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The Trauma of Terrorism: Helping Children Cope

Ilene R. Berson and Michael J. Berson

September 11, 2001, began for many as an ordinary Tuesday morning throughout the United States. In some parts of the country, students were in school, some adults were at work or engaged in their daily routines, and others were still in peaceful slumber, unaware of the horrific series of events about to unfold. At about 8:45 a.m., the tragic assault on the country began. Within moments, the nation became a collective witness to and victim of a violent atrocity.

Elie Wiesel has stated, "More than anything–more than hatred and torture–more than pain–do I fear the world's indifference."[1] The intensity of the response to this assault on the nation has awakened the compassion of our citizens. We have lived in a long period of peace, and this event has been a sudden jolt. The immediacy of the news accounts and images made everyone not only witnesses, but also participants in the tragedy. Unlike in times past, when travelers spread news of atrocities months after the event, firsthand knowledge of threat and potential for risk heightens the intensity of our response. Even those individuals who are far from the disaster sites cannot remain emotionally distant.

The terrifying aspect of this violence is the realization that we are not just bystanders to aggression but also the target of it. Violence is not a unique occurrence here, but mass destruction of human life still stirs fear and uneasiness across America. Because mass violence often appears to happen at a safe distance, we have remained detached from the reality that civilians are the sometimes accidental and often intentional victims of attacks. In recent conflicts, civilians account for almost 75 percent of resulting deaths.[2] Terrorism involves a violent lawlessness in which aggression intrudes into the ordinary existence of people.

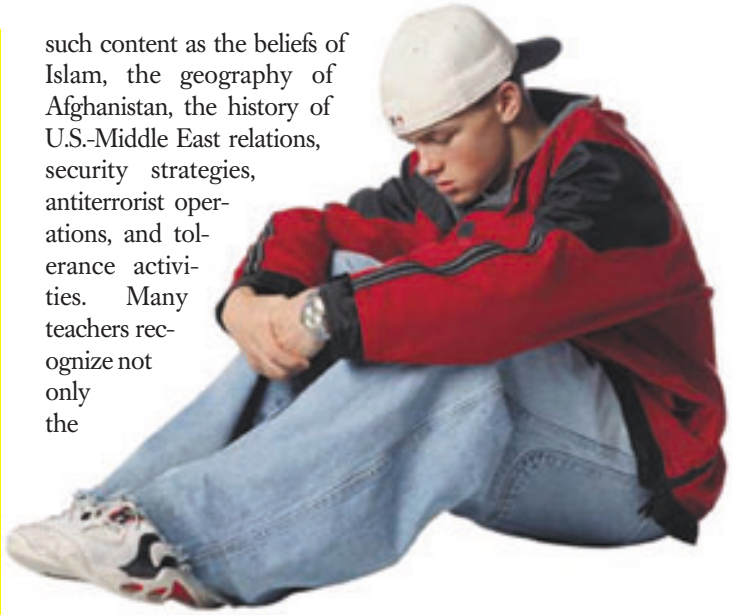
The horrors of conflict and organized violence have not escaped touching the lives of the young. A year is comprised of 525,600 minutes, but it takes only one moment to make a lasting impact on children and young adults. The powerful images of this event affected many students throughout the country, and the enduring influence is intensified as their imaginations are fed by the memory of the violence.

In fact, the end of the twenty-first century has been burdened by images of brutality. Conflicts are characterized by atrocity, and recent history attests to an abandonment of any "rules of war, starting with the abandonment of respect for any distinction between combatants and civilians, or the innocence of children."[3] In the United States, the shock of direct attacks on our own soil has left us to deal with the aftermath. We have little empirical research to guide our responses to this form of tragedy because so few terrorist attacks have occurred in the United States. The most recent event, the Oklahoma City bombing, provides the most updated understanding of the reaction of children.[4] We have learned from other tragic incidents that the meaning we assign to events and the messages we highlight are crucial to the healing process. Terrorism is insidious in infiltrating the collective psyche with fear and the pervasiveness of our horror. Children and young adults are especially vulnerable to the psychological impact. Adults must guide the response of children and youth to an awareness that "the world needn't be evil simply because some people are. It is only evil when we let the evil happen."[5]

Social studies teachers in particular are confronted with how to respond to these acts of violence as they enveloped the nation. Gripping current events provide an important opportunity to expand students' global understanding of the world while integrating these important topics into the formal curriculum. While assisting students in managing devastation and loss, teachers can also see the experience as a segue into

Selected Web-Based Resources

- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**
  www.aacap.org
- **American Academy of Pediatrics**
  aap.org
- **American School Counselor Association**
  www.schoolcounselor.org
- **ChildTrauma Academy**
  www.childtrauma.org
- **Educators for Social Responsibility**
  www.esrnational.org
- **Emergency Services & Disaster Relief, Center for Mental Health**
  www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/emergencyservices
- **ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education**
  www.indiana.edu/~ssdc/eric_chess.htm
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**
  www.fema.gov
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA for Kids**
  www.fema.gov/kids
- **George Mason University Psychological First Aid Kit**
  www.gmu.edu/departments/psychology
- **National Association of School Psychologists**
  www.nasponline.org
- **National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**
  www.ncptsd.org/what_is_new.html
- **National Institute of Mental Health: Helping Children & Adolescents Cope with Violence & Disasters**
  www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm
- **National Institute of Mental Health Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Trauma, Disasters, & Violence**
  www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/ptsdmenu.cfm
- **National Council for the Social Studies: Teachable Moments—Resources For Teachers and the Media**
  www.socialstudies.org/resources/moments
- **National School Safety and Security Services**
  www.schoolsecurity.org/terrorist_response.html
- **National Victim's Assistance Organization**
  www.try-nova.org
- **PBS: America Responds: Classroom Resources**
  www.pbs.org/americaresponds/educators.html
- **Purdue Extension: Terrorism and Children**
  www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/children/index.html
- **The Dougy Center for Grieving Children**
  www.grievingchild.org
- **Tolerance.org: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center**
  www.tolerance.org
- **University of Virginia Youth Violence Project**
  youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu
- **U.S. Department of Education**
  www.ed.gov/inits/september11/index.html



such content as the beliefs of Islam, the geography of Afghanistan, the history of U.S.-Middle East relations, security strategies, antiterrorist operations, and tolerance activities. Many teachers recognize not only the importance of the events, but also the natural connection between these events and the social studies curriculum. Nonetheless, teachers need guidance on how to infuse these events into instruction.[6]

In the ensuing weeks, teachers must shift the focus from "What happened?" to "Where do we go from here?" How do we restore the faith of young people in the promise of their future as Americans who can live in safety and security? How can we triumph over our fears and prejudice? How do we use our strength and character as a nation not only to deal with the tragedy, but also to grow and seek out peace? The following suggestions can guide social studies teachers in such addressing such important questions. Through these actions, teachers will seed the hope for the future.

Students' Exposure to Terrorist Attacks

Acts of terrorism infringe on our basic sense of safety and often leave us questioning whom to trust. "Human degradation and misery are intensified in the experience of the child whose innocence may be consumed by the horrid realities which disturb so many lives."[7]

American students could not escape the horrific images of the terrorist attack. Child victims of atrocities are particularly vulnerable and may require careful intervention to restore their sense of safety and security. Nonetheless, even in the face of devastating trauma, children and young adults have the potential to exhibit resiliency, courage, and an enduring vitality. By fostering coping skills and drawing on the strength of the collective community, we can help students begin to heal.

Behavioral and Emotional Effects of Exposure

Links between an exposure to violence and negative behaviors in children and young adults exist across all age ranges. Exposure to a traumatic experience has short- and long-term consequences in a student's life and can contribute to physical and mental health problems as well as educational impairments.[8] Even children and young adults who have been

exposed to a single terrorizing event can exhibit clinical indicators of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, including fears, repetitive nightmares, thought reenactments, and thought suppression. The children and young adults with greater proximity to the event tend to experience more intense symptoms.[9] It may seem obvious that relatives of the victims or direct witnesses to the disaster may have strong responses, but other children and young adults may also have less obvious connections to the events, which similarly heightens their sensitivity to the trauma. These connections include students who have visited the buildings that were affected, whose parents fly frequently, who have recently suffered another loss, or who have experienced other forms of trauma. Students in the last two categories may have expended their coping resources in dealing with their daily problems and may not be equipped to handle further adversity in their lives.

Although responses to the events will be unique to individual students, ranging from total disinterest to chronic obsession and panic attacks, the age and developmental levels of a student are important in determining his or her ability to deal with the events. Young children under age six will typically look to adults to guide their response. The powerlessness and anxiety of parents and teachers may be apparent to the young, who often observe others around them for cues on how to act. Because young children relate events to themselves, they will be most worried about their own safety and the well-being of those they care about. Subsequently, they may become clingy and concerned about the whereabouts of parents and family members. Generalized fears may become more intense; loud noises, including sirens and the sounds of airplanes, may result in fearful reactions. Children may have greater difficulty sleeping and may be plagued by dreams of monsters and other creatures during their rest periods.

Although crying and fussiness may appear more frequently, young children may have difficulty identifying feelings because they lack the vocabulary to express their emotions. Children may exhibit regressive symptoms and lose previously acquired skills. Conversely, if adults have successfully monitored their reactions and limited their children's exposure to media images of the tragedy, some young children may be relatively unaware of the attack. Other children may have repeated exposure to horrific images and misinformation about the event; they may presume, for example, that each viewing on television represents a separate incident in which a building is attacked, leaving the impression that hundreds of planes struck many structures.

Elementary-age children may express similar feelings of anxiety, appear fearful or worried, and cling to teachers or parents. They may be irritable in class, indicate concern about ongoing violence, and complain of headaches or stomach aches. In their play, elementary children may repeatedly reenact the event or discuss elements of the attack. Teachers may observe changes in children's behavior, with increased acting out, heightened aggression, angry outbursts, withdrawal, poor concentration, and impaired performance on school work. They may also hear children discussing death and dying.

Middle school students will exhibit comparable symptoms of anxiety. In addition, middle school concerns may include a generalized fear about school violence and war. In repeated discussions of the events, these students may share horrific details and focus on acts of revenge. Middle school students may struggle with accepting others who are different and may be more suspicious of diverse perspectives. Changes in school behaviors include defiance, as well as an increase in absenteeism or withdrawal from extracurricular activities. Some students may indicate that the terrorism has had no effect on them at all.

In the high school, students may not only be fearful and exhibit many of the signs of trauma noted in younger children, but may also feel vulnerable to death. They may try to numb this vulnerability with drugs or alcohol. Some students may become so transfixed on issues of death and dying, combined with a sense of hopelessness, that suicidal thoughts enter their minds. Other adolescents will appear unaffected by the atrocity. For some, this denial is a self-protective coping mechanism. For others, who by age eighteen have witnessed over 800,000 real and imaginary deaths on the television, they have already been desensitized to these acts (see www.childtrauma.org).

The Impact of Violence on Social Studies Teachers

At the very time when students turn to their teachers for stability and support, teachers may be equally traumatized. The numbing effect of the trauma, combined with fear and depression, may make it hard for teachers to identify students in crisis. These adults may be more irritable and less responsive than usual. Some teachers may have less tolerance for student misbehavior, and their punitive response may leave students feeling withdrawn or perceiving themselves as bad. Other teachers, fearful of their reactions or lacking answers to students' questions, may avoid discussing the events. Teachers may worry about exacerbating the negative emotions of the students. Thus, while experiencing their own traumatic response, teachers' ability to play a stabilizing role and support students' resilience may be compromised.

At a time when students need structure and routine, teachers may have trouble concentrating on planning for lessons. Fear of being ill-equipped to handle controversial or emotionally laden content may result in a denial of the importance of the event. Some teachers may also become incapacitated with fear of physical harm in the school setting, exhibiting a hypervigilance to their surroundings.

Support offered within the school and throughout the broader community can help combat the sense of isolation and the saturation of the senses that overwhelms coping responses. Many students will sense the fear, tension, and confusion of teachers who are distracted by worry. Teachers need to reach out to their colleagues and use employee assistance programs when they are overwhelmed by their emotions and reactions. But supportive conversations among staff should be

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conducted outside the purview of students to protect them from reexposure to frightening interactions. It is important for children to know that even though their teachers may be upset by the events, they are still capable of teaching and caring for them and meeting their needs in the classroom.

Discussions of Events and Feelings

A safe and supportive environment in which to address concerns and feelings helps combat the sense of isolation and validate the presence of a caring community. The ability to deal with complex issues can be empowering to young people who must integrate into their experience a barrage of facts, images, and diverse perspectives. Teachers need to understand that students' reactions to these events will vary. Young people who are experiencing other crises in their lives, including preexisting mental health and behavioral problems, may have intensified anxiety. Others will appear unaffected. These variation of feelings may also relate to the developmental stage of the student: young children are concerned about separation and safety, older elementary school students focus on fairness and caring for others, and adolescents grapple with the ethical dilemmas about violence and the resolution of conflict. Teachers can help children and adolescents cope with this disaster by attending to their words and actions and observing signs of distress.

Social studies teachers in particular can serve as important informants to children whose perspective on the tragedy may be influenced by rumors, speculation, and misunderstanding. Students need to express their feelings and to make sense of the events. Competing values and ethics may create stress as students wrestle with antiviolent sentiments, which have been promoted in schools, and revenge-oriented ideology, which provides a simplistic mechanism for coping.

Regardless of the age of the students, young people need reassurance that they are safe and secure. This message needs to be reinforced over time, especially as new developments reintroduce concerns. A sense of security is communicated through consistent class routines and the fair application of rules of the classroom, which provide students with a sense that they have control of their environment. Flexibility in scheduling is also important, however, to allow students to process their thoughts and feelings and to receive accurate information. Because of television and other technologies, students who were not geographically present at the event became eyewitnesses and, in that sense, victims. Controlling student contact with disturbing images and adult conversations is important to limit exposure to vicarious traumatization. False assurances, however, are unsettling to students who experience a cognitive dissonance between the reality of the situation and the information they receive.

Teachers may find it helpful to structure a limited period of time for discussions, although they need to respond to students' questions that arise throughout the day directly and honestly, with a guided transition back to the class activity. Teachers should emphasize that it is the responsibility of adults to create safety for children. They should also give students an appropriate overview of school plans to address emergencies, including a review of school safety guidelines. Although we want students to recover the security and routine of their daily lives, we must also assist them in learning from this tragedy. Wallowing in fear is not productive; neither is living in a state of terror. But the complexity and enormity of this event may necessitate repeated discussions.

Anger management activities should be infused into class discussions. Students can describe how they successfully managed past frightening situations and identify effective coping strategies for dealing with stress. They often feel empowered when they realize that they have overcome hardships in the past. Relaxation exercises, creative activities (i.e., listening to music, reading stories, singing), and moments of quiet reflection are soothing to students. Students will also be comforted by knowing that over time, they will be able to cope with their strong feelings better. This is a crucial time to maintain open communication with parents and other school personnel about students' functioning. Mental health professionals in the school and community are a valuable resource for students who continue to experience strong emotions without relief.

Young children need repeated assurances that adults are working together to keep them safe and cared for. Young children may need extra assistance with transitions from home to school, with a warm greeting in the morning and a nurturing school environment during the day. In addition to verbal assurances, physical comfort–smiling faces, extra hugs, and hand-holding–is important. Because children will imitate teachers and parents, adults should model good coping skills. The complexity of information necessitates repeated clarification of information, including discussions of who is responsible for the event. Some children will believe that they are to blame for tragic events because of their misbehavior. Others will have inaccurate information about events. Teachers need to provide honest and realistic responses.

Young children also need to improve their "feeling vocabulary" so they can verbalize their distress. Teachers need to be aware of nonverbal cues that indicate fear, anger, or grief. For young children, hands-on activities are helpful for expressing feelings. These activities include watching puppet shows, drawing pictures, reading books, doing art projects, writing letters, making music, and taking action to help. Young children may need to reenact the experience to gain control over the event. Rescue materials, building blocks, and puppets can help children express their fear and anger.

In the elementary years, children may notice that adults are concerned and upset, but they need to know that the significant adults in their lives can still take care of them and guide them through the scary and angry feelings. Not talking about it makes children feel that the topic is taboo. Teachers can initiate the conversation with opening questions about the children's knowl-

edge of the event and then let children guide the discussion. Strong feelings, such as anger, fear, anxiety, and grief, can be difficult emotions for children under any circumstances. Teachers should anticipate that children who feel overwhelmed and fearful might struggle with concentrating, sleeping, and controlling aggression. Maintaining routines can help. Children also need assistance in labeling their feelings and differentiating between angry emotions and angry behaviors.

Reenactment in play may help, but if children are unable to acquire a sense of control, this process may not be productive. During play, teachers can help students explore alternative endings and guide them to find words to explain their actions. Elementary students also may benefit from writing about their experiences, discussing other examples of disasters in literature, and observing that most people in their lives are caring and helpful.

Older students may not directly express their concerns but still grapple with fears about a reoccurrence of the event, the loss of a loved one, separation from the family, isolation, and loneliness. In addition to having access to adults who are receptive to questions, adolescents need guidance in developing constructive responses and alternative solutions. Class activities might emphasize constructing answers to questions together to demonstrate an orderly way to solve a problem. Sensitivity to the reactions of others may help identify other young people who are relying on self-destructive mechanisms (i.e., drugs, alcohol, aggression) to cope. Teachers should carefully observe student behavior to redirect students before angry outbursts escalate into conflict.

As events continue to unfold, teachers will need to provide additional updates on basic facts and check on students' evolving understanding and ability to cope. (Prompts to guide discussions are available at www.apa.org.) Teachers can model for their students how to express feelings in an appropriate manner by acknowledging the variety of their emotions and by managing expressions of anger and intense fear.

Building Students' Resilience to Trauma

We need to safely steer students through the onslaught of emotions and images that have touched them since September 11. The creativity and vibrancy of childhood is violated by those images depicting an attack on the communities that are supposed to nurture their development.[10] The most important factor in restoring that sense of safety is a strong relationship with a competent, caring, positive adult. Students are comforted through the reassurance of significant adults and the engagement in normal routines. Specific discussions about safety and victim assistance will calm their fear. Children want to be assured that they and their family and friends will be OK. They need permission to laugh and play and explore their childhood. Vulnerability and powerlessness disappear when a child discovers joy and self-efficacy.

Celebrate Diversity and Promote Tolerance

In times of crisis, we are bound by the commonality of our experience, yet there remains the threat of isolating individuals on the basis of racial, ethnic, or religious differences. Now is an important time to ensure that the curriculum infuses tolerance-building activities that explore the rights of people throughout the world, consider historical examples of ethnic discrimination and stereotyping, and examine resources and organizations promoting tolerance and the elimination of terrorism. Lessons on religious understanding, with a particular focus on Islamic teachings, are important to counter misperceptions about Muslims and their beliefs. Students need to know that violent acts that target civilians are not Islamic in origin and "there is no justification in Islamic scriptures and jurisprudence for indiscriminate killings or assassinations of local or foreign citizens by either Sunni or Shiite Muslims."[11]

As fear over the event transforms to anger, the intensification of hatred can feed stereotypes and prejudice. In such an environment, atrocity and counter-atrocity flourish.[12] Dehumanization of the perpetrators of the event minimizes children's stress,[13] but teachers of adolescents must be wary of the danger of mis-socializing students with fear, violence, and hatred. Adults should be role models of acceptance and community.

In classrooms, we often have a tendency to present isolated details of events without an in-depth analysis of the conflict or exploration of multiple perspectives. In fact, students may experience confusion when the messages of patriotism replace thoughtful observation and discussion.[14] Teachers need to promote an understanding not only of patriotism for our own country, but also of the love that others feel for their countries.[15] An exploration of the efforts of world leaders to respond to terrorism can reduce hatred and violence on local, national, and global levels.

Celebrate the Helpers

K-12 students can focus on the unity of communities in the wake of a tragedy. Moreover, students can affirm the actions of so many individuals who are committed to assisting the victims, consoling families, investigating the tragedy, or working to ensure the continued safety of our nation.

A powerful counterresponse to powerlessness is action. Although the tragedy of September 11 has caused deep sorrow, we observe the heroic acts of so many generous and courageous people. Students should be encouraged not only to observe and celebrate the efforts of others, but also to engage in outreach and participatory service in their schools and communities. Memorials can also provide an opportunity for young people to share their feelings, and a range of service activities can offer students a chance to bond as a community and combat isolation and vulnerability.

Final Thoughts

Acts of terrorism instill fear and helplessness in a society. Coping with the intense stress and trauma of these events can be overwhelming for our youth, who may feel especially vulnerable. To function optimally, each student has a basic need for safety and security.[16]

Although many are still coping with the trauma of the terrorist attacks, teachers have the opportunity to transform students' shock into action. Already, many heroic individuals have modeled lessons of unity and strength. Survival does not mean insulating our youth from further trauma, but rather providing them with skills to make a positive impact on their lives and the lives of others. "The basic law of terrorism is that even the smallest threat can ripple out to touch those a thousand miles away."[17] Our youth can instigate a counterresponse that spreads compassion, understanding, and hope throughout our nation and the global community.

Notes

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13. J. Garbarino, K. Kostelny, and N. Dubrow, *No Place to be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
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15. L. K. Egendorf, *Terrorism: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2000).
16. Michael J. Berson, "Rethinking Research and Pedagogy in the Social Studies: The Creation of Caring Connections through Technology and Advocacy," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 28 (2000): 5.
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Ilene R. Berson is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Child and Family Studies at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida in Tampa. She is a cofounder of the American Educational Research Association SIG Research in Global Child Advocacy. Her research focuses on creating safe, supportive school environments for child victims and investigating preventative interventions for child safety and prosocial development in cyberspace. She can be contacted at berson@mirage.fmhi.usf.edu

Michael J. Berson is Associate Professor of Social Science Education in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. He is a cofounder of the American Educational Research Association SIG Research in Global Child Advocacy. His research explores technology in social studies education and global child advocacy. He can be contacted at berson@tempest.coedu.usf.edu