

## Recognizing the Impact of Childhood Trauma and Traumatic Loss

### Consider the developmental stage of the child when traumatized:

Inadequate or incomplete achievement of developmental tasks often occurs in the wake of trauma and traumatic loss. It is essential to consider the developmental stage the child was in the process of mastering when the trauma occurred as the developmental task of that stage may be partially or inadequately mastered. The development of the human personality and psychology is similar to the building of a house. In the building of a house the care with which the foundation is laid will determine the solidness and the structural strength of the completed house. All parts of the house rest on the foundation, just as all parts of the personality are built on the sequential developmental stages and sequential learning of childhood and adolescence. Unresolved trauma and traumatic loss can have a profound negative impact across the child's life span. Early intervention and involvement of the family, community and school will have an immeasurable effect on the healing of children and adolescents who have suffered trauma and traumatic loss.

### Unresolved trauma and traumatic loss often present as:

- Depression
- Anxiety disorders, separation anxiety, avoidance of social relationships
- Obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviors, perfectionism
- Alcohol and Substance abuse and inappropriate dependence
- Problems with intimacy such as social isolation, abusive relationships, inappropriate control in relationships, problem with boundaries
- Sleep disturbance—difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, early awakening
- Eating disorders—*anorexia, bingeing, bulimia, overeating*
- Psychosomatic illness—such as headaches, peptic ulcers, etc
- Aggression, hostility, irritability, difficulty managing anger, controlling behaviors
- Risk taking behaviors
- Failure to emancipate, failure to take responsibility, running away, Etc.

### Recognizing fear and its roots in trauma:

It is the trapped fear that is at the root of posttraumatic stress symptoms. Common fears of children after trauma are described by Lenore Terr, MD in *Too Scared to Cry: How Trauma Effects Children and Ultimately Us All*. These common post trauma fears are:

- Fear of another more frightening event
- Fear of separation
- Fear of death
- Fear of helplessness
- The mirror image of extreme rage is extreme passivity—both are fear based
- It is oftentimes unresolved fear that unconsciously drives a trauma survivor's life and the resolution of fear is therefore essential to recovery and healing.

## Identifying Children at Risk after Significant Loss

When the following behaviors persist months after the loss they are considered red flags and indicate the need for professional assessment and intervention.

- Anxiety which limits the child's ability to function, such as school phobia, fear of further loss, fear that he or she will also die
- Persistent difficulty talking about the person who has died
- Hyperactivity, aggression, destructive outbursts
- Marked social and/or emotional withdrawal
- School difficulties, (this could present as failing grades, difficulty concentrating and following directions, or over-achievement and perfectionism)
- Persistent self blame and guilt
- Compulsive caregiving or compulsive self reliance
- Somatic complaints such as headaches or stomachaches
- Identification symptoms, (accidents, developing symptoms of the deceased person's illness)
- Substance abuse or other self destructive behaviors; expressing a desire to die, (this is often related to an unconscious hope of reunion)
- Prolonged inability to cry or to express or experience longing for the person who died
- Sleep and eating disturbance

### Risk Predictors:

1. High level of family stress and change
2. Inadequate support network
3. Attachment to surviving caregiver is threatened in some way, (i.e. illness, substance abuse, depression, ineffective coping)
4. Little or no preparation for or involvement in the funeral
5. Not able to say good-bye
6. Sudden or violent death, (i.e. suicide, homicide, accidental death)
7. Addictive family system
8. The level of functioning of the surviving parent is the most powerful predictor of a child's adjustment after the death of a parent. (Worden, 1996)

Balance Point, Inc. Megan Bronson APRN, BC 2007

## Reentry into School Following a Traumatic Loss:

### Guidelines and suggestions for classroom teachers and other school personnel

Following a traumatic loss, teachers and other school personnel can have a profound effect on how children respond to school re-entry and to the lifelong healing process that follows. The following are some specific suggestions for how to create a safe and healing environment for all children.

#### Address the issue immediately:

##### Talk with the grieving student privately:

If you have a child directly affected by the traumatic event or loss in your classroom this year, it may be helpful to contact the family and the child before school begins and arrange a meeting to talk over school re-entry issues before he/she walks into the school for the first time. Ask them what your student needs to feel comfortable beginning the school year. Stress that everyone is different - some want the event discussed openly, others don't. Most grieving children want to be treated as they were before, with no "special attention". However, they don't want people to act as if nothing happened.

##### Talk to your class about the event:

Prepare a way to address the issue of the event as soon as possible after the children return to school – during the first day. How this is done will vary depending on whether there are children or grandchildren of the individual who died, , or others directly affected by the loss in your classroom. Depending on what the child and family requests, some of the following scripts may be appropriate:

- I'm sure you have all heard about the (event) and may know that Johnny's dad was one of the people who were killed. As a class, we all want to help Johnny feel comfortable and know that we are thinking of him and want to help in any way we can. Johnny has said that he would prefer that we not ask him questions about the (event) at this time. He will let us know when he is ready to talk more about it.
- OR: Johnny has requested that he have some time this morning to talk about how this has been for him.
- OR: We all want to remember Johnny and his (family member) at this time so we will have a moment of silence now before we begin the day.
- It's ok to say "I am having a difficult time too" if that is true and may help your class.

##### Ways to support any child who is grieving:

- Let the child know that they can talk with you or someone else (school counselor or other teacher) when they are ready and check in with them periodically.
- Offer warmth, affection and your physical presence. Sometime, just a simple touch on their arm can be very reassuring without drawing attention to them.
- Be aware that feelings of grief will ebb and flow and may be triggered during holidays, when media attention is given to the event, at anniversary dates, etc for years to come.
- Don't expect the child to complete all assignments on a timely basis.

- Recognize that the student may have trouble concentrating and focusing on school work at times and may need some quiet time. They also from time to time need to have assignments modified especially in the first year after the loss.
- Provide a support person for the child (teacher, counselor, etc.). This is a person the child knows they can go to if they are having a rough day and need emotional support or a hug.
- Provide a safe place or the opportunity to leave the classroom if needed. Sometimes it is helpful for a traumatized child to sit near the teacher's desk or near where the teacher speaks to the class from. This provides physical proximity that is often reassuring to the grieving child and also helps them to stay focused if they are having difficulty concentrating.
- Maintain active contact with the student's family (phone calls, emails, etc) throughout the school year with information going to the family about how the children are doing at school and requesting information about how they are doing at home.

**Provide opportunities for all children to express their feelings about the loss throughout the school year:**

- Allow time for students to discuss how this has affected them.
- Provide an art/writing corner in the classroom with materials for writing, drawing, etc. so that children can express their feelings, thoughts and concerns when they are ready.
- Invite children to write letters or draw pictures to be sent to the families of the Charleston 9.
- Have a memorial bulletin board in the classroom or in the school.
- Plant trees, gardens, memorial areas, etc. at the school.
- Ask the children what they would like to do to remember the firefighters and their families.
- Have age appropriate books available for your class both in the room and library. The following resources have a wide selection of books available for this need.
- [www.compassionbooks.com](http://www.compassionbooks.com)
- [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)
- [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)

**Take care of yourself too.**

- Know your limitations and seek support if needed.
- Ask for help from your school counselor/psychologist if you aren't sure how to handle a situation.

Ongoing support for the child from the school counselor will help take some of the pressure off you while you are trying to teach your students.

Samantha Price, MHDL,NCC,LPC Copyright 2007

# Children & Loss

**Teachers serve as a crucial emotional bridge for a child at times of loss. What do we need to know to help students cope?**

By Bruce D. Perry MD, Ph.D

Humans, by nature, are designed to grow, learn, work, and play in groups. By the time a child is 10, he or she has created and maintained dozens of key relationships — parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and more. Throughout life, these relationships satisfy our primary needs. It is the brain that allows these social connections. Unique neural systems change in response to the waxing and waning of relationships in our lives — forming a landscape created by the history of our emotional experiences. Relationships can bring us comfort, safety, and joy. Yet relationships can change or even end. And then we experience painful emotions.

## **Loss: Disrupting the Emotional Landscape**

The loss of a loved one is an earthquake that fractures and devastates our emotional landscape. Death is the most permanent loss we face; yet there are other forms of loss that can alter, break, or erode our emotional anchors. The most common types of loss for children are moving and divorce. In the modern world, adults control the context and the shape of our children's relationships. When we decide to move or separate, often we have already taken the time to gradually adjust to these transitions. Yet we then turn around and force our choices onto our children. They have less time and fewer skills with which to adjust.

The pain of loss can be related to the nature of the transition. The sudden death, the abrupt move, and the unanticipated separation may all shatter existing emotional connections, often causing fear and intense emotional pain. When loss is sudden and unexpected, there is much less time for the child to begin adjusting. An anticipated death, separation, or move is easier because there has been time to think, review, anticipate, mourn and, slowly, reshape relationships. Gradual, predictable transitions, although they are painful, make the loss easier to deal with and accept. When informed, the child can prepare for the change ahead.

The pain from loss is also related to the nature of the relationship, the history of other losses, the vulnerability of the particular child, the support system available, and other factors. If a child is close and dependent upon the lost loved one, he or she is likely to experience more severe distress. If the move or the separation takes the child away from the loved one, he or she may experience a similar intensity of pain as if this were a death.

For most children, loss and fear go hand in hand. They do not know what will happen to them. And fear intensifies and complicates the other emotions associated with loss. The fearful child cannot concentrate in school; will misinterpret comments; and will sometimes regress to immature behavior (a young child may start to bed-wet) or self-destructive coping behavior (a preadolescent may drink or experiment with drugs).

## **The Teacher's Role**

It is often the teacher who first identifies how difficult a loss is for a child. After a move, divorce, or even many months after the death of a loved one, most of the world expects the child to bounce back and "be resilient." Yet the teacher may notice a lethargy, sadness, anger, and deterioration in performance. Teachers know better than most that recovery from loss is not likely to be over in a month, or 2, or, for some children, even 10 years. Different children will have different styles of grieving and different timetables.

The key to helping the child is the appreciation that recovery from loss requires the re-shaping of existing relationships in the child's life. A teacher can help facilitate this by fostering changes in three of the child's key relationships: the relationship with the teacher, the relationship with the family members, and the relationship with classmates.

Sometimes the teacher will decide to cautiously share her observations with the caregivers, and inquire about what they may have observed at home. Rather than preach, the teacher should use her instincts about the parent's readiness to talk, respecting their privacy.

## Dealing With Loss in the Classroom

Whether the teacher helps the child directly or indirectly by supporting the parents and guiding classmates, there are some key points to remember when talking about loss.

- Tune in to every child, but especially to one who has recently experienced a loss. Pay close attention to the content and mood of his verbalizations, his play themes, stories, and drawings. The better you understand his feelings, the easier it will be for you to comfort and support him.
- Each child who has experienced loss should be free to communicate her pain and bewilderment when ready. Forcing the issue is likely to cause feelings to go underground.
- If a child senses your discomfort with the topic, he may not bring it up even when he is ready to. Consider your own feelings of sadness to avoid discouraging a child's readiness to express his.
- Be sensitive to any inappropriate remarks or teasing from other children. In a discreet way, you can help them to respect the grieving process and avoid their classmate's "tender spots."

By being attentive, sensitive, and supportive, a teacher can become an important emotional bridge for a child at times of loss.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., is an internationally recognized authority on brain development and children in crisis. Dr. Perry leads the ChildTrauma Academy, a pioneering center providing service, research and training in the area of child maltreatment (<http://www.childtrauma.org/>). In addition he is the Medical Director for Provincial Programs in Children's Mental Health for Alberta, Canada. Dr. Perry served as consultant on many high-profile incidents involving traumatized children, including the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado; the Oklahoma City Bombing; and the Branch Davidian siege. His clinical research and practice focuses on traumatized children-examining the long-term effects of trauma in children, adolescents and adults. Dr. Perry's work has been instrumental in describing how traumatic events in childhood change the biology of the brain. The author of more than 200 journal articles, book chapters, and scientific proceedings and is the recipient of a variety of professional awards.

## About the Author

Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., is the Thomas S. Trammell Research Professor of Child Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Baylor College of Medicine; and Chief of Psychiatry, Texas Children's Hospital, Houston, Texas. TM ® & © 2007-1996 Scholastic Inc All Rights Reserved

How Caregivers can Help Children Exposed to Traumatic Death By Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

Jana Lihn Rosenfelt, M.Ed., LPC