



# Building Resiliency in Traumatized Kids:

## Coping with 21st Century Realities

Special Focus

By Linda Goldman

Although many children may appear unaffected by the outside world, more and more of our kids are showing signs of stress. Children must deal with many issues that were seldom experienced or certainly not discussed in the past such as death-related tragedies involving terrorism, war, suicide, homicide, natural disasters and disease. They must also face social traumas such as violence and abuse, bullying and victimization, gender issues and family disruptions that are new and frightening to this generation. The media creates constant feelings of fear, panic, stress and extreme anxiety, feelings that are heightened almost daily by new threats to the community, nation and world.

Our children's instinctual reactions to these terrifying events are tension, fear and uncertainty about physical or psychological trauma and real threats of impending loss – too many children are left unsuccessfully trying to deal with trauma and becoming increasingly overwhelmed with feelings and distracted by thoughts. As adults, we must help our youth transform fear, sadness, worry and anger into stronger emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth and development – we must develop a new paradigm to guide our children through the reality of the 21st century.

Our children can survive and, indeed, thrive by enlarging their capacity for empathy, understanding and resilience after crisis. Our task as parents, educators and mental health professionals is to instill feelings of safety, comfort and hope for the future in our children, pointing out along the way things that are encouraging and positive. Too often, adults see children as “broken” and “needing to be fixed,” interpreting their reactions to hard life issues as personality deficits or emotional disorders rather than focusing on supporting resilient attributes and working through complex situations. Our ultimate responsibility is to enhance children's ability to cope with and overcome adversity, grief and trauma during dramatically challenging times.

### The Nature of Children's Traumatic Grief

Grief is not just about death. It is a normal, internalized reaction to the loss of a person, thing or idea – our emotional response to loss. Childhood losses range from the death of a loved one to divorce, relocation, custody changes, abuse, bullying and neglect. Further, children often have secondary losses during a grief experience that may include loss of their daily routine, loss of skills and abilities in school performance or activities, loss of protection from the adult world and loss of their perceived future. Any of these challenging situations may traumatize children, causing them to feel powerless, hopeless and helpless. The safe familiar world of childhood may suddenly change – if not personally, than vicariously through media coverage of traumatic public events. A week after the

terrorist attacks, Tari, a five-year old Muslim child, came to her kindergarten teacher and asked, “Are you still going to let me go to school here?”

Disease, violence, crime, suicide and accidents rob children of their parents, siblings, friends, relatives and even pets. Many of our children also find themselves victims of a variety of traumatic situations and losses. Bullying by kids in school or the neighborhood is one of the serious problems boys and girls face on a daily basis. Parental physical and verbal assaults on children, sexual predators stalking and harming toddlers to teens, adults fighting and abusing each other are also difficult. Family separation and moving, financial issues caused by drastic changes in lifestyle, moms and dads working several jobs and sometimes leaving children alone for extended periods, children placed in foster care or living with grandparents or other family members are important examples of issues involving abandonment, neglect, bereavement and loss. Gender issues and sexuality concerns may leave pre-teens, teens and young adults torn between speaking up about these issues and fearful that, if they do, they will be ridiculed, teased, ostracized or worse by adults or peers.

With limited coping mechanisms and perceived ambivalent support, many youth respond to their anger and pain by hurting themselves or others.

### Common Signs of Children's Traumatic Grief

Traumatized children often have difficulty putting their behaviors into any context of safety as harsh and overwhelming feelings engulf them when they least expect them. Many withdraw and isolate themselves, regress and appear anxious, distance themselves from the incident or exhibit sleep and eating disorders.

*"As I lay in my bed*

*Alone in the night*

*Nothing is normal*

*I'm not alright."*

*- by Sara*



It is essential for children and adults to recognize the signs of grief and trauma in order to normalize their experiences and reduce their anxieties and fears. It is important for adults to accept children's reactions as symptoms of their deep internalization of the loss and trauma. The following are examples of some of the physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral manifestations common to the grieving process:

- Retelling events about a loved one's life and death
- Feeling the loved one is present and speaking of him/her in the present tense
- Dreaming about a loved one and longing to be with him/her
- Experiencing nightmares and sleeplessness
- Not concentrating on schoolwork
- Appearing to feel nothing
- Being preoccupied with death and worrying excessively about health issues
- Being afraid to be left alone
- Crying at unexpected times
- Bedwetting and loss of appetite
- Idealizing a loved one and assuming his/her mannerisms
- Becoming class bully or clown
- Experiencing headaches and stomachaches
- Rejecting old friends, withdrawing or acting out. (*Life and Loss*, Goldman, 2001, p. 49-50)

Children's responses to traumatic events are often age-related. They may appear directly after the trauma or may not appear until several weeks or months later. The intensity, frequency and duration of responses can be indicators that outside help may be needed.

- All children may feel guilt, fear, distorted perception of self, anger and nightmares of dying or being hurt.
- Young children (birth to 5) may regress and become clingy, cry, thumb suck, wet the bed, have trouble sleeping, become hyper vigilant and even stay up all night to protect the family.
- Older children (6 to 11) may experience anxiety and fear as they realize there is real danger and they could possibly be hurt, have nightmares, fear the dark, complain of headaches or stomachaches and want to stay home from school.
- Teenagers (12 to 19) may withdraw, bully, take drugs or become violent, anxious, angry or depressed.

Certain mental health outcomes are more likely to evolve in bereaved youth in the

absence of intervention. Mental health outcomes research of adults bereaved as children indicates that they may tend to exhibit higher degrees of suicide ideation, depression, panic disorders and anxiety. Providing the grieving child with advocacy in school, open modeling at home, counseling and peer grief support groups can create the safe haven needed to process grief and trauma in the present so that these issues will not be carried unresolved into adulthood.

### Building Resilience

Resilience is often referred to as the resources one uses to cope during difficult times and the ability to bounce back from these hard situations. Our goal is to help children identify and then support their own natural attributes of resiliency.

As professionals and parents who care about children, we strive to instill the qualities of adaptability, tolerance, patience and fortitude as they grow up. Our goal is to have our children identify their natural attributes of resiliency and to support and nurture their implementation. The following are significant factors to discover and encourage in children.

- Choice
- Optimism
- Courage
- Realistic goals
- Humor
- Self confidence
- Appreciation of self
- Acceptance and comfort
- Productive action
- Creativity
- Spirituality
- Service

Spirituality is one resilient attribute to recognize in children. Six-year-old Christina displayed a positive coping mechanism after the terrorist attack in Washington. Her strong faith



was expressed through her art in a drawing, which portrays angels who, she explained, were watching, and God knew everything was ok.

Productive action is another quality of resiliency. Sixteen-year-old Andrew was devastated by the destruction caused by hurricanes that leveled parts of the south. He was so inspired by the bravery of the emergency workers who saved so many people that he trained several evenings a week during his senior year in high school and became an Emergency Medical Technician to help others.

### Coping Strategies for Children

The question of how we can prepare our children to live in a world that is sometimes not understandable to adults is a difficult one. Young people are living with intimate exposure to war, terrorism, random violence, bullying and abuse, death and disease through first-hand experience or constant media exposure.

Children must be allowed to grieve their losses, reduce their fears and feel a sense of safety and protection in their homes, schools, communities and world. It is important to create the understanding that horrific events have occurred throughout history, and our country, and indeed our world, have survived and will continue to do so through strength, faith and human resiliency.

We need to encourage our children to express their feelings and thoughts through drawing, play, writing, music, memory work and problem solving. Elcy, age seven, drew a picture about how she felt after hearing about a murder close to her home. Her artwork showed her perception of her parent's reaction to this violence, and also showed a television in the background playing scary images. Allowing Elcy to express her feelings during this trauma in a safe



way gave her a release from the fear of experiencing a violent event in a near-by physical proximity.

Allowing children to play a role in developing coping skills empowers them throughout their lives. We can provide understanding and create an environment at home and school and in the community to include the following skills in our work with children:

- Teach children that it is normal to have many different kinds of feelings after a personal, community or national loss. They are all okay.
- Allow them to express their feelings in safe ways.
- Encourage them to remember events and loved ones in a variety of creative ways.
- Let them know that it is normal to have fears and express them in safe ways.
- Invite them to write letters to public figures and compose poetry or plays.

Boys and girls can be presented with tangible means of feeling safe. They can be part of creating emergency procedures that they can turn to and follow if the need should arise. They can be prepared with important telephone numbers to call during a crisis. They can help choose items for an emergency kit at home or at school.

Techniques can be used with young people to alleviate their worries and fears. Children can prepare lists of their top five worries and be encouraged to discuss these worries with a responsible person they trust. They can also construct safety and fear boxes where they can physically place items or pictures of things that make them feel safe or frighten them. In this way, they begin to take troubling emotions and place them outside themselves.

Boys and girls can actively participate in helping others through fundraising or donations. They can express national pride by wearing or displaying flags or ribbons. Memorials can be produced for any loss, be it a deceased pet, a lost loved one or a community or national tragedy. Active commemoration as part of a community grief team allows children to be included in funerals, memorial services,

family religious traditions or a group prayer for peace and brotherhood.

## Adult Support

Many children don't like to feel different, so they choose not to discuss the losses and traumas they have suffered, but that does not mean that they are not feeling pain, grief, anger and despair. Each child's grief is unique and may last for weeks, months or years. Children need to know that they don't have to "get over their grief" or "move on." Adults must create safe havens for expression of all feelings and thoughts without judgment.

Remember, what we can mention we can manage. Adults need to provide children with age-appropriate dialogue in order to bring discussion of complex life events into the open.

Adults need to clarify any misinformation young people have acquired. Children may misinterpret the facts after a difficult experience. Many boys and girls watching the replay of the planes crashing into the towers after 9-11 thought the event was happening over and over again. We can ask children what they think happened and provide them with

age-appropriate facts. It is sometimes useful to limit TV watching and monitor it when being watched as a



teachable moment for discussion and clarification of disconcerting occurrences.

School involvement is imperative to the process of developing coping mechanisms for our children. Clearly, in today's world, school systems suffer trauma too. School shootings, suicides, terrorist threats, natural disasters, disease and bullying create an environment in which educational populations are thrust into danger at unsuspected times. As prepared as many systems have become, the unexpected drama that unfolds in today's schools leaves kids, teachers and parents shocked and vulnerable. Absorbing the mayhem, integrating it and focusing on responding to students can be difficult when



teachers and administrators are themselves traumatized. This is a challenge to today's schools. Strong guidelines, planned crisis procedures, grief and trauma education and accountability for grieving and traumatized children are necessary in order to establish a base for action during challenging times.

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Educators have a responsibility to monitor how children are coping after a traumatic event and identify at-risk behaviors, inform parents and monitor troubled children vigilantly to ensure their needs are addressed. Their role is to function as nurturers and providers of safety, accurate information, release outlets for kids' thoughts and fears, identification of troubled students and emergency planning for the future. Schools must remind children that they are survivors and can deal with challenging experiences and also turn traumatic events into teaching experiences that will help our young people move forward with feelings of safety, protection and hope.

Community-based outreach programs also have a responsibility to help children who have experienced personal or public trauma. They can offer safe havens that allow traumatized children to express, reflect upon, process and overcome the challenges they face. Support groups, one-on-one and group counseling, camps, mentoring programs and after-school activities all serve to build resilience, healing and hope.

Children need to feel empowered by their own inner strength and guidance and know that they have internal resources to help them through trauma and grief. Building resiliency in our children gives them freedom to grow and develop into resourceful adults regardless of past fears or disasters.





## And Finally

After the crisis interventions are over, we must develop increasingly comprehensive trainings in schools and universities to prepare anyone working with young people with new paradigms of children's trauma and stress that include age-appropriate vocabulary, grief and trauma resolution techniques, resources specific to each complex loss and critical understandings of the nature of childhood traumatic grief. Identifying and supporting these bereaved children in terms of their own natural resiliency can generate inner attributes of service, optimism, humor, courage, spirituality and self-appreciation. These resources can be so helpful in allowing boys and girls to overcome life difficulties and not only to survive but perhaps to thrive. Building our children's capacities to positively endure, adapt and overcome life's adversities with optimism is our ultimate goal.

It is a new world. The old rules may no longer apply to current situations. Our role as parents, educators, therapists and other helping professionals is to protect and prepare our children to accept present and future circumstances and develop flexibility in adapting to an ever-changing global perspective. We are powerless to control the losses and catastrophic events our children may need to experience. But, by honoring their inner wisdom, providing mentorship and creating safe havens for expression, we can empower them to become more caring, more capable human beings. In this complex and ever-changing universe, it is more important than ever that we join together as a global grief community, with a shared vision of our work with children and traumatic grief as one that recognizes the preciousness of life, the endurance of love and the necessity of a listening heart.

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## Resources for Adults

### Resiliency

Benard, B. *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School and Community* (1991). Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.

Brazelton, T. B., & Greenspan, S. I. *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish* (2000). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Brook, R., & Goldstein, S. *Nurturing Resilience in Our Children: Answers to the Most Important Parenting Questions* (2003). Chicago: Contemporary Books.

Goldman, L. *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World* (2005). New York: Taylor and Francis Publisher.

### Trauma

Doka, K. & Licht, M. *Living with Grief: Coping With Public Tragedy* (2003). New York, NY: Brunner Routledge Publisher. This book takes a comprehensive look



at the many ways children and adults lived through and coped with the terrorist attack.

Goldman, L. *Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief/ Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence, and Abuse. 2nd Ed.* (2001). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Publisher. This guide presents a comprehensive look at complicated grief and children and ways to work with them.

Goldman, L. *Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children. 2nd Ed.* (2000). New York: Taylor and Francis Publisher. This is a helpful manual that clearly explains the nature and scope of bereaved children with grief resolution techniques and useful resources.

Goldman, L. *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World* (2005). New York: Taylor and Francis Publisher. This is an excellent resource that addresses the traumatic issues in our children's world and effective ways to work with them.

Kauffman, J. (ED.) *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss.* (2002). New York: Brunner Routledge Publisher. This book presents a diversity of perspectives and interpretations of the concept of the loss of the assumptive world facing many people.

Middelton-Moz, J. *Children of Trauma* (1989). Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc. This book helps the reader discover his/her discarded self by coming face-to-face with emotional fears that may be the result of traumatic childhoods.

### Bullying

Fried, S. and Fried, P. *Bullies and Victims* (1996). New York, NY: M. Evans and Co. This book describes today's schoolyard as a battlefield with practical solutions to help children.

Goldman, L. *Raising Our Children to Be Resilient: A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Trauma in Today's World* (2005). New York: Taylor and Francis Publisher. This is an excellent resource that addresses the issues of bullying and victimization with helpful interventions for children and adults.

Olweus, Dan. *Bullying At School* (1993). Maiden, MS: Blackwell Pub. This book provides understandings about bullying at school and what can be done about it.

Ross, Dorothea. *Childhood Bullying and Teasing* (1996). Alexandria, VA: ACA. Suggestions about what school personnel and other caring adults can do about bullying.

## Resources for Children

### Resiliency

Heegaard, M. *Character Building* (2004). Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press. This is a workbook for children that allows them to process character-buildings tools through drawing and writing. Ages 5-10.

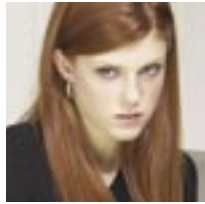
Lewis, B. *Kids with Courage* (1992). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing. This book contains a series of stories about young people making a difference by taking a stand. Ages 11 and up.

Morrison, T. *The Big Box* (1999). New York: Hyperbion Books for Children. This is a story about children put in a box by adults and their strong desire to gain personal freedom. Ages 5 -10.

Stepanek, M. *Heartsongs* (2001). Alexandria, VA: VSP Books. This is a compilation of poems written by a young boy expressing hope and optimism for the future. Ages 6 and up.

Waber, B. *Courage* (2002). New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. A beautiful book for young children that describes the levels of courage that take place every day. Ages 4-8.





### Trauma

Goldman, L. *Bart Speaks Out on Suicide* (1998). LA: California: WPS Publishers. This is a useful interactive storybook about suicide that creates words and dialogue about this sensitive topic.

Goldman, L. *Children Also Grieve* (2005). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. This is the colorful story of Henry, a Tibetan Terrier, and his feelings of grief after Grandfather dies. It includes a children's memory section and a section for adults.

Holmes, M. *A Terrible Thing Happened* (2000). Washington, DC: Magination Press. Sherman is anxious and angry after he experiences something terrible and learns to talk about it.

Salloum, A. *Reactions* (1998). Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation. This workbook helps young people who are experiencing trauma and grief.

Sheppard, C. *Brave Bart* (1998). Grosse Pointe Woods, MI: TLC. This is an excellent story for traumatized and grieving children.

### Bullying

Romain, Trevor. *Bullies Are A Pain In the Brain* (1997). An easy to read book that talks to kids about bullies and ways to stop them.

Boatwright, Becki; Mathis, Teresa; and Smith, Susan. *Getting Equipped To Stop Bullying* (1998). A kid's survival kit for understanding and coping with violence in the schools.

Cohen-Posey, Kate. *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies: A Book That takes the Nuisance Out of Name Calling and Other Nonsense* (1995). A book that gives ideas and healthy ways to respond to meanness, like name calling and insults.

McCain, R. *Nobody Knew What to Do* (2001). Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Co. This is a true story about bullying with meaningful drawings that stresses the power of onlookers.

Goldman, Linda, "How to Make Yourself Bully-Proof;" (*Current Health*, Oct., 1998). An article that is written for middle school children about bullying and practical ways to work with the problem.

### Bullying Curriculums for Educators

Beane, Allan. *Bully Free Classroom* (1999). A book that contains over 100 tips and strategies for teachers K-8.

Garrity, Carla; Jens, Kathryn; Proter, William; Sager, Nancy; & Short-Camill, Cam. *Bully-Proofing Your School* (2000). This book is a comprehensive approach for elementary schools to use interventions against bullying.

*No-Bullying Curriculum* (1998). A curriculum on bullying which provides classroom teachers with tools to deal with bullying and involving all school personnel, students and parents.

*No Putdowns Character-Building Violence Prevention Curriculum* (1998). A school-based curriculum dealing with violence prevention and character building for educators.

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