In the wake of the tragic shooting in Connecticut, many children and families will have questions, concerns, and fears that will need to be dealt with. It is important that we deal with these issues forthrightly and appropriately. We have found these resources, which you may refer to for guiding how to respond:

- An **Exchange** article by Diane Levin: "*When the World is a Dangerous Place — Helping Children Deal with Violence in the News.*"
- A **New York Times** article, "*Tips for Talking to Children About the Shooting.*"
- Advice from **National Child Traumatic Stress Network**, "*Talking to Children about the Shooting.*"
- Advice from the **National Association of School Psychologists**, "*A National Tragedy: Helping Children Cope.*"
- A resource from the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, "*Tips for Talking to Children and Youth after Traumatic Events.*"
- Fred Rogers' advice from **Family Communications**, "*Helping Children Deal with Tragic Events in the News.*"
- Advice from the **American Psychological Association**, "*Helping Your Children Manage Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting.*"
- Article from **Young Child Ministries**, *Children and Grief*
Spam
Not spam
Forget previous vote
The Realities of Working With Children in Today’s World

Children are growing up in a world that is saturated with violent and scary world events. Despite adults’ efforts to protect children from violence in the news, I have been hearing accounts from teachers and parents around the world of how news violence — about such topics as robberies, shootings, terrorism, and war — is entering young children’s lives and affecting what they say and do.

News violence comes up when we do not expect it. For instance, just before the war against Iraq began, the mother of a 4½ year old told me that she flipped on television to watch the Today Show as she often did, just as it was airing a demonstration of the Unites States’ newest, biggest-ever conventional bomb. The child, who had been happily playing, immediately glued his eyes to the explosion on the screen. As his mother quickly turned the television off, the child asked what it was. Feeling uncomfortable, she replied, “We’re not going to watch that. It’s for grown-ups.”

Even when we think we have protected children, we often find out that they have been exposed anyway through the media, adults’ conversations, and experiences with siblings and peers. The mother of a three year old told me that even though she tried to protect her daughter from accounts of September 11, soon afterwards her daughter’s teacher told her that she noticed Louisa run under a tree when a plane went overhead. When asked, “Why did you run under the tree?” Louisa responded, “Because the bad men can make the plane crash into us!”

Some children end up bringing what they have heard into their play, art, and conversations in unique and unpredictable ways (Levin, 2003b & c). During the heightened media coverage of the US war with Iraq, a group of preschoolers made a building with large hollow blocks. They put sea creatures inside. One child held up a long, thin block and dropped it onto the animals saying, “It’s a missile,” then walked away.

Even events in the news to which grown-ups pay little attention can be raised at unexpected times as children try to deal with questions and concerns and make sense of what they heard. I was recently in a classroom with four to six year olds when a child spontaneously reported that he could not play with toy guns because “...a robber could sneak a real gun into a toy store and you could think it was a toy gun and use it to hurt someone.” Another child said, “That really happened.” And then another quickly jumped in asking, “Are there really robbers?” “What do you know about robbers?” I asked. As this confusing (to me) discussion about toy and real guns and robbers unfolded, I had the disturbing realization that at least some of the children had heard a brief local news report the night before about a robber with a toy gun who had been shot by police.

Changing Times, Changing Needs, Changing Responses

Before September 11, 2001, when asked about media violence and children, I most commonly heard questions about how to
deal with violence in entertainment media and children’s efforts to bring it into their war and superhero play. However, since September 11, while violence from entertainment media is still a concern and often gets mixed in with real world violence issues in children’s play, I am hearing more and more accounts from teachers and parents like those described. Such accounts have led me to conclude that many young children are hearing about the dangerous and scary events in the world that can undermine their sense of safety and social and emotional well being. And, as they struggle to work out an understanding of what they hear, they need more help from adults than we usually give.

In all of the above situations, the adults were left with the imposing challenge of trying to figure out how to best respond to the children and wishing they did not have to. There are few foolproof formulae to follow and few of us have received much training to help us with such efforts. There is still a lot to learn about how best to help young children deal with violent world events, but we do know enough now to begin to outline guidelines for implementing an age-appropriate, meaningful, and caring approach (Greenman, 2001; Levin, 2003a).

What Teachers (and Parents) Can Do*

■ Protect young children as much as possible from exposure to news violence on the television, radio, or from hearing adults talk about it. While we can rarely protect them fully, having safety and security predominate in children’s lives is vital for emotional health. The mother’s instinct to turn off the television when she saw her child’s response to the bomb explosion was appropriate. Especially at times when violent events are the focus of much news coverage, as it was after 9/11 and during the US war against Iraq, it is wise to turn on the television only at pre-planned times for pre-planned programs.

■ Trusted adults have a vital role to play helping children sort out what they see and hear and in helping them feel safe. When news violence does get through, despite our efforts to protect them, children often feel scared or confused. They need to know you are there to help them in an ongoing way and that they will not be criticized for bringing up the issue or saying what is really on their minds. How you react plays a big role in determining how they think and feel, and what they learn. The children who began talking about toy and real guns and robbers showed they felt safe raising the issue, and asking them what they knew about robbers conveyed that the adult was interested in their ideas.

■ In deciding how to respond, take your lead from what the children do and say and what you know about them as individuals. Base your responses on age, prior experiences, specific needs, and unique concerns of individual children, not on how you think and feel about the issue. Before jumping to any conclusions about the reasons why Louisa ran under a tree when a plane flew overhead, the teacher asked an open-ended question, “Why did you run under the tree?” to check out her suspicion about what was going on. Once she heard Louisa’s answer, she had a clearer idea about how to respond.

■ Remember that young children won’t understand violence as adults do. When they see or hear something scary, children often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. They tend to focus on one thing at a time and the most salient aspects of what they see. Because they do not have logical causal thinking, it’s hard for them to figure out the logic of what happened and why, or sort out what is pretend and what is real. They relate what they hear to themselves, to what is important to them, as well as to what they already know. This can lead to misunderstandings. “Mommy works in a skyscraper; her building can blow up, too!” “Planes crash into buildings so they can crash into a building near me, too.” “Robbers can carry toy guns that look real so toy guns I use could be real, too.”

■ Start by finding out what children know. This can convey to children that you are interested in their ideas and give you more information about what they know and what kind of
response they might need. When the child asked if there were really robbers, the adult first asked, “What have you heard about robbers?” Once the mother turned off the television program showing exploding bombs, she might have followed up by saying, “It made a big noise and cloud of smoke. What do you think it was?” If the child says, “a bomb” the mother could respond with, “What do you know about bombs?” If a child does not raise an issue, but you want to, you can start a conversation with, “Have you heard anything about a plane crash [or bombs, or a place called Iraq]? What did you hear?”

Answer questions and clear up misconceptions that worry or confuse. You don’t need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they seem to want to know. Don’t worry about giving right answers or if children have ideas that do not agree with yours. You can help them learn to distinguish real from pretend violence. You can calmly voice your feelings and concerns, and reassure them about their safety. The children who talked about the robber with a toy gun were confused. They seemed to think children could get real guns that looked like toy guns. They needed to know that grown-ups make sure that real guns are not in toy stores and adults work very hard to keep real guns from children.

Support children’s efforts to use play, art, and writing to work out an understanding of scary things they see and hear. It is normal for children to bring the violence they hear about to these activities. Although many teachers are uncomfortable when children bring violence into their play, such efforts can help them work out ideas and feelings; it shows you what they know and worry about (Levin, 2003 b). Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials — blocks, airplanes, emergency vehicles, miniature people, a doctor’s kit, markers and paper — help children with this. Having materials such as these allowed the boy in the earlier story to drop the “missile” into the house and let the teacher know it was on his mind. A next step might be to ask the boy, “What have you heard about missiles?”

Be on the lookout for signs of stress. Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating from parents or sleeping, or troubles with transitions are all signs that additional support may be needed. Louisa’s teacher recognized that something was probably amiss when she ran under the tree. In fact, when Louisa’s mother heard the story, she realized this might explain why Louisa had recently begun having nightmares and running into her parents’ bed. Protecting children from violent media images, maintaining routines, providing reassurance and extra hugs can help them regain equilibrium.

Help children learn alternatives to the harmful lessons they may be learning about violence and prejudice. Some children are confused when we tell them to use their words with their own conflicts, but then they see grown ups using guns and bombs to solve theirs. While helping them deal with this apparent contradiction, it is more important now than ever to help them experience the power of solving their own conflicts without violence. In addition, when children hear about grown-ups fighting, they try to figure out who the good guys are and who is bad. Their way of thinking can contribute to stereotyped ideas about people, especially based on how they look. Point to positive experiences with people different from themselves. Try to complicate their thinking — that is give them a bit of meaningful information at a time that challenges their ideas — rather than telling the “right” way to think.

Discuss what adults are doing to make the situation better and what children can do to help. Whatever your point of view, children feel more secure when they see adults working in concrete ways to make the world safe and to take care of victims of violence — raising money or collecting supplies to donate, participating in events such as rallies. Helping children take small and meaningful action steps themselves can help them feel more in control. It can also help them focus on positive aspects of the world, not just its dangers. After one young child saw a rally with grown-ups holding signs, she asked to make a sign, too, which said,
“Don’t fight. Use your words.”

■ Have regular conversations with other adults about what you are doing and what they can do. Support each other’s efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes sharing information that comes up with particular children, developing effective response strategies together, and agreeing to protect children from unnecessary exposure to violence. Talking together can also help you meet your own needs in dealing with the violence that surrounds us.

Foundations for Safety and Peace

This is a time of increasing pressure to focus our work with young children on basic academic skills, often at the expense of addressing pressing social and emotional needs such as helping them deal with the violence in the news. By making their efforts to deal with news violence a legitimate part of our work with children, we contribute to their overall mental health and sense of safety — necessary conditions for effective learning to occur. We are also helping children learn alternatives to violence and build the foundation they need to live together in peace.

References


———. (May 2003b). “Beyond banning war play: Meeting children’s needs in violent times.” Young Children.

———. (April 2003c). “When the world is a dangerous place: Teachers can play an important role in helping young children deal with violence in the news.” Educational Leadership.

Web Site Resources

National Association for the Education of Young Children.
Resources on children, war, and violence. www.naeyc.org/Supporting_Children.htm


Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children’s Entertainment.

*Adapted from Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom (2nd Edition) by Diane E. Levin.

One crucial source of my growing awareness that news violence is affecting children at a global level is the 2003 World Forum on Early Care and Education. Participants from around the world generously shared with me stories of how they have seen media violence affect children in their countries. Their accounts sound uncannily like the examples I use in this article which come from adults in the United States.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Changing... is hard: This article focuses on the dynamic nature of teaching young children — how things change as world conditions and situations change. It is very likely that teachers will need help figuring out how to implement Levin’s suggestions. In a staff meeting, take each suggestion and discuss it with your faculty. How does it apply in your school? Is it a suggestion that has validity for your program and your children? Then, open the discussion to identify actual teaching strategies and techniques teachers might use when issues related to media violence come up.


But, how: Levin concludes by challenging early childhood educators to make dealing with violence a legitimate part of our work with young children. Devote a staff meeting to a serious discussion of how teachers can do so individually and collectively. Make a plan and implement it.
“Play is the highest expression...

...of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul.”

Friedrich Fröbel
Tips for Talking to Children About the Shooting

By BENEDICT CAREY

First, find out what they have heard.

Through Facebook, Twitter, or friends, most youngsters will know about the mass shooting that took place on Friday morning at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn.

Listen to their fears. Dispel rumors. And be honest, sharing as much detail as a child is able to handle.

Therapists who treat childhood trauma said on Friday that parents talking to their children about the mass shooting should address the news directly and soon, allowing the child to lead with questions and concerns. Parents can no longer control what their children know by simply turning off the television. Many children will know what is happening from mobile devices and social media; now is the time to turn those devices off, these experts said.

“It’s important to open up the discussion,” said Melissa Brymer, director of terrorism and disaster programs at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, based at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Duke University. “There’s a lot of talk on Facebook and Twitter, and it’s important to clarify what’s rumor and what’s not.”

Dr. Andrew J. Gerber, a child psychiatrist at Columbia, said that parents should come to terms with their own feelings about the massacre before talking to a child. They should "essentially metabolize the awfulness of the event so that what they pass on when they have a discussion with their children conveys a certain amount of thoughtfulness and understanding, rather than raw trauma," he said in an e-mail.

If a child is frightened, determine the precise source of the fear. It may be a worry that their classroom isn’t safe; or about how to escape school when under threat. “If you say, ‘This bad man can’t hurt you,’ you’ve introduced another fear,” said Dr. Robert H. Abramovitz, a child psychiatrist at Hunter College. “Ask what their worst fear is, and address that.”

Dr. Abramovitz said that parents can be so eager to reassure that they make unrealistic promises, like “this will never happen to you.” “Better to validate the child’s fear, to say that it’s natural to feel that way, and tell them, ‘I’m going to do everything I can to keep you safe,’” he said.

And reinforce coping skills the child may have already used. Dr. Abramovitz suggested asking,
“Remember the last time you were afraid? Remember what you did to calm down?” He said, “This gives the child a feeling of having some agency, some control.”

If possible, other therapists said, parents should use family or holiday routines as a comforting structure. Spend extra time with children at bedtime. Read them a book. Engage traditions that remind them what they are thankful for.

Practical questions will soon arise, if not today then soon. Does a child know his or her school’s emergency procedures? What is the family’s communication plan, should something happen?

“For example, texting is a better strategy then calling,” Dr. Brymer said. “The phone lines clog up fast. It may be a matter of children knowing to text, ‘I’m OK.’”

And they should be, especially if their parents check in with them and listen. And remind them of something important: that the world is a good place, even if some people do very bad things.
Talking to Children about the Shooting

The recent shooting has evoked many emotions—sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger. Schools are supposed to be one of the safe places, where students go to learn and be with friends. Children who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the shooting may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance. Reinforcing safety after this tragedy is important with very young children. They need to hear that their parents/caregivers will do everything they can to keep them safe. Schools will be working to be sure that their school is a safe place for learning and having fun with friends and classmates.

• **Start the conversation.** Talk about the shooting with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child’s mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about this. Chances are your child has heard about it, too.

• **What does your child already know?** Start by asking what your child/teen already has heard about the events from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the shooting are known.

• **Gently correct inaccurate information.** If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.

• **Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about the incident. For example, she may ask if it is possible that it could happen at their school; she is probably really asking whether it is “likely.” The concern about re-occurrence will be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. While it is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk, she is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has for keeping safe in the event of any crisis situation. Do give any information you have on the help and support the victims and their families are receiving. Let her know that the person responsible is under arrest and cannot hurt anyone else. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.

• **Limit media exposure.** Limit your child’s exposure to media images and sounds of the shooting, and do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio shooting-related messages. Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often are aware of what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of this shooting. If your child has watched coverage, take a minute to turn off the television and ask the child about what they think about what was seen. This also gives you an opportunity to discuss the event and gently correct misperceptions.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)
• Common reactions. Children/Teens may have reactions to this tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating. They may become more irritable or defiant. Children and even teens may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It’s common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. Their sleep and appetite routines may change. In general, you should see these reactions lessen within a few weeks.

• Be a positive role model. Consider sharing your feelings about the shooting with your child/teen, but at a level they can understand. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims and their families. You may share some worry, but it is important to also share ideas for coping with difficult situations like this tragedy. When you speak of the quick response by law enforcement and medical personnel to help the victims, you help your child/teen see that there can be good, even in the midst of such a horrific event.

• Be patient. In times of stress, children/teens may have trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).

• Extra help. Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children’s/teens’ abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

NOTE: Children/teens who were present at the school, knew those directly affected, or have experienced similar incidents will need more support in the days and weeks ahead.
A National Tragedy: Helping Children Cope

Tips for Parents and Teachers

Whenever a national tragedy occurs, such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters, children, like many people, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.

2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help insure their immediate safety and that of their community.

3. **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that the government emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, and the military are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.

4. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

5. **Observe children’s emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child’s level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.

6. **Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

7. **Tell children the truth.** Don’t try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

8. **Stick to the facts.** Don’t embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don’t dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

9. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** *Early elementary school* children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. *Upper elementary and early middle school* children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. *Upper middle school and high school* students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. **For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!**

10. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don’t ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

What Parents Can Do:

1. **Focus on your children over the week following the tragedy.** Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

2. **Make time to talk with your children.** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. Stay close to your children. Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.

4. Limit your child’s television viewing of these events. If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don’t sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.

5. Maintain a “normal” routine. To the extent possible stick to your family’s normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., but don’t be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.

6. Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.

7. Safeguard your children’s physical health. Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.

8. Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.

9. Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope. Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

What Schools Can Do:

1. Assure children that they are safe and that schools are well prepared to take care of all children at all times.

2. Maintain structure and stability within the schools. It would be best, however, not to have tests or major projects within the next few days.

3. Have a plan for the first few days back at school. Include school psychologists, counselors, and crisis team members in planning the school’s response.

4. Provide teachers and parents with information about what to say and do for children in school and at home.

5. Have teachers provide information directly to their students, not during the public address announcements.

6. Have school psychologists and counselors available to talk to students and staff who may need or want extra support.

7. Be aware of students who may have recently experienced a personal tragedy or have personal connection to victims or their families. Even a child who has merely visited the affected area or community may have a strong reaction. Provide these students extra support and leniency if necessary.

8. Know what community resources are available for children who may need extra counseling. School psychologists can be very helpful in directing families to the right community resources.

9. Allow time for age appropriate classroom discussion and activities. Do not expect teachers to provide all of the answers. They should ask questions and guide the discussion, but not dominate it. Other activities can include art and writing projects, play acting, and physical games.

10. Be careful not to stereotype people or countries that might be associated with the tragedy. Children can easily generalize negative statements and develop prejudice. Talk about tolerance and justice versus vengeance. Stop any bullying or teasing of students immediately.

11. Refer children who exhibit extreme anxiety, fear or anger to mental health counselors in the school. Inform their parents.

12. Provide an outlet for students’ desire to help. Consider making get well cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy, or writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals as well as emergency rescue workers, firefighters and police.

13. Monitor or restrict viewing scenes of the event as well as the aftermath.

For information on helping children and youth with this crisis, contact NASP at (301) 657-0270 or visit NASP’s website at www.nasponline.org.

Modified from material posted on the NASP website in September 2001.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may do fine for weeks or months, and then begin to show troubling behavior. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers recognize problems and respond appropriately.

**Preschool Age**

Children ages 1–5 find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. These youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a violent or traumatic event. Preschoolers may resume thumbsucking or bedwetting, or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or “monsters.” They may cling to a parent or teacher, or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may refer to it repeatedly.

**Early Childhood**

Children ages 5–11 may have some of the same reactions that younger children have. They also may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children also may return to more childish behaviors, such as asking to be fed or dressed.

**Adolescence**

Children ages 12–14 are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress, and may abandon chores, school work, or other responsibilities they previously handled. Though they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they also may withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug use.

Traumatic events, such as shootings, bombings, or other violent acts, can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure.

Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has seen the event on television, or has merely heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents and educators to be informed and ready to help if stress reactions begin to occur.
These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as “normal” by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in family activities they once enjoyed.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the traumatic event. Older teens may deny the extent of their reactions to the traumatic event.

**How to Help**

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the event honestly, but do not dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, writing, or artwork and to find a way to help others who were affected by the event.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine, and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Temporarily reduce your expectations about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.

Acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

**Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event**

- Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they are seeing on television and to ask questions.
- Do not be afraid to admit that you cannot answer all of their questions.
- Answer questions at a level the child can understand.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for children to talk. They probably will have more questions as time goes on.
- Use this as an opportunity to establish a family emergency plan. Feeling that there is something you can do may be very comforting to both children and adults.
- Allow children to discuss other fears and concerns about unrelated issues. This is a good opportunity to explore these issues also.
- Monitor children’s television watching. Some parents may wish to limit their child’s exposure to graphic or troubling scenes. To the extent possible, be present when your child is watching news coverage of the event. It is at these times that questions might arise.
Helpful Resources

National Mental Health Information Center
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Web Site: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
Toll-Free: 1-800-729-6686 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Web Site: www.ncadi.samhsa.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Web Site: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) (24/7 English and Español)
TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Web Site: www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)
Web Site: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Office for Victims of Crime
Toll-Free: 1-800-851-3420
TTY: 1-877-712-9279
Web Site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html

Other Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Web Site: www.nctsn.org

National Association of School Psychologists
Phone: (301) 657-0270
Web Site: www.nasponline.org/NEAT

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence
Phone: (203) 785-7047
Toll-Free: 1-877-49-NCCEV (496-2238)
Fax: (203) 785-4608
Web Site: www.nccev.org/violence/children-terrorism.htm

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Revised 04/07

• Help children understand that there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of reactions is normal. Encourage children to express their feelings to adults (including teachers and parents) who can help them understand their sometimes strong and troubling emotions.

• Be careful not to scapegoat or generalize about any particular cultural or ethnic group. Try not to focus on blame.

• In addition to the tragic things they see, help children identify good things, such as heroic actions, families who unite and share support, and the assistance offered by people throughout the community.

When Talking Isn’t Enough

For some children more active interventions may be required, particularly if they were more directly affected by the traumatic event.

• The family, as a unit, might consider counseling. Traumatic events often reawaken a child’s fear of loss of parents (frequently a child’s greatest fear) at a time when parents may be preoccupied with their own practical and emotional difficulties.

• Families may choose to permit temporary regressive behavior. Several arrangements may help children separate gradually after the agreed-upon time limit: spending extra time with parents immediately before bedtime, leaving the child’s bedroom door slightly ajar, and using a nightlight.

• Many parents have their own fears of leaving a child alone after a traumatic event or other fears they may be unable to acknowledge. Parents often are more able to seek help on the children’s behalf and may, in fact, use the children’s problems as a way of asking for help for themselves and other family members.

• Teachers also can help children with art and play activities, as well as by encouraging group discussions in the classroom and informational presentations about the traumatic event.

Note: Some of the information in this brochure was gathered from a brochure developed by Project Heartland—a project of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services in response to the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Project Heartland was developed with funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in consultation with the Federal Center for Mental Health Services.
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For more information on Family Communications and Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, visit their website at www.fci.org.

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The state would also like to extend its gratitude to UNC-TV, North Carolina’s public television network, and public television station WTVI Charlotte for their assistance in distributing this booklet to parents, caregivers, and teachers all across North Carolina. Please visit their websites for more information on their Outreach and Kid’s Clubs.

Helping Children Deal with Tragic Events in the News

Timeless wisdom from Fred Rogers for parents, caregivers and teachers

UNC-TV

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL
(919) 549-7000

WTVI

WTVI Charlotte www.wtvi.org
(704) 371-8840

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services
3022 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-3022
Telephone 919-733-7011 Fax 919-733-9455

State of North Carolina, Michael F. Easley, Governor
Department of Health and Human Services, Carmen Hooker Odom, Secretary
Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse,
Richard J. Visingardi, Ph.D., Director

2,300 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of $6,000 or $ per copy. 2/04
During his lifetime, Fred Rogers became known for his reassuring way of helping families of young children deal with difficult times, beginning with his response to Robert Kennedy’s assassination. Over the years since then, there have, unfortunately, been other tragic events during which parents and educators turned to him for his calming and thoughtful insight. Fred Rogers’ wisdom is timeless, and his messages continue to be valuable for children and the people who care for them, as we deal with the events of today’s world.
In times of community or world-wide crisis, it’s easy to assume that young children don’t know what’s going on. But one thing’s for sure: children are very sensitive to how their parents feel. They’re keenly aware of the expressions on their parents’ faces and the tone of their voices. Children sense when their parents are really worried, whether they’re watching the news or talking about it with others. No matter what children know about a crisis, it’s especially scary for them to realize that their parents are scared.

**Who will take care of me?**

In times of crisis, children want to know, “Who will take care of me?” They’re dependent on adults for their survival and security. They’re naturally self-centered. They need to hear very clearly that their parents are doing all they can to take care of them and to keep them safe. They also need to know that people in the government, in their community and in the world, and other people they don’t even know are working hard to keep them safe, too.

**Helping children feel more secure**

Play is one of the important ways young children have of dealing with their concerns. But, even playing about the news can be scary and sometimes unsafe. So adults need to be nearby to redirect that kind of play into nurturing themes, such as a hospital for the wounded or a pretend meal for emergency workers.

When children are scared and anxious, they might become more dependent, clingy, and afraid to go to bed at night. Whining, aggressive behavior, or toilet accidents may be their way of asking for more comfort from the important adults in their lives. Little by little, as we adults around them become more confident, hopeful and secure, our children probably will, too.

**Scary, confusing images**

The way that news is presented on television can be quite confusing for a young child. The same video segment may be shown over and over again through the day, as if each showing was a different event. Someone who has died turns up alive and then dies again and again. Children often become very anxious since they don’t understand much about videotaped replays, close-ups, and camera angles. Any televised danger seems close to home to them because the tragic scenes are taking place on the television set right in their own living room. Children can’t tell the difference between what’s close and what’s far away... what’s real and what’s pretend... or what’s new and what’s re-run.

The younger the children are, the more likely they are to be interested in the typical news scenes of close-up faces, particularly if the people are expressing strong feelings. When there’s tragic news, the images on TV are most often much too graphic and too disturbing for young children.
When there’s something tragic in the news, many parents get concerned about what and how to tell their children. It’s even harder than usual if we’re struggling with our own powerful feelings about what has happened. Adults may be somewhat surprised that their own reactions to a televised crisis are so strong, but great loss and devastation in the news often reawaken our own earlier losses and fears... even some we thought we have “forgotten.”

It’s easy to allow ourselves to get drawn into watching televised news of a crisis for hours and hours; however, exposing ourselves to so many tragedies can make us feel hopeless, insecure, and even depressed. We help our children—and ourselves—if we’re able to limit our own television viewing. Our children need us to spend time with them—away from the frightening images on the screen.

Talking and listening

Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to give our children all the reasons for such things as war, terrorists, abuse, murders, fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. If they ask questions, our best answer may be to ask them, “What do you think happened?” If the answer is, “I don’t know,” then the simplest reply might be something like, “I’m sad about the news, and I’m worried. But I love you, and I’m here to care for you.”

If we don’t let children know it’s okay to feel sad and scared, they may try to hide those feelings or think something is wrong with them whenever they do feel that way. They certainly don’t need details of what’s making us sad or scared, but if we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them.

Angry feelings are also part of being human, especially when we feel powerless. One of the most important messages we can give our children is, “It’s okay to be angry, but it’s not okay to hurt ourselves or others.” Besides giving children the right to their anger, we can encourage them to find constructive things to do with their feelings. This way, we’ll be giving them useful tools that will serve them all their life and help them to become the world’s future peacemakers... ...the world’s future “helpers.”

Timeless wisdom from Fred Rogers for parents, caregivers and teachers
• Try to keep regular routines as normal as possible. Children and adults count on familiar patterns of everyday life.

• Plan something that you and your child can enjoy together, like taking a walk or going on a picnic, having some quiet time together or doing something silly. It can help to know there are simple things in life that can help us feel better, both in good times and in bad.

• Even if children don’t mention what they’ve seen or heard in the news, it can help to ask what they think has happened. If parents don’t bring up the subject, children can be left with their misinterpretations. You may be surprised at how much your child has heard from others.

• Focus attention on the helpers, like the police, firemen, doctors, nurses, paramedics and volunteers. It’s reassuring to know there are many caring people who are doing all they can to help in this world.

• Let your child know if you’re making a donation or going to a meeting, writing a letter or e-mail of support, or taking some other action. It can help children know that adults take many different active roles...and that we don’t give in to helplessness in time of crisis.

Fred Rogers often told this story about when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: “My mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”

Helpful hints

• Do your best to keep the television off, or at least limit how much your child sees of any news event.

• Try to keep yourself calm. Your presence can help your child feel more secure.

• Give your child extra comfort and physical affection, like hugs or snuggling up together with a favorite book. Physical comfort goes a long way towards providing security. That closeness can nourish you, too.
Helping your children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting

As a parent, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children about a shooting rampage. It is important to remember that children look to their parents to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what age your children are, be they toddlers, adolescents or even young adults.

Consider the following tips for helping your children manage their distress.

**Talk with your child.** Talking to your children about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them. What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there listening to them.

- Find times when they are most likely to talk: such as when riding in the car, before dinner, or at bedtime.
- Start the conversation; let them know you are interested in them and how they are coping with the information they are getting.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view; don't interrupt — allow them to express their ideas and understanding before you respond.
- Express your own opinions and ideas without putting down theirs; acknowledge that it is okay to disagree.
- Remind them you are there for them to provide safety, comfort and support. Give them a hug.

**Keep home a safe place.** Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the solitude or comfort they need. Plan a night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity.

**Watch for signs of stress, fear or anxiety.** After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work or changes in appetite. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear in a few months. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.

**Take "news breaks."** Your children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the Internet, television or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also, scheduling some breaks for yourself is important; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy.

**Take care of yourself.** Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.

These tips and strategies can help you guide your children through the current crisis. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, you may want to consider talking to someone who could help. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/understanding-psychotherapy.aspx) if you feel like you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living.

Thanks to psychologists Ronald S. Palomares, PhD, and Lynn F. Bufka, PhD. who assisted us with this article.

Updated April 2011
This article originated as a staff training seminar and evolved into a professional conference presentation that has been given in various venues across the United States. The research was a result of trauma in a preschool where the staff and children had experienced the deaths of several individuals within a relatively short period of time. The deaths ranged from sudden to expected, suicide to cancer. The results were the losses of two moms, a dad, uncle, grandmother, teacher, and child. Everyone connected with the preschool was impacted in some way.

Crisis

When a family experiences a time of crisis, coping skills are severely tested. Often, there are feelings of anger, uncertainty, fear of the unknown, vulnerability, inadequacy, and being overwhelmed (Fox, 1988). Research has demonstrated feelings experienced during or as the result of a crisis are predictable and experienced by everyone.

According to Fox (1988), a crisis causes a disruption in the psychological equilibrium of adults. Young children, though, are not normally in a stage of psychological equilibrium and should not be expected to be in one when a crisis is over. For the young child, a crisis is interference in the developmental process. The result of this interference can result in developmental suspension.

The goal of intervention with children is to help them during a confusing and frightening time in their life, encourage them to move through the stages of grief, and minimize any further negative impact in order to allow the child to successfully continue through their developmental
Healthy Coping

There are three requisites to a successful intervention for those in crisis. First, there must be a realistic perception of the event (Fox, 1988). A child must have timely and honest information in a developmentally appropriate manner. This will significantly increase the chances of the child coping well with a crisis. Young children need to know they are not alone; their feelings are predictable and experienced by everyone.

The second requisite is an adequate situational support network (Fox, 1988). These are individuals currently or potentially able to assist with the various needs inevitable during and immediately following a crisis.

The final requisite for healthy coping is that of adequate coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms are referred to by Fox (1988) as “well-functioning conscious and unconscious ways of dealing with the anxiety generated by challenging life events”. Naturally, children are not expected to have adequate coping mechanisms. Developmental immaturity makes it difficult for young children to effectively deal with potentially overwhelming life events. Instead, they will observe, sense and imitate the coping mechanisms of the adults around them. In doing so, they will begin the process of organizing information and experiences and integrating these so as to establish meaning and understanding (Fox, 1988).

Defining Grief
Grief is intense sorrow, great sadness, especially as a result of death, loss, and/or change. It is intense, deep, and profound sorrow, especially due to a specific event or situation.

These events or situations are called “life transitions” and it can be anything that brings about a traumatic change; e.g. death, divorce, separation, marriage/remarriage, blending of families, moving, new environments, new situations, new people. Divorce is especially traumatic for children because in their mind, divorce means “I don’t love you anymore” - something they cannot begin to imagine.

The normal stages of grief for an adult are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1973). The stages are progressive in nature, however, everyone moves through them at their own pace, often revisiting previous stages as they move toward healing (Kübler-Ross, 1973). Coping effectively with stress and grief requires a certain level of life experience and acceptance of reality. If the progressive stages of the grief cycle are difficult
for adults to experience, surely there are lessons for us to learn about how young children deal with stress and grief with their limited life experiences and concrete thought processes.

**Developmental Milestones and Grief**

Adults have varying degrees of experience when it comes to dealing with loss and grief. Some deal with it in a healthy way; some do not. When talking about young children – children under the age of 8 years – it is important to keep in mind that they do not have the experiences nor have they reached a mature developmental stage in which successful grief processing has been learned. When it comes to young children and grief, the expectations of adults are often exaggerated and unrealistic. Thus the purpose of this article: to provide a resource for adults who have the opportunity to help a child through the grief process.

Children are aware when there is a great sadness and stress, especially as a result of marital problems, death, loss and/or change (Kübler-Ross, 1983). A child’s fear and anxiety are very real, even though they may seem exaggerated and unrealistic to adults. They are afraid of what is strange and unknown. When their fears are not validated by loving adults, they experience the real fear of being left alone.

**What We Know**

Research by Fox (1988), Kübler-Ross (1983) and others has demonstrated young children think spontaneously about death and they fear abandonment. Their understanding is progressive and developmentally and experientially based. The grief behaviors of children differ from those of adults, and children may or may not mourn. Magical thinking often fills in “the gaps” to help explain the strange and unknown, while thoughts and fantasies of a reunion include a
misunderstanding of the permanence of death and sometimes suicidal ideology (Lyles, 2004).
The death of a parent or sibling during childhood increases the risk of emotional disorders in adults (American Red Cross [ARC], 2001).

Generally, infants and toddlers will sense a loss. They will have a memory of the situation – a sensorial memory of smells, sounds, perhaps something they see, but most definitely they will remember the feelings and perceptions they experienced during the time of loss and adjustment. Infants will pick up on the grief of a parent or caretaker and may change their eating, sleeping or toileting habits. Babies may be more irritable, cry more often and need to be held and cuddled frequently. (ARC, 2001).

During the time of loss or significant change, young children (between 2-6 years of age) tend to feel helpless, powerless, unable to protect themselves, insecure and fearful. They take language literally and pick up on nonverbal communication. Still being very egocentric, they feel responsible for situations, consequences and others moods. These young children will often connect things not related and repeatedly recreate events and conversations in their play in an attempt to understand and internalize. Children this age cannot understand the concept of permanent loss or separation. They believe consequences are reversible. These are all normal reactions which can help provide opportunities for open discussion and sharing, opportunities for learning (ARC, 2001).

Case Study
Four year old Helen was dropped off at preschool by Grandpa, again. Before he left she began crying. Within minutes of his departure, she was hysterical: screaming, crying, refusing to be comforted. For the last two weeks, Helen’s behavior had continually deteriorated. Now it was time to talk to mom and dad; to find out what changes might be occurring in little Helen’s world.

During the parent/teacher conference, Helen’s parents were puzzled, if not dumbfounded, by their happy little girl’s recent behavior changes. “She’s always loved this preschool. She’s been coming here since she was a baby.” When searching for recent life changes, the teacher mentioned the fact that Grandpa was now the individual dropping Helen off in the morning and picking her up in the late afternoon. Helen’s parents were aware of the change – their new work schedules required his help. Helen’s teacher pressed: what kind of work schedule changes?

In a few moments, Helen’s parents realized that their work schedule changes equated to longer days at the office, leaving fewer hours at home. In fact, Helen’s mother admitted she had been leaving for work before Helen awoke in the morning and often returned home from work after Helen had already gone to bed for the night. Could Helen’s behavior changes be a result of not being able to see her mommy? Not spending time with her mommy? Helen’s mom promised to change her work schedule again and make more time for her little girl.

Within a week, the answer was very clear: Yes, Helen had been missing her mommy and the only way she could express her sorrow was through her tears.

Helping Children Through Life Transitions
For a young child, several questions need to be answered succinctly and honestly (Kübler-Ross, 1983; Lyles, 2004). The young child needs to have as much confusion eliminated as possible. They need to know what has happened, why it happened, will it happen to me, mommy or daddy or some other significant figure. They will also need permission to feel and appropriately express their feelings.

Knowing the facts and being aware of one’s own feelings regarding a situation will help provide a foundation for sharing and explanations. When we are honest with young children, it is much easier to deal with their known fears than it is to deal with nebulous, unknown fears. The young child does not understand grievous situations. Honesty is the only way to help them because (a) it gives the adult a reference point at which to start (b) it keeps a focus on the situation (c) it helps the child’s understanding as they mature and grow older (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 1997).

When adults listen to children, they often can find where the child’s needs most lie (Kübler-Ross, 1983). Perhaps there’s confusion about the situation. Perhaps the child needs reassurance they are not responsible for the event. Listening provides the adult with a starting point. Naturally, there is not an answer for every question; be honest about that, too (Kübler-Ross, 1983).

When talking with a grieving child, share facts in a clear and understandable way developmentally appropriate for that particular child. Share your own feelings and encourage them to share theirs. Encourage questions. Allow for the expression of feelings and be aware of personal comfort and curiosity levels. Avoid pushing their comfort level simply because the adult feels the child needs to know certain information.
Reassurance is of paramount importance (AACAP, 1997). When adults around them are demonstrating intense emotions, young children need to know their basic needs will be met, they will be cared for, they are not alone. The mind of a young child will explore magical thinking and fantasies – some of which are scary; they need help making sense of these thoughts.

Children express their feelings and reactions in various ways. Acceptance of this will make a difference in how the child recovers from the event. Young children will need to be more dependent for a period of time. Allow for more hugs and special moments. Let them keep the light on at night or not sleep alone or return to having their favorite teddy bear or blanket.

Once children have accepted the inevitable results of a traumatic event, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, often at unexpected moments and in unexpected ways (AACAP, 1997). Spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely while at the same time, teaching them how to do so appropriately.

**Tangible Reassurance and Commemoration**

Young children learn through play and it is only natural for them to learn about grieving through play. By preparing the environment for them to engage in meaningful activities, they can act out or project their feelings without having to verbalize them or hurt others. Role-playing, puppets, artwork, clay, sand, dolls, medical “kits” and play telephones are just a few of the many ways teachers can help young children imagine and pretend as they work through the
different stages of grief (AACAP, 1997).

Express Feelings and Concerns

- Dolls/puppets
- Dramatic Play
- Physical Contact
- Clay & Play Dough
- Draw a Picture / Paint
- Large Muscle Movement
- Create a Mural or Collage
- Write a Letter/Poem/Story/Song
- Share Experience in Group Discussions

Case Study

Before Mrs. Smith’s death from cancer, the preschool where her boys attended commissioned her to paint a mural in the main hallway of the preschool. After her passing, her two sons, husband, mother, and other relatives found it very healing to come and view the mural, taking pictures of it and reminiscing about the painting of it – most of which was done after her right collar bone had broken (she was right handed) causing her to paint either in intense pain while using her right hand, or with her left hand. What a legacy she left for those boys – both in her painting and in her perseverance.

Helping children to create happy memories can be a very rewarding experience. It can also provide valuable outlets for their confusing, often overwhelming, emotions (AACAP, 1997).
In the event of a death, make sure the child is allowed to have as much closure as possible. The young child does not understand what is happening; they need to be included. Describe upcoming events as best as possible and invite them to be included in a developmentally appropriate way. Funerals and memorials are just as healing for children as they are for adults, mainly because the ritualism holds meaning. Even if it is confusing and new, time and maturity will bring meaning and healing together. Encourage commemorative activities which can assist in the healing process through the use of memory making (AACAP, 1997).

As much as possible, children should stay with those whom they feel most familiar rather than being sent away for a time. This, along with consistent and predictable routines and schedules, will help the child feel more secure and in control (AACAP, 1997).

If the traumatic event is a marital separation or divorce, the adults need to realize young children do not understand why the two most important people in their lives seem to hate each other. The child loves both mom and dad! They do not understand the angry words and hateful looks. Neither can they comprehend a life without mom or dad. As far as possible, parents need to allow the child to continue a relationship with the estranged spouse; provided their safety
will not be compromised.

The stages of grief are similar for adults and children, but the process is unique to each individual. Successful grieving is about accepting reality, experiencing the emotional pain, adjusting to a new environment or situation, and finally, braving the reinvestment of emotional energy. For the young child, they may confuse the reality of moving-on-with-life with forgetting. Commemorative activities and tangible reassurance can help bridge this conceptual gap. For a while, anniversaries might be necessary. Above all, plan for purposeful one-on-one time; it will help to foster trust and open communication.

**Warning Signs**

Remembering young children are egocentric, it should not be a surprise to discover they often believe they are responsible for, the cause of, what is happening around them. “If I were better, mommy and daddy wouldn’t fight so much.”

Children are more apt to express their feelings openly: anger, fear, guilt, rejection, isolation, jealousy. Expression is good; appropriate expression is learned. Some children, though, may not be openly expressive. Instead, they may become depressed, withdrawn or develop physical symptoms. Other danger signals may include:

- Extended depression
- Poor concentration
- Inability to sleep
- Disturbances to sleep
- Nightmares
- Loss of appetite or energy level
• Prolonged fear of being alone or separation problems
• Uncharacteristic, prolonged behavioral changes such as aggression or withdrawal
• Nausea, headaches, weight gain or loss, unexplained pain
• Excessive imitation
• Intense anxiety or avoidance behaviors
• Refusal to engage in daily activities
• Inappropriate coping skills
• Wanting to join the dead person.

If any of these behaviors persist, professional help may be needed (ARC, 2001).

**Religion and Death**

When it comes to death and dying, many people find comfort in their religious faith. The majority of religious teachings about death, though, are very confusing to the literal little child. Mixed messages can compound confusion resulting in misunderstandings about the issue of death (ARC, 2001). Here again, honest factual information is most beneficial. Because the young child listens to the exact words of adults, there will be some amount of misunderstanding which will require time and effort to be adequately explained.

The use of concepts, words and types can help create meaning for literal minds. There are examples of death in nature – plants, insects, birds and pets. There are examples also in the temporal world such as a broken toy that must be thrown away. There are stories about death in literature, books for young children and, most importantly, the Bible. There are also stories of God resurrecting people in the Bible and these can provide the young child with a sense of hope even in the face of sorrow.

**Summary**
Sadness is part of the human experience. Each individual deals with sorrow in a unique manner. Perhaps the best summary of what we know about young children and grief can be summed up in a short paragraph written by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1983, p. 2):

**Letter to Parents,**

“They are aware of your pains and worries, your sleepless nights and concerns, and you should not hide them. Don’t go into their room with a false “cheerful” smile. Children cannot be fooled. Don’t lie to them… Tell them you are sad and sometimes feel so useless… They will hold you in their little arms and feel good that they can help you by sharing comfort. Shared sorrow is much easier to bear than leaving them with feelings of guilt and fear that they are the cause of all your anxiety.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>How to talk to the literal thinker</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reality</strong></th>
<th><strong>Suggestion</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mommy has cancer.</td>
<td>Mommy’s body is sick. It is not working right.</td>
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<td>Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce.</td>
<td>Mommy and Daddy need to stop fighting. Fighting is wrong. Mommy and Daddy need to be apart from each other. They need to stop fighting.</td>
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<td>Or,</td>
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<td>Mommy and Daddy don’t love each other anymore.</td>
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<td>Grandma has fallen asleep in Jesus. Or,</td>
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<td>Grandma is in heaven. Or,</td>
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<td>Grandma went away. Or,</td>
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<td>Grandma is at rest. Or,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandma died because she was old.</td>
<td>Grandma has died. Her body was old and tired. Her body stopped working and she died.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Something very bad happened to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Traumatic death…

It hurt his/her body so much, that s/he died. His/Her body stopped working and s/he died.

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To schedule a speaking appointment with Dr. Gillan Byrne, please use the email link or call (805) 490-6055.

References


http://aacap.org/page.ww?name=Children+and+Grief&section=Facts+for+Families


http://www.njredcross.org/safetyCenter/childCope.pdf


