

**Dear Readers:**

When children witness something traumatic they can experience what is referred to as **imprinting**. If a death

occurred, this experience is referred to as **death imprinting.** Children can be negatively affected by a traumatic incident even if they do not witness it if other people describe the event vividly in their presence. This experience is referred to as **emotional incest**. When a child imprints a traumatic incident, he/she will remember in vivid detail what he/she thought, saw, felt, heard, and smelled. The child may be triggered by a thought, feeling, sound or smell and have a flashback of the event.

The negative effects of trauma can be reduced significantly if the child is given an opportunity to **debrief**. Debriefing is a process led by a trained professional. If the child is not profoundly affected by the incident, caring adults who do not need special training can do many things to assist the traumatized child in releasing the event.

The following information is intended as a guide to help parents, teachers, and other

helpers understand the **normal** reactions of a child to an **abnormal event**...a tragedy that happens rarely.

**TRAUMA:**

**An emotional shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to an individual’s psychological development.**

**Trauma refers also to overwhelming, uncontrollable**

**experiences that psychologically impact victims by creating in them feelings of**

**helplessness, vulnerability, loss of safety, and loss of control.** Treating Traumatized Children: New Insights and Creative Interventions by Beverly James

**CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO TRAUMA**

The child’s reaction will be described first. For each reaction, an appropriate adult helping behavior will then be described.

**Preschool Through Second Grade**

1. Helplessness and passivity.

Provide support, rest,

comfort, food, opportunities to play or draw and talk.

2. Fear.

Assure the child of safety;

make protective presence obvious.

3. Confusion in their thinking.

Repeatedly clarify issues with correct answers as the child brings them up.

4. Difficulty identifying what is wrong.

Provide emotional labels for the child’s reactions.

5. Difficulty verbalizing, withdrawn, repetitive non-verbal traumatic play, unvoiced, implied questions

Help to verbalize general feelings and complaints.

Validate the experience of trauma. Be present for the child.

6. Attributing magical qualities to traumatic reminders.

Separate what happened from the physical reminders

7. Sleep disturbance, fear of going to sleep, fear of being alone in the night, nightmares, difficulty sleeping alone.

Encourage them to talk about their fears. Maintain consistent and normal bedtime routines. Give comfort and reassurance following nightmares.

8. Anxious attachment, clinging, fearful about being away from parent, worrying about when parent will be back.

Provide consistent caretaking, allow the child to call the parent when anxious, consistent pick-up after school, knowledge of parent’s whereabouts.

9. Regressive symptoms, thumb sucking, bed wetting, baby talk, wanting to sit in an adult’s lap.

Tolerate regressive symptoms for a short time, comfort and reassure the child.

10. Anxieties related to incomplete understanding about death; fantasies of rescuing the dead; expectations that dead person will return; concerns about how they will eat, go to the bathroom, or get out of the casket.

Give explanations about the physical reality of death.

**Third Through Fifth Grade**

1. Preoccupation with theirs or a relative’s actions during the event; issues of responsibility and guilt.

Encourage verbalization or

expression through drawing their thoughts, feelings or fantasies about the event.

2. Specific fears triggered by traumatic reminders or being alone.

Encourage verbalization of reminders and feelings. Encourage them not to transfer their feelings to other situations.

3. Retelling and repetitive traumatic play of the event; cognitive distortions and obsessive focusing on details.

Encourage them to talk, draw, or act out the details in your safe presence. Reassure them of the normalcy of their reactions.

4. Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings.

Encourage them to express feelings in your safe presence.

5. Impaired concentration and learning.

Encourage them to let parents and teacher know when they are having difficulty; give individual assistance as needed at school and at home with homework.

6. Sleep disturbances, nightmares, fear of sleeping alone.

Support them after nightmares; encourage them to talk about the dream; talking about the nightmare is a way of resolving the trauma. Use night lights and encourage the child to sleep with a stuffed animal. Make them aware that you will be with them during the night whenever they need you.

7. Concerns about their’s or a family member’s safety.

Encourage them to talk about worries; reassure them. Allow the child to call a family member to be sure they are safe.

8. Altered and inconsistent behavior, aggressive, reckless, or inhibited. Encourage self-discipline and positive self-talk; validate the child’s feelings.

9. Physical complaints

Assist the child in identifying and describing feelings and sensations. If child’s symptoms seem serious enough, have your physician evaluate him/her. Highly stressful experiences can lead to more frequent physical illness.

10. Close monitoring of the parent or older sibling’s responses and recovery; the child may be hesitant to tell the parent about his/her own struggles and anxieties as a way of protecting the parent or older sibling.

Encourage the child to talk about feelings and concerns.

11. Concern for other victims and their families.

Encourage positive activities on behalf of the injured or deceased such as making them a card, doing them a favor, taking flowers to the cemetery, contributing to a memorial fund, or in some way expressing their love and concern.

12. Feeling distressed, confused, and frightened by their grief responses; fear of ghosts.

Normalize grief responses. Give balance to their grief through positive memories of the deceased.

**Adolescents (Sixth Grade and Up)**

1. Detachment, shame, and guilt

Encourage talking, writing, or drawing about the event. Know that some children have a delayed reaction and may express their feelings months after the original event. If another event occurs, they may return to the first event also. Expect them to have a strong **anniversary** reaction. They will begin to remembering the event several weeks in advance of anniversary date when the event occurred.

2. Self-consciousness about their feelings (especially boys), fears, and concerns about being normal.

Encourage them to vent their feelings; encourage peers to be understanding; educate peers about trauma and grief.

3. Acting out through drug abuse, failure to attend school, at-risk sexual involvement.

Promote understanding of their behavior as an unhealthy way of avoiding feelings. Continue to encourage venting of feelings.

4. Self-destructive or accident-prone behavior.

Confront the behavior during or immediately after the event. LINK the behavior back to SELF-DISCIPLINE and IMPULSE CONTROL.

5. Avoidance of interpersonal relationships

Discuss problems in relationships with family and peers. Encourage problem solving, positive communication, and conflict resolution.

6. Feelings of rage and desires for revenge.

Encourage discussion of desires to get revenge. Talk about the consequences of these actions; encourage alternative opportunities to release feelings that reduce the sense of helplessness. Teach anger management.

Maintain rules, expectations for appropriate behavior, and discipline consistently. Teach positive actions to problems that may have led to the event, i.e. peer mediation, conflict resolution, positive interpersonal skills, empathy for others, healthy relationships, seat belt use, avoiding drugs, etc.

7. Overt changes in lifestyles

Discuss connection between lifestyle changes and event.

8. Attempts to grow up too fast such as quitting school, getting married, moving out of the family home, or anxiety about graduating from high school or leaving home.

Discourage unrealistic decisions. Assure them they still have time to enjoy their youth. Encourage more realistic decisions.

**GUIDELINES FOR ASSISTING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN IN RECOVERY**

**\* Practice being a safe person. Do not invalidate a child’s feelings or perceptions of an event. Do no discount a child’s feelings. Do not give a child advice. Rather teach problem solving and decision making. Expect the child to assume responsibility and accept consequences for his/her actions. Do not invade emotional, social, physical, verbal, mental, or spiritual boundaries. Do not tolerate your child’s invasion of other’s boundaries.**

**\* In responding to extreme stress in children, assure them that their feelings and responses are normal given the abnormal trauma they have experienced. Be patient and assure them that over time and by expressing their feelings and concerns, their reactions will diminish in intensity.**

**\* Cultivate patience. Be consistent, affirming, and loving toward the child. Never joke or make light of the child’s experience. Never say anything to others that might embarrass the child. Respect confidentiality.**

**\* Nurture the child in healthy ways. Do not overindulge the child with gifts or privileges. Be consistent in your discipline and rules.**

**\* Create a safe physical and emotional environment for the child. Teach others to respond to the child appropriately.**

**\* Keep your boundaries clear. Do not emotionally incest the child with your own fears.**

**\* Affirm and build your child’s confidence through opportunities to be successful.**

**\* Prepare your child for anniversary reactions.**

**Assure them they are normal and the feelings are universal.**

**STRATEGIES FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD RETURN TO A MORE NORMAL LIFE FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC INCIDENT**

**\* Encourage them to be involved with friends in extra curricular activities, in the community, family, or church.**

**\* Encourage them to do fun things with family or friends. Planing “bonding” activities with family members. PLAY, LAUGH, rent or go to a funny movie, help a family member, neighbor, or friend do something physical. Encourage them to be kind to themselves.**

**\* Encourage them to associate with people who are healthy physically, emotionally, and socially.**

**\* Encourage them to engage in hobbies or relaxing activities. Physical activities are especially good because they reduce stress.**

**\* Take relaxing mini-vacations. Take nurturing short trips that are inexpensive. Plan time to read, listen to music, be with nature, play with pets.**

**\* Play relaxing music at home. If prayer is a part of your life, encourage the practice of it daily.**

**\* Teach children healthy values, respect for others’**

**feelings, kindness, and caring as a way of life.**

**\* Help children put a relaxing transition in their daily experience by encouraging them to change clothes into something more comfortable when they come home from school, or a warm bath or shower. Give them a break to talk with you and relax before asking them to do homework or household chores.**

**\* Try to be emotionally and mentally present for your children. Be aware that your role is to be a nurturing guide for healthy coping during stressful times.**

**\* Practice these activities yourself so that you can keep balance in your own life. Trauma in the lives of our children becomes trauma in our own lives so care for yourself.**

**\* Focus on the positive blessings you have in your life.**

**\* If you could be more active in your child’s life, either through school, extra curricular activities, or community organizations, find the time to prioritize your child’s needs.**

**\* Help your child sort through any life lessons that can be learned from tragedy.**

**\* Take care of yourself. Do not expect a child to take care of you emotionally or physically. Do not transfer your fears to your children.**

**Maintain your own support network so that you have other adults with whom you can share your personal concerns.**

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