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# **When Traumatic Incidents Occur: How Children React and How We Can Respond (According to Developmental Stages)**

## **Tips for dealing with children of ALL ages**

- Children react to your reactions, not just to your words! How you say things, not just what you say, carries great influence. Seeing constant excited and emotional discussions taking place, at home or school, can make a child anxious.
- Sharing your own experiences may be helpful and reassuring to children. Through sharing and modeling for them children will hopefully sense your sincerity and genuineness.
- Make sure that they do not misinterpret your openness and think that you are “falling apart.” Assure them that while it is normal to feel sad or scared, you are coping with the situation at hand. Children need to sense your resilience, strength and support, especially at times like these.
- When empathizing with pre-teens and teens be wary of saying, “I know how you feel.” Often this does not make them feel better; rather, it can inwardly infuriate them. They feel that you have encroached into their private world and mistakenly (and perhaps arrogantly) think you fully understand them. This applies even if they have smiled, nodded their heads and thanked you for your concern.
- Allow and encourage children to verbalize and ventilate about what they are thinking and feeling. Then validate what they've expressed. Children often harbor inner fears that “I’m going crazy” or “I’m the only one going through this.” Hearing that these reactions are normal and common can help calm them significantly.
- All children, and frankly adults as well, want to feel protected, safe and secure – assure, and reassure, them of this. You are there for them, they are safe and will be continue to be taken care of.

- They also want to feel part of something larger (family, school, friends, neighborhood) – let them know that they are not alone, that others are impacted as well, but that ultimately we (family, Crown Heights, Klal Yisroel) are all in this together
- It is important to recognize and respect each child’s style of coping. There are no specific “recipes,” “formulas,” “road maps” or “timetables” on how to handle trauma.
- One of the scariest feelings that trauma in general, and an attack in particular, triggers is a lack of control and autonomy. Children often cope better when they are able to “do something” during times of trauma. Some may prefer to work on a project (prayer, chessed, charity) directly related to what has happened, while others busy themselves with distractions which help them avoid facing the tragedy. Avoidance can be a very valid method of coping. Don’t push children in either direction.
- "Roller coaster" reactions may occur, with responses coming and going without any apparent cycle or pattern. The strength of the reactions may also become stronger or weaker without any discernable pattern.
- Juggle flexibility with structure and routine. Too much flexibility can be counterproductive, but so can too much rigidity. "Having difficulty focusing? For right now, do part of your homework." "Can't fall asleep? For tonight, you can stay up a half hour longer than your usual bedtime." "Want to sleep with a light on, or in our room? For tonight, that's OK."
- Read between the lines. When a child asks how the injured bachur is doing, he personifies "Mee K'Amcha Yisroel." But keep in mind that children may subconsciously be wondering "What if this happened to me? Or to my family? How would I cope?"
- Coming on the heels of the recent attack in Har Nof, children may feel that "It's happening everywhere, all the time. What place is safe if such things can happen even in a Bais Medrash?" Plus, while there are a number of differences between the two incidents, this attack happened right here, not across the globe. If such concerns sincerely spur a person (child or adult) to address any of the myriad behaviors that Hashem desires of us (learning Torah, doing chessed, accomplishing personal growth, etc.) then that is tremendous. On the other hand, if it basically serves to rile us up, lose sleep, meals, focus or composure - then it is important to recognize that the cumulative effective of recent traumas is impacting us.

## **Tips for dealing with children according to developmental stage**

### **pre-school - 2nd grade**

#### **students may:**

- misinterpret what they are watching and think that the event is happening live
- misinterpret repeated viewings and think that similar events are happening again and again (some children who watched the events of 9/11 repeatedly on TV, for example, thought that dozens of planes had crashed into dozens of buildings)
- find the yelling, cursing, aggression and violence depicted in the online videos upsetting, unsettling and confusing

## pre-school - 2nd grade cont'd

### possible school and family responses:

- Experience has shown that it is healthier for children to hear the basic realities of what has happened from parents and/or teachers, rather than deal with the unbridled fantasies which can ensue when the matter is ignored, denied or misstated. Hearing the news from friends often sets the "telephone game" into play, where facts quickly get distorted and become even scarier than they really are.
- Your tone of voice and body language have a large impact on how children perceive the situation. Speak in a tone that is calming. Parents can hold children close, or on their lap or with their arm around the shoulder.
- Younger children may repeatedly ask graphic, inappropriate (to us) questions such as, "Was there a lot of blood?" This is not a breach in etiquette, upbringing or education; rather, at this developmental stage, children are very concrete, inquisitive and repetitive. It serves as a child's way of trying to process the difficult information he has just heard. Above all else: remain patient!
- **"If parents allow young children to watch the news at all, experts suggest that parents watch the news WITH their children and talk about what they are seeing. For example, if parents allowed their children to watch coverage of the 9/11 attacks, children may have needed it explained to them that despite seeing the plane crash into the building over and over again, this was a single incident on one day."** from *"The Effects of Media Coverage"* by the National Center for PTSD

## Older elementary school - junior high school

### students may:

- have difficulty separating the trauma at hand from other difficult, scary or confusing events/thoughts/feelings in their life. Life issues may tend to mesh together to form a "dark cloud" which colors their life and consumes much thought, emotion and energy.
- become overly concerned with personal or family safety, and feel unable to manage their feelings.

### possible school and family responses:

- Help children to compartmentalize their feelings. The illness of a friend or family member, whether current or from years ago, is not connected to what happened now. Speak this through with your child. Hold the fears up the light of day and explain, step by step, how they are separate and distinct, and explore methods to handle each issue. This approach is empowering and anxiety-relieving.
- Reassure them that they are safe and OK. Make sure they know how and when to reach you, as well as any trusted family members or neighbors. Remind them of times in the past when they were anxious and what methods they used to successfully address their concerns.

## **Older junior high school - high school**

### **pre-teens and teens may:**

- find themselves drawn to the "buzz" of the online videos of the incident, finding them fascinating or even "exciting" to view. There is a certain high-energy, edge-of-your-seat quality to the videos, especially since it happened in reality as opposed to merely being part of a show or movie.
- be intellectually, emotionally and spiritually bothered by the trauma at hand (teens especially). They may also expand their questioning to broader issues of why such an incident (or any type of "bad," "evil" or suffering) can happen at all.
- gauge whether adults are being genuine in their responses. They may be wary that parents or teachers are taking advantage of the situation to manipulate their (teens') attitudes or behaviors.
- perceive the world as too scary, or even meaningless in light of an attack ("Anything can happen anytime, anywhere"); fatalistic attitudes can, at their extremes, lead to depression or dangerous behavior.

### **possible school and family responses:**

- Be extremely careful not to be judgmental. They are feeling bad, or confused, enough as it is. Feeling judged is belittling and demeaning, and breeds anger and mistrust.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of answering such questions, as well as the pain and frustration that this inadequacy may trigger for you. Once he senses that you are answering sincerely and not being evasive, dismissive or challenging, you may have a chance to engage in a meaningful dialogue.
- Talk with your teen, not to him. Yes, teens can, and even sometimes do, discuss their true feelings with caring adults. Triggers to start a discussion (since "How are you feeling?" is often too direct and intimidating) include: What are others in your class saying? How about students in your school? How do you think students in another school might react? What advice would you give them?
- Discuss Hashkafa, as long as they are willing to hear it and don't feel it is coming across as "preachy" or dogmatic.

# **Chai4ever – Helping children and families cope with parental illness or loss.**

Moshe Borowski, LMSW, ACSW, is the Director of Crisis Intervention at Chai4ever. He may be reached at [mborowski@chai4ever.org](mailto:mborowski@chai4ever.org) or (732) 998-6964.

**At Chai4ever, we help mitigate the impact of parental illness or loss on families and children by providing expert practical and emotional support throughout this most challenging time.**

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