



## Helping Children Who Have Witnessed a Traumatic Event

*Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.*

In my work with Hamilton's Academy of Grief & Loss in Des Moines, I have had the opportunity to learn from many children who are "secondary victims." From my conversations with them, I have created the following list of 15 suggestions to consider when helping a child who has witnessed any traumatic event, including:

*Accidents of any kind*  
*Death*  
*Suicide*  
*Assault*  
*School violence*  
*Domestic violence*  
*Gang violence*

*Situations of abuse*  
*Substance abuse*  
*Homicide*  
*Natural disasters*  
*Fire*  
*Acts of war and/or their aftermath*  
*Terrorism*

1. This may be the child's first experience having his or her basic belief system questioned. Such children's sense of security and safety has been threatened, which cannot help but change their view of the world.
2. Use words that are both real and accurate, and avoid euphemisms, such as "passed away" or "gone to sleep". Substitute words and phrases, although seemingly comforting to adults, can add to the child's confusion about what it is that they witnessed.
3. The child may be too scared to even speak of the event for fear of repercussions or other reasons. Help to create a safe place for him or her to eventually tell the story and express the resulting feelings.
4. Give the child several modes of describing or acting out the event. Dolls, drawing materials, paint, crayons, sand, clay, puppets, stuffed animals, and other appropriate toys can all be used.
5. Recurring nightmares are common. The more the child is able to safely "tell the story," the more these will diminish.
6. Keep in mind that any trauma will result in different issues for each child. For example, if the trauma was a car accident, a fear of riding in a car may develop. If the event was gang violence, the child may not want to go outdoors. Domestic violence may result in problematic issues of trust or, more seriously, attachment disorders.

7. Guilt and a sense of responsibility are normal reactions when children witness violence or trauma. Help the child to understand that the event was not his or her fault, while understanding yourself that this is a real part of the child's grief. Children's minds are often filled with the "if only's," much as adults' are. *"That makes sense you feel that way, but remember (and restate the facts)."*
8. Children who have witnessed trauma or violence can experience fear, guilt, denial, anger, rage, confusion, desire for revenge, loneliness, and in any combination. Watch for signs indicating that the child is struggling with any of these feelings, such as changes in behavior, personality, sleeping or eating patterns.
9. Be aware that when internalizing fear and other feelings, the child can also be physically affected: loss of appetite, headaches, stomachaches, and sleeplessness, for example.
10. Some children, particularly girls, may react to witnessing trauma or violence by becoming more quiet, withdrawn, or introverted. Their struggle is more likely to go unnoticed or unaddressed. Be watchful, and be prepared to offer special attention to help them express themselves, whether through play, art, or talking to a caring adult.
11. Attempt to maintain the child's daily routine as much as possible. This continuity helps provide the child with some sense of security and stability during a time full of uncertainty.
12. Maintaining rules and expectations is very important for rebuilding the child's feelings of security. Continue to expect the child to abide by the household and classroom rules, even as they are working through this experience and their grief.
13. The child may already feel very different from others because of this experience; their self-esteem could, in fact, be diminished. It is important that the child not be singled out for special privileges or compensations. They need to feel a part of the peer group and should be expected to function accordingly.
14. Be prepared to listen well with your ears, eyes, and heart to what your child has to teach you about his or her grief journey. As adults, we must be willing to put ourselves in the position of the 'student', *learning from the child* who is the teacher and the **expert** regarding his or her own grief experience.
15. Consider having the child meet with a professional, if even for one session, to see if formal therapy would be beneficial for them.

*There are many helpful grief resources available in and around our community.  
For more information, please contact Hamilton's Academy of Grief & Loss:  
phone: (515) 697-3666, or e-mail: [HFHAcademy@HamiltonsFuneralHome.com](mailto:HFHAcademy@HamiltonsFuneralHome.com).*