



Children, Trauma and Stress: Coping Strategies for Parents and Educators

“During recess, children’s play involves re-enacting the funerals of the martyrs, throwing stones at each other, pointing plastic guns at their friends as if they were soldiers, and throwing ‘bombs’ made of crumpled paper.”

In my interaction with teachers through my work at the Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development, I have heard a number of stories such as this. This account of school-yard play from a primary school teacher in Ramallah is, although alarming, not surprising: it is an indicator that the child has been exposed to a variety of traumatic events.

All Palestinian children have been exposed to varying degrees of trauma since the Intifada began over two years ago. Most children and adolescents recover quickly from the trauma and experience no lasting consequences. There is, however, a possibility that some children who witness violence, such as home demolitions, home searches, arrest and detention or the murder of a loved one, may develop ongoing difficulties referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder. The chances of a child developing PTSD are directly related to the seriousness of the trauma, whether the trauma is repeated, the child’s proximity to the trauma and the child’s relationship to the victim (martyr).

In order to ensure our children get the help they need, parents and educators need to be aware of what the child will experience after witnessing a traumatic or highly stressful event. According to experts in the field of psychology, children may initially be agitated or confused. Following this, they may exhibit fear, helplessness, sadness, horror or denial. If the suffering

caused by the trauma becomes too great, the child may become emotionally numb in order to dull or block the pain.

Children with PTSD often avoid situations or places that are reminders of the trauma experienced. In addition to this avoidance, children may become emotionally unresponsive, depressed, withdrawn and detached.

A child with PTSD may re-experience the traumatic event. The following are indicators that this is happening: frequent memories of the event; play in which some or all of the trauma is repeated over and over; nightmares; acting or feeling like the experience is happening again; and, developing repeated physical or emotional symptoms when the child is reminded of the event. Such behavior might indicate that your child is suffering from PTSD.

Parents and educators should be alert to other symptoms of PTSD, including: worrying about dying at an early age; severe headaches and stomachaches; sudden and extreme emotional reactions; irregular sleeping patterns; irritability or bursts of anger; inability to concentrate, leading to trouble with schoolwork; loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities; and, regression (for example, bedwetting or thumb-sucking by older children).

Child and adolescent psychologists can be very helpful in diagnosing and treating children with PTSD, but there are also a number of things that we as parents and educators can do to alleviate the suffering of children who have been exposed to horrific violence.