

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN WITH TRAUMA

Information handbook for parents and professionals

/ Dr. Peter Pöthe, child psychiatrist/

In different times of our lives we experience different things. What we see, hear and feel is received, organised and stored in our brains in a form of memories. Our brain contains millions of memories which influence our thoughts, feelings and actions. Some of them are nice and pleasant so we want to remember them. Some of them are bad, unpleasant and we want to forget them. Unfortunately, the more unpleasant the memory might be, the more difficult it is to forget it. Actually, they can make us feel scared, angry or sad also when nothing bad is happening around us and everything seems to be fine. This is true also for our children. The younger the person is, the more she or he may be influenced by memories. Children who had experienced dangerous situations, sudden unexpected changes, losses of their homes, families or close persons can feel very much anxious, scared, sad and angry even many months or years after the event. Therefore it is very important for us to understand that the child's action, behaviour, thought and health may be strongly influenced by experiencing events, which had gotten stored in the brain a long time ago. **We can say that these children suffer from memories that cannot be remembered, nor forgotten.** These memories are called "traumatic memories". Sometimes the only way to help such children to feel secure, happy and motivated to grow, is to recognise that they suffer from "psychological trauma".

How do I know if my girl or boy suffers from "psychological trauma"?

We know that the effect of "traumatic memories" shows itself mostly through **actions and behavior**. As parents or professionals we should pay special attention to children who can be divided into the following categories:

THE RESTLESS CHILD

- he/ she cannot stand still, gets easily **distracted**, forgets and does not remember things, looks "absent minded", gets easily **agitated, reacts aggressively to any restriction, impulsively**, looks **unnaturally cheerful, plays repetitively**, aggressively with toys, the theme of his play is control and power, **talks fast**, has a **false sense of power**, likes to control his environment, especially other children, he is usually a boy

THE PASSIVE CHILD

- looks quite, **unnaturally calm**, submissive, appears "**invisible**", **avoids** other children and adults, is socially **withdrawn** and **isolated**, shows no joy, shows no interest in anything, is

indifferent, stares blank, is usually **compliant**, **does not play** or plays without fantasy, **lacks creativity**, **gets stuck** in simple situations, she is usually a girl

THE RESTLESS/ PASSIVE” CHILD

- experiences sudden shifts in mood and motivation, cries and loughs at the same time, fluctuates from social to withdrawn behaviour, is rejecting and clinging at the same time, has characteristics from both restless and passive child.

The CHILD WITH HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS

- a child may suffer from **problems with sleeping, nightmares, loss of memory, poor concetration**, loss of aquired knowledge, **avoidance** of certain people and situations, **reliving** of bad memories or scary images, **lack of selftrust**, lack of confidence, bed time **enuresis**, thumb sucking, **digestive problems**, weight loss, **headache, stomachache**, chronic exhaustion, and others...

How can I help a traumatised child?

First of all it is useful to find out what we feel about our child. If we find out that she/he shows signs of a “RESTLESS CHILD”, we may feel frustrated, annoyed and exhausted by constantly giving him/her attention and boundaries. If she or he fits more into a category of a “PASSIVE CHILD” we may feel angry and tired from providing constant motivation. If our child shows signs of both categories, we may feel confused and very worried

In any case it is important to know that child is:

- NOT NAUGHTY
- NOT LAZY
- NOT DISOBEDIANT
- NOT SPOILED

As we said before, she/he most probably suffers from “psychological trauma” which means that getting angry, impatient or forcefull with him would not do any good. In fact, it can make things even worse.

So what can we do to help him/her to overcome the trauma?

The following ten points may give us some ideas about some real help for our troubled child:

1. First of all we need to tell him/her that we **don’t blame** her/him for her/his actions because they are a result of their feelings, memories and fantasies, which they may not know about.

2. We find time to sit down and **help them to know their feelings, fantasies** and memories. This **“special time” should be provided** exclusively to them without a presence of other children. It is good, if we give them this time regularly approximately same time of the day even if it can last only for 30 or less minutes. Another way how to address our son’s and daughter’s thoughts and feelings is to do just right after the “problematic” situation, that is when they become upset. The way how we **calm them down requires gentle holding, touching, talking but also commenting their their possible feelings.**

3. In the meantime we may **encourage them to express feelings** and fantasies as much as possible, at best through a creative play, painting, dancing or telling fantasy stories. Talking about feelings and images which may pop up in our minds will help them to understand that they what they do **makes sense from what they feel, and what they feel make sense from what has been going on with them.**

4. The feelings of **younger children** are usually expressed through bodily sensation. Sensitive **touching**, gentle hugging or **holding** in our arms can help them to calm down but also to get in contact with what they are really feeling. For children it is easier to express their feelings through **play with toys** and puppets the through words. Puppets act according to the their wishes, thoughts and feelings. We can also use toys to discover and name their true wishes and fears. Creative **painting** or fingerpainting also belong to activities by which your son or daughter can alleviate tension and show what she/he carries “inside”.

5. We may know that the strongest feelings which “traumatised” children have, are the following ones:
 - **SADNESS**, about loosing something and someone
 - **FEAR**, of losing a member of the family, staying alone, being hurt, being unhappy, from future....
 - **ANGER**, with people who hurt the family, who forced to leave your home, who does not care, who don't protect them,...
 - **HELPLESNESS** and LACK OF CONTROL over their own lives
 - **GUILT**, for not being good and strong enough to save the family, for not protecting younger members of the family, for feeling angry at us, for disobeying us, for making us angry and unhappy...
 - **SHAME** for being poor, homeless, without school, or the “original” family...

Everytime when we talk or listen to our child, we may wonder which of these feelings make him/ her suffer the most. In any case it is very useful to talk about these feelings openly, with no shame and fear. **Feelings are never dangerous. It is the action, what causes the problem, never a feeling.**

6. **Making sense of their feelings** can happen simply by **talking to them about their stories and about our own stories**. We should remember, that children have many questions that they don't dare to ask. We may think about their **possible questions**, so that we help them to find answers and make them feel more secure. **Children usually become aware of their feelings when they see that we are not afraid of them**. Of course sometimes it's not possible to do that even for us.
7. We should try to **think about the worst possible feelings and fears** our child can have. Many of their feelings come from the fact, that they don't have any understanding of what had happened to them in the past and what may happen in the future. In terms of the future they usually don't think about the long term future. Much of what they care about is the next days or weeks. If we don't know what's going to happen in the distant future, we should at least give them **clear information about the near future** and **ensure them that they are not going loose us** and nothing will take them away from them.
8. Think about ways **how you can make your child feel competent, how to give him/her a sense of control**. Children like to do stuff which they are good at. We should support their interests by giving them enough time and **praise** for doing what they like. **By praise and showing continous interest** we **motivate** our son or daughter **to improve** his/ her skills which he/she could be proud of.
9. We should never underestimate our own needs and capacities. There a times when we need someone with whom we share feelings or deepest worries. It is important to look and find such person. It could be another member of the family or a professional whom we trust. Although it may be very difficukt to trust, we need to make an attempt not only for our sake but also for the sake of our children. But remember! Children don't need us to be perfect or absolutely strong. **It's enough if we are stronger and more open to our feelings then them**.
10. If the problems of our child would continue, we should not hesitate to **contact a professional** person who can treat effects of psychological trauma by specialised psychological or medical approach. It is worth to consult a person who is educated in child psychology.

How can I help my child to grieve?

Helping children with trauma often entails helping them with feelings connected with lost objects and persons. Dealing with loss is process that is called the grieving. Without grieving we cannot move forward and start a new life.

Whenever we lose something or somebody very important we are usually very surprised. We cannot understand that a person who was part of our lives, without whom we could not imagine ourselves and our family, is suddenly gone without ever coming back. The **idea of loss** is sometimes so **painful** that it is **unthinkable**. We do everything **to protect ourselves**, that we convince ourselves that it actually never had happened. This **denial** helps us to prepare our minds to acknowledge that our lives, our family or future will never be the same again. Some of us remain in the denial state for a long time. This can happen to children who might be too weak to face the painful reality without us. Some children use fantasies of **believing they are super heroes** or powerful kings who rule the world and don't need anything or anybody. This type of **denial in fantasy** makes them especially vulnerable when they experience any change in their lives. Because changes always entails loss. But change is also a chance to acquire something new and good. Children don't understand this, but we do.

The first step to help our child to get out from the denial which makes him/her stuck in the trauma, is to **acknowledge our own loss**. But how can we do it without feeling extremely unhappy and sad? We cannot. It is always bad.

But you can survive it, you have been through worse and it is very probably, that no major losses will expect you now. Believe in yourself! Don't be afraid to feel sad, it is a part of grieving and will get better. Admitting your feelings and showing them without shame is the way to help your son and daughter to overcome the loss. You may tell them that **it is normal to feel sad when sad things happen**. When they see that sadness can be accepted and survived the **grieving takes off and you and them can gradually** feel relieved a free.

Final recommendations:

You don't need to be perfect parents.

You should not blame yourself for happened with your family and children.

You have an extreme job in extreme circumstances.

You deserve respect of all the parents of the world.

THANK YOU !

Written by Dr. Peter Pöthe (www.dr-pothe.com) in Lesvos, august 2019