

# Trauma & Children: What we can do

By Linda Goldman

The events of September 11, 2001, caused significant trauma to all of us. Children witnessed a terrorist assault on our nation over and over again on television, in newspapers and magazines and on the Internet. We have recently memorialized the 10th anniversary of the tragedy, and, with that have all witnessed the photos and films once again. This unprecedented horror was and may continue to be a traumatic overlay, potentially triggering all of the pre-existing, grief-related issues that our children were carrying before that awful day. Since then, our young people have also been traumatized by natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina, Haiti's earthquake, tornadoes, floods and the tsunami in Asia), man-made disasters such as oil spills, rampage shootings, political assassinations, plane crashes and many other scenes that have played repeatedly through media sounds and images.

Each day, our kids are impacted directly or vicariously by death-related tragedies involving suicide, homicide, and sudden death-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 issues. These experiences can result in overwhelmed feelings and distracted thoughts that may create traumatic grief for girls and boys.

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, 2nd Ed, 2000). 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

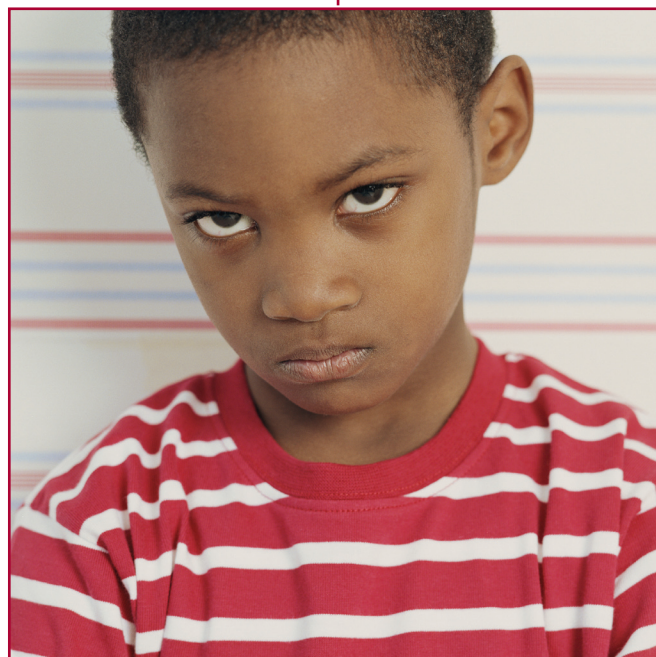
flowing through children when they least expect them. Kids can be unsuspectingly hit with "grief and trauma bullets" just about anywhere, with everyday sights and sounds triggering sudden intense feelings without any warning.

## Talking to children about "the bad stuff"

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, violence, natural disasters and destruction?" Sometimes, it may help to ask children if they have been "thinking about world events" and, if they have, then opening a dialogue. Some children don't want to talk about it. Some live in fear they will be killed or hurt, while 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. We need to be able to discuss each piece of traumatic experiences a little at a time.

## 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. 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 external tragedies, without contemplating with them what did or may happen. Keeping explanations developmentally appropriate allows children to process this information at their own level. Ask them what they think happened to clarify their understandings.



- Young elementary school children need simple information balanced with 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 has happened and why, and may need to develop tactics for combating terrorism, rationalizing war and preventing world annihilation. (Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists, NASP, [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).)

### 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 when learning about tragic events. 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, and you are there to help them with their personal traumas. Mature modeling guides children to create responsible ways to be helpful during the crisis. This can mean collecting money to help victims or removing some of the sources of their distress. One example is helping them establish a new email account that they can keep private and avoid cyber-bullying.

### 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 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. Encourage children to use a variety of activities to safely tell their story, including drawing, writing and acting out with puppets or other expressive means of describing their traumas.

### Activities to help children participate in dealing with grief over world events

Since 9/11, adults have been more supportive of children and helping them express their grief. Young people 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 victims allow children to be recognized mourners.

Communities can involve children in participating in fundraisers for the survivors of disasters. Making patriotic pins and selling them to raise money to help victims and survivors, creating websites 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. One group of children in Washington, DC, initiated a backpack project to collect backpacks for the children of Hurricane Katrina.

### What kids can do

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. 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. 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. 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. Monitor TV viewing and create a “teachable moment” for dialoguing as a family.

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 disasters or the children in war-torn countries. 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. As a family, say a nightly prayer and light a candle for world peace.

### Helping our children grieve

Our world contains millions of grieving, traumatized children who have seen and experienced too much. They have been abused; witnessed adults and teens gunned down; lost a parent to death, divorce, deportation or deployment; watched their family dissolve due to economic problems; looked at pictures of starving children; been placed in foster care; and experienced bullying from peers and older kids or adults. 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. Responsible adults need to help children cope with trauma, loss and grief over issues within their homes, schools, community and nation.

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. We 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 connected to their feelings during the continuing traumas of terrorism, war, and man-made and natural disasters. The 9/11 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 in Linda Goldman’s books: *Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief/Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence, and Abuse* (Taylor and Francis, 2002) and *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Help Children with Trauma in Today’s World* (Taylor and Francis, 2005) and *Great Answers to Children’s Questions About Death: What Children Need to Know* (Jessica Kingsley, 2010).



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