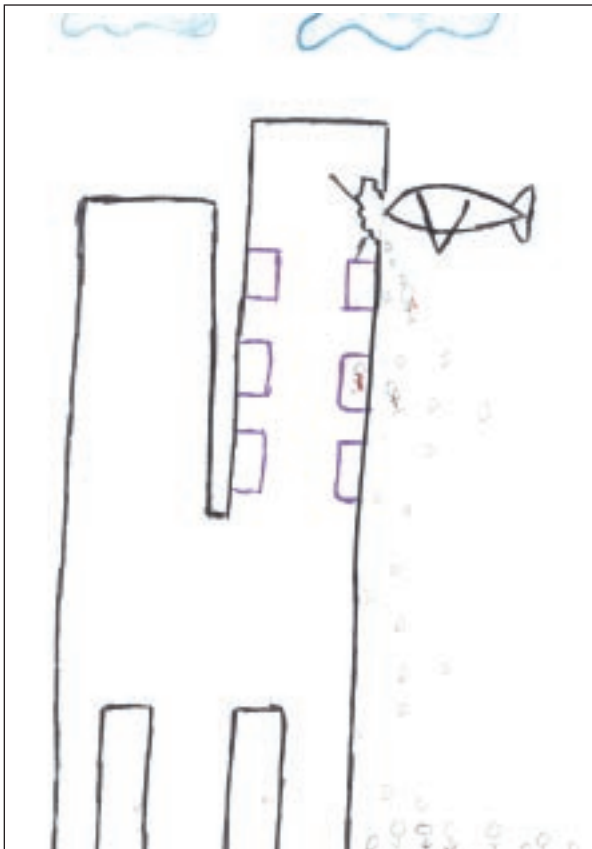
Darian, age 6, illustrates his fear for his own safety after September 11.

reassurance that trustworthy adults are bringing stability to their day-to-day life. Middle school children may seek out more facts and want to know more about what is being done to keep them safe and healthy at home, school, and in the community. High school students may outspokenly voice opinions about what happened and why, and may need to develop ways to combat terrorism, rationalize war, and prevent world annihilation. (Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists, NASP, www.nasponline.org.)

Telling children the truth in an age-appropriate way is very important. They often have a conscious or unconscious knowledge of events happening around them and can sense the impact of the terrorist trauma on the adult world. One mom shared just such an experience in the car with her four-year-old son, Andy. She was "sneaking" a listen to the news on the day of the attack. As the reporter began talking about the destruction of the World Trade Center, she quickly turned it off so Andy couldn't hear. Andy immediately explained his level of awareness: "Mommy, they are talking about the plane crash that blew up buildings today."

He just knew about it. If Andy had then been told his experience wasn't real, he may have begun to doubt himself and/or the adult world and question his mother's truthfulness. If Andy felt his mom was hiding the truth about what happened, he might worry more, thinking his mom was too afraid to tell him what really happened. Either way, Andy may have another loss – the loss of the trust in the adult world. Teachable moments for all children can evolve with teachers and parents on subjects such as bullying, violence, prejudice, sexual discrimination, and conflict resolution.

It's OK to let children know you are upset and worried too. Using mature modeling of this upset and worry can create examples for children to follow. It's often hard for them to reconcile a message of "Don't worry; everything is fine" with the enormity of anxiety they may feel coming from the adult world. Find out what they may know about the traumatic event, remembering that they may process what they see and hear inaccurately. Search for faulty perceptions and replace these with simple truths.



With this recreation of the World Trade Center destruction, 13-year-old Tiara illustrates her grief over the horrific footage she viewed on TV.

Helping our children grieve can only help the grieving child in each one of us.

Young children usually worry about their immediate environment, their family and friends and pets, and their ongoing day-to-day routine. Kids may worry something will happen to their dog, their home, or their friend.

Prepare children for dialogue

Reassure children that what they are feeling is very common. Emphasize to them that adults are feeling the same things that they are. Remind them that everyone has different ways of showing their feelings and that is OK. Restore confidence by reassuring them that problems are being handled, people who were hurt are being cared for, buildings are being cleared, and that things are getting a little better each day.

Mature modeling guides children to create responsible ways to be helpful during the crisis. Emphasize ways that adults can help. Parents can volunteer to give blood, food, time, and money. Relief agencies such as the Red Cross issued appeals for help. Contributions of needed goods and family money can be taken to needed areas. Children can be included in planning ways families can help and joining in delivering food and clothing. Families

and schools may want to join together in saying a prayer for the victims that were attacked, for their families, and for world leaders to bring about peace.

Accept children's reactions

While there are several commonly seen reactions to trauma in children, these reactions range widely. Some children will listen to your explanation and then go out to play. Others will want to stay near you and talk about it for a length of time, or maybe ask you to drive them to school instead of taking the bus. Still others may be angry that adults can't immediately fix the problem.

Children can use many activities to safely tell their story. Props like firefighter and police hats, doctor kits, toy soldiers, and hand puppets can be used to reenact the tragedy and war. Toys, puppets, art, clay modeling, collage, letter writing, journaling, and other projective play can be used for role-play and expression of emotions. Positive visualizations and breathing exercises can help kids to relax.

Activities to help children participate in world events

Children can create rituals that allow commemoration and avenues to voice feelings. Lighting candles, planting flowers, writing letters, raising money for victims, or saying prayers for survivors or world peace allow children to be recognized mourners. Thirteen-year-old Helen lived in a New Jersey community where many families, especially those of firefighters and police, had been deeply affected by the World Trade Center disaster. "Let's make brownies," she told her younger brother and sister, "and sell them to raise money for the firefighters. Everybody likes brownies."

Teachers can create a global flag project in their classrooms. Students can

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creatively design a global flag and think about their own vision of world peace. One high school senior pondered a strategy for peace: "Suppose we had one million people walk across the Afghan border, bringing food and clothing and only wanting peace; I wonder what would happen?"

School systems can create assemblies about prejudice with prominent Muslim, Arab, or Palestinian members of the community participating. Communities can involve children in participating in fundraisers for the survivors of terrorist attacks. Making patriotic pins and selling them to raise money to help victims and survivors, creating Web sites for world peace, or having a poster contest at school on "What We Can Do to Feel Safe" are ways to give children back a sense of control and participation in their own lives.

What kids can do about terrorism

1. Talk about their feelings. Allow children ways to tell their story as much as they need to. Draw pictures, create poems, write letters, or offer suggestions about ways to help.
2. Make a fear box. Cut out pictures from newspapers and magazines about what frightens them and paste these around the box. Write down their fears and put them inside.
3. Create a worry list. Make a list of worries from 1 to 5; number 1 is the biggest. Suggest that children talk about this list with someone they trust, like their mom or dad, their sister or brother, their guidance counselor, or a good friend.
4. Put together a "peaceful box." Ask kids to find toys, stuffed animals, and pictures that make them feel safe and peaceful, and keep these items in the box.
5. Help others. Help boys and girls give food or clothing to people who need it. Suggest that the family donate money to

a good cause, like the Red Cross, the fund for victims and survivors of terrorist action, or the children in Afghanistan.

6. Display an American flag and create an original global flag. Children can place these flags together outside their house to remind everyone of their support for their country and their hope for world peace.

7. As a family, say a nightly prayer and light a candle for world peace.


Helping our children grieve

We are now a nation and a world of grieving, traumatized children, and the terror of bullying lives inside most of us on this planet and threateningly looms over our everyday life. Our children fear terrorism from foreign strangers and bullying from well-known classmates, siblings, and adult figures. If we can help our kids to see the relationship between terrorist attacks, bullying behaviors, and issues of power and control, we can begin rooting out the behaviors that create oppression, prejudice, misguided rage, and destruction of people and property as a justification for a cause or self-serving purpose.

Responsible adults need to help children cope with trauma and loss and grief from the terrorists outside their country and the bullying within their homes, schools, and community. Providing information, understanding, and skills on these essential issues may well aid them in becoming more compassionate, caring human beings and thereby increase their chances of living in a future world of inner and outer peace.

When the crisis interventions have passed, we will need extensive training in schools and universities to prepare to work with kids in the context of a new paradigm of trauma and grief. Educators, parents, health professionals, and all caring adults must become advocates in creating understanding and procedures to work with our children facing a present and future so different from their past. Our task is to help our children stay con-

nected to their feelings during the continuing trauma of terrorism and war.

The terrorist attack has transformed us all into a global community joining together to re-instill protection and a sense of safety for America and for the world. Helping our children grieve can only help the grieving child in each one of us. 

Read more about children and complicated grief issues in Linda Goldman's book *Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief/Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence, and Abuse* (Taylor and Francis, 2002). To contact Linda Goldman, e-mail her at lgold@erols.com or visit her Web site at www.erols.com/lgold.

HEALING HIGH FIVES RESOURCE REVIEW

Healing High Five request for resources

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