

Helping children cope with trauma

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., L.P.
Wednesday, 29 June 2011 12:31



I love children, don't you? They see the world so honestly and they approach life with such pure abandonment, courage and genuineness. They are often openly affectionate and loving. In fact, there is nothing "fake" about a child. In fact, I recall a story of a little boy around 4-5 years old who went to get his Annual wellness check-up at a place like NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. While there, the doctor checked his throat and in her attempt to be engaging she asked the child "*Do you think I'll find the 'Cookie Monster' down there?*" The child politely gargled "*No*" and looked at the doctor as if she had come from another planet. She proceeded to conduct the examination by checking his ears and asking: "*Do you think I'll find 'Big Bird' in there* ? Again, the child looking a little exasperated said to the doctor: "*No ma'am, I don't think so* !" Finally, the doctor took her stethoscope to check his heart and asked him: "*Do you think I'll find 'Barney' in there* ?" The child emphatically replied, "*No, Love is in my heart!...Barney's on my underpants!*"

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Children then, are especially vulnerable socially, emotionally and physically when a traumatic event occurs such as the tornado that hit North Minneapolis. After any disaster, children are most afraid that the event will recur, that they or someone they love will be hurt or killed, that they may be separated from those they love and be left alone. Meanwhile, parents and caregivers are often at a loss when they notice a shift in their child's attitudes and behaviors. One mother with whom I recently spoke described her child as exhibiting characteristics of withdrawal whereas he was normally one of the most out-going children in the household.

Researchers say that when traumatic events occur, they impact our brains' ability to function. We have a *threat response* that leads to only three choices: "fight, flight, or freeze." What that means is that the most primitive parts of our brain (called the limbic system) put into motion a series of commands that tell us that we are experiencing a perceived imminent threat. We make our decisions based on the memories associated with our past experiences with danger as well as an awareness of our current environmental options. The problem with children is that, well, *they don't have much experience* and their brains are still developing logical pathways to decision making. These logical pathways lead to skills in the area of Executive Functioning. The National Center for Learning Disabilities defines *Executive Functioning* as a "set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action." Therefore, when our children experience trauma, we have to understand that they may not know how to handle what has happened and we must consider the context in which any past trauma experiences have occurred in their lives.

The National Association of School Psychologists report that when it comes to trauma, the closer a child is to the location of a threatening and/or frightening event, and the longer the exposure, the greater the likelihood of severe distress. Risk factors also include having relationships with the victims of disaster as well as the child's ability to understand the nature of the traumatic event. Some children may not view a traumatic event as threatening because they are too developmentally immature to understand the potential danger, while others may report perceiving the event as extremely threatening and/or frightening.

The adult and/or parental reactions to the traumatic event seem to influence children's abilities to make sense of, understand and cope with tragic events. Organizations like the *Association of Black Psychologists*, the *American Psychological Association*, the

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National Association of Black Social Workers

, and

American Counseling Association

have several web-based resources that parents can access in order to learn more about trauma and its impact on children. Listed below are some tips to help your children cope with trauma:

1. **Be age appropriate in the ways that you expose children to information** about the incident. For example, children under the age of 6 should not be exposed to TV videotape coverage of the tornado or other traumatic events, and the viewing time allowed older children should be limited.

2. **Talk About it.** Allow children to express their feelings about what has happened and share your feelings with them. Don't try to tell children to "be strong," "be a big boy or girl" or "act tough." In fact, it is very likely that a child's former age-based behaviors (i.e., thumb-sucking, waking up in the middle of the night and bed wetting) may occur in response to the trauma. Do not punish or scold children for these regressive behaviors, but instead try to help them put their feelings into words. *Reassure your children that their feelings and behaviors are normal responses to an abnormal situation*.

3. **Reassure your children** that they are now safe and that they are loved; try to hug them often, and spend extra time with your child, especially doing something fun or relaxing for both of you.

4. **Be honest** with children about what has occurred and provide facts about what happened. Children usually know when you are "faking it."

5. **Try to return to your family's normal routine** as much as possible. This helps provide a sense of security and safety.

6. **Review, create and practice safety procedures** so children will feel prepared the next time an emergency situation occurs. In fact, you can make it a game of running down to safety in "record" time. When they get there, have a treat of cookies and milk! Safety procedures should be applied to other conditions as well (fires, dealing with strangers) so that children can "learn" what to do when in danger.

7. **Talk with teachers, baby-sitters, daycare providers** and others who may be with your children so they understand how your child has been affected. Ask them to **watch for signs of repetitive play in which children re-enact all or part of the disaster**. Although excessive re-enactment of a traumatic experience may be a warning sign, this behavior is an appropriate form of expression of emotions.

Encourage a child who is not able to articulate their express their feelings through coloring, drawing, or painting.

8. **Seek support from a professional, should you, your child or a family become overwhelmed.** Through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children's Mental Health Division, the Minneapolis Urban League has partnered with the

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African American Child Wellness Institute to provide emotional support to uninsured and under-insured children of African descent and their families. Please contact us at 612-302-3140 for an appointment to participate in the *African American Child Wellness & Success program* or for a referral to another agency or provider of your choice.