

GROWING UP IN THE AFTERMATH OF TERRORISM

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On September 11, 2001, in a kindergarten class somewhere in the United States, a child arrived to school late. Upon entering the room, he declared in a singsong voice, “I know what happened to our country.” Puzzled looks from other students greeted the child, who was immediately hushed by the teacher; she had already been informed, in a whisper from the principal, that a terrible tragedy was taking place.

At school, children watched the reactions of their parents and teachers, who sometimes sobbed and trembled at the news. Maybe they also heard the quiet conversations of teachers consoling each other in the hallway.

In homes where televisions were left on, young children got to see the horrible images again and again. They listened to the President calling for retribution against the terrorists, and they heard members of congress sing “God Bless America.” In homes where the television and radio were left off, some children were largely unaware of the tragedy.

The next day, a number of schools were closed. Children saw flags appear on houses and in car windows. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks, on the front of every newspaper, were hard to avoid. And some children had their worst fear confirmed: a friend or relative, maybe a parent, had been killed.

On September 11, many adult Americans initially felt fear, anger, or the emotional numbness of shock. In the ensuing weeks, grief would cause a void, to be partially filled with sentiments of patriotism – pride as we witnessed the selfless actions of many citizens – and a powerful desire to take action of some sort on behalf of the country. But a sense of anxiety has also taken hold. How could this happen? What can we do to make the world a safer place? And what does it all mean for our children’s future?

Some children will hardly notice these national events. Some will already have employed coping skills to make the trauma surmountable. Others will struggle with the challenge of overcoming fear or anger. In the weeks following the event, many children have expressed fears of ongoing dangers, both real and imagined, and have felt a new insecurity. Whether or not children will show traumatized responses over an extended period of time depends largely on whether their immediate environment is safe and predictable. Time is needed to heal, to allow the stress that intensified in the week following the event to diminish.

The effects of disruption and instability cannot be restricted to a specific time frame. The day of the event, the day

after, one week later, one month later may each bring a new transformation in a child’s responses to the perceived threat to his or her safety. How well troubled children recover will largely depend on the actions, in the ensuing weeks and months, of the adults that are closest to them.

Continuous Questions

The curiosity of children is a trait that skilled teachers can direct in order to facilitate a broader understanding of information and make learning relevant. Children struggle to make sense of events and the adult reactions that they observe. Some children, preoccupied with the tragedy, may need to talk about details of the event continuously. These discussions may get in the way of other essential activities, and adults, who do not have all of the answers, may become annoyed when a child repeatedly asks the same question or several children repeat similar questions to which the teacher has already responded. Yet, anger or impatience with this repetitive process will be counterproductive to children’s healing. The messages, both spoken and implied, that teachers send to children let them know when it is okay to address a topic and what should be left unsaid. These question-and-answer discussions provide an important opportunity to explain events to children in a manner that is appropriate for their young age. Teachers should announce that now is a good time to talk about fears and worries.

Sometimes children keep asking the same question over and over because, indeed, no one has yet answered them. Adults may respond without really listening to what the child is asking. In contrast, when teachers listen to their students and respond to their questions in a clear and gentle manner, children will more easily clarify distortions in their thinking. Talking about the event can also allow children to sort out what is real, what is fantasy, and then receive the extra comfort that they need.

While being responsive to students’ questions, teachers must be careful to limit the discussion and to keep the day grounded in the normal patterns of the classroom. Through this process, children can be reassured that others share similar feelings and concerns. They can also find respite from the emotional stress by returning to the predictability and emotional safety of the class routine.

Continuous Silence

On the other hand, some traumatized children may maintain

a solemn silence. Many young children may not have the words to describe their own experience. They often do not know how to verbally express their need for support and comfort when distressed. In the classroom, teachers may notice some children becoming irritable, “clingy,” aggressive, or withdrawn. When children believe that they have to bottle up their feelings, by ignoring or denying them, they are at risk for long-term traumatic responses. These can manifest as distressing recollections of the tragedy, nightmares, avoidance of thoughts associated with the event, avoidance of situations which might evoke traumatic recollections, difficulty recalling information about the trauma, feelings of sadness, worries about premature death, sleep difficulties, poor concentration, and exaggerated “startle responses.” Children distressed by the events of September 11 may also show constant watchfulness and guardedness.

Elementary age children will be able to understand that permanent changes may be occurring as a result of the terrorist attack, and this awareness may contribute to anxiety. Children’s worries and fears may not be expressed through words, but can often be observed in their actions. Without evolved coping skills and with limited verbal capabilities, children must rely on adults to speak for them, providing words that describe how they feel.

Following the tragic events, many adults and children described dampened emotional reactions such as numbness. Subsequently, typical trauma-induced responses have been observed in children, including physical complaints. A child might be more comfortable complaining of a stomach ache than in directly voicing his or her fears, especially if the adults in the room are themselves not comfortable talking about the event. The stress then manifests itself as a physical ailment, which provides a mechanism for a child to get assurance, comfort, attention, and physical closeness to a significant adult. This coping mechanism has a functional purpose in bringing help when words cannot convey the need for emotional support.

Of course, severe or persistent pain of any sort should be brought to the attention of a medical doctor. Likewise, persistent emotional distress of any kind can benefit from the help of a mental health professional. Teachers and parents should be assertive in asking for services and advice from school counselors, psychologists, and family doctors when any child exhibits severe emotional disturbances or mild disturbances that persist.

Helping the Helpers

Likewise, some adults may still be processing their own feelings and concerns and be less available to the child to assist

them with their own reactions. Teachers who are entrusted with the care of traumatized children need support to develop their own skills in addressing the special needs of the young. Teachers will need to replenish their own resources for coping so as to be emotionally available to their students, to physically comfort them, and to model healthy coping behaviors. This is a good time to access the mental health services in our schools and communities.

Consistency and Guidance

Over time, children may still be afraid that the disaster will occur again. Ongoing news reports may re-ignite fears. Children will observe adults’ fear as proof that the danger is real. Children whose parents fly often or are in the military, who recently visited the World Trade Center or the Pentagon, who know a victim of the attacks, or who are already facing an unrelated emotional trauma may be especially fearful. These feelings of anxiety are, unfortunately, based on real

problems, so these children desperately need an adequate level of safety and stability in their environments if they are to heal and grow. Emphasize the things that adults are doing to ensure safety. Hold a hand, give a gentle hug or a pat of encouragement. Make time to talk one-on-one.

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Be ready to seek further professional help. These actions can further reinforce for children the fact that adults care about them and are invested in their happiness, health, and safety.

Children are looking to the significant adults in their lives for calm, compassion, and hope. Young children learn to perceive the world first through lenses provided by others. They depend on adults to guide them, foster their understanding, respond to their questions, and even articulate their questions. Amidst all the discussion, the most important words are those of comfort and reassurance given by adults. More than ever, children need reinforcing messages confirming that the adults in their lives are working to keep them safe and to take care of them. These reassurances help children believe that the world will continue to flourish and to nourish them, and that emotions like fear and sadness need not be experienced alone.

Understanding Through Play

Play is the essence of childhood, providing a context in which children can struggle with the emotional challenges the world throws at them. Play is the medium that children use to work through their concerns, but play needs to be supervised.

In primary school classrooms teachers will notice children seeking ways to express their knowledge of the

tragedy. Some will draw descriptive pictures and others will act out the details on the playground or in the classroom with puppets and dolls. This expression will help defuse anxiety. Playing out the events allows children to imagine the fulfillment of a great wish that all young children have, to be in a position of power and control over the circumstances.

If play activities become destructive, adults should redirect it. One can suggest that child substitute caring themes into a play sequence, such as acting out the role of helpers, like fire fighters and rescue workers. Healing play, art, and literary activities afford children the opportunity to imagine a solution that reestablishes a sense of control.

As always, children will build tall buildings with wooden blocks and knock them down. Such play should not be forbidden, because children need to imitate disasters (like tornadoes and car crashes) in the process of understanding them and expressing their desire to control them. On the other hand, playing with toy guns, violent video games, or playing hostile games that pit a group of children against one child (or “gangs” against each other) should be forbidden at school and at home. Teachers should be especially watchful for bullying behavior or other forms of aggression and be ready to intervene.

Additionally, the power and invincibility of super heroes provide an imaginary comfort, that no matter what may happen and how horrible people may act, there is someone who can protect us. The super hero represents safety, fairness, and justice. When children pretend by empowering themselves or their dolls with superhuman abilities, they may be striving to articulate their need for a safe world. These fantastic elements of children’s play help them cope with anxiety.

Risk and Resilience

When children face stressful events, their ability to cope remains intact as long as they are not overwhelmed with too much adversity. However, the accumulation of traumatic experiences can harm children’s emotional and intellectual functioning. The problem is further exacerbated when opportunities for positive interaction are diminished.

Give me one tennis ball and I can toss it up and down with ease. Give me two and I can still manage easily. Add a third and it takes special skill to juggle them. Make it four and I will drop them all. So it is with risk factors.¹ Teachers may need to give special attention to the children who are already burdened by problems, whether they are family issues, academic difficulties, mental health issues, physical impairments, or dangerous neighborhoods. Too many emotional assaults on a child with a fragile sense of well-being can have lasting consequences for his or her functioning.

Indicators of stress among children may include fearfulness, anger, and regressive behaviors (such as thumb-sucking). Intensified anger can result when coping skills are consumed by the immensity of a traumatic event. Young



children, in fact, have little control over the many environmental dangers which may surround them. The emotionally at-risk child will have limited or destructive ways to address intense feelings. Teachers then have the opportunity to instruct children about the emotions the child is experiencing, model positive ways to express that feeling, and identify possible responses and choices for social interaction. Teachers can ask for help and intervention by psychologists and other mental health professionals when disruptive behaviors do not change.

Land of the Free

To help us restore safety and a sense of calm following the chaos of a disaster, it can be helpful to immerse ourselves in familiar activities. Patriotic symbols highlight our solidarity and sense of national community. These messages are shared with children as they engage in patriotic activities, saying the Pledge of Allegiance and singing the national anthem. But as we teach children the words, we need to provide them with a deeper understanding of the values and meaning behind them. Young children need understanding as well as activity. This is where social studies is so important. It is our chance to salvage something hopeful out of this terrible event.



Children should learn what the symbol of the flag stands for and what are the principles upon which this country was founded. The pledge should be not a thoughtless ritual; but an opportunity to introduce and discuss democratic principles, such as liberty, justice, and freedom. Unfortunately, incidents have been reported of children taunting their Arab American classmates, or harassing people who are wearing traditional Muslim attire. If this occurs, it is an occasion for a teacher to speak gently but firmly with the children about an important principle of democracy: tolerance of differences.

Compassion and Tolerance

Children will respond differently to recent events according to their individual personalities, the support available in their home and community, and the cultural and moral beliefs of their family. When children's energies are directed toward some proactive experience, they can feel empowered—even when the complexity of a problem is not fully understood. Children can find strength through efforts, even small ones, to repair the pain in the world. For example, many charities find themselves low on supplies because so many resources are now being diverted to New York City, to help in the recovery there. A food collection drive for the local food bank might be a community service project that

would really be appreciated by service workers and fellow citizens in need.

Simple, kind deeds that people do for others represent personal acts of goodness, which counterbalance horrid atrocities. These acts of kindness can be small or large, and recognizing children's involvement will empower them to make a difference in the lives of others. Each act of compassion takes away a bit of the darkness of despair. "Democracy cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage," said Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.²

Teachers can lead the way by seeking understanding of diverse cultures, learning about alternative perspectives, and identifying the similarities among children worldwide. Empathy mitigates aggression and prejudice by highlighting the commonality of our lives.

Final Thoughts

Despite fears based in reality, children can attain emotional health if they are part of a community that strives hopefully for a peaceful future. In the face of cruelty and ignorance, we can help guide our children toward the positive messages of kindness and community. These, too, should be part of the aftermath of the tragedy. We can help children understand that today, and in the future as adults, they have an important role to play in creating a peaceful, safe, and just world.

The gift of childhood is the capacity to dream, to imagine oneself achieving extraordinary things. Anne Frank wrote in her diary, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."³ Our collective efforts today—sharing messages of reassurance, understanding, and caring—have the power to guide children toward emotional health. Maybe that is the first step toward a safer, happier future.⁴

Notes

1. J. Garbarino, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995).
2. Carl T. Rowan, *Dream Makers, Dream Breakers: The World of Justice Thurgood Marshall* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1993), 454.
3. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. (New York: Doubleday, 1952).
4. M. M. Holmes, "A Terrible Thing Happened" (Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2000). Online at www.maginationpress.com/4416428.html; C. Monahan, *Children and Trauma: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997); For links to other resources about helping students cope with traumatic events, visit www.socialstudies.org, the website of the National Council for the Social Studies.

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