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The Comforting Capacity of Books - Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma

by Tracy Larson and Aisha White (https://www.oed.pitt.edu/)

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Donate Books
to children of Squirrel Hill community

(<http://bit.ly/BookDrivePGH>)

Stop by the Office of Child Development's HealthyCHILD (HC) office any day of the week during the school year and you will likely find empty space. If your visit is in the spring or fall, you'll also find the P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education) team out and about, offering learning sessions for parents. Both of these teams travel all over the city of Pittsburgh to provide their programming. HealthyCHILD helps early educators and families build their capacity to promote children's social-emotional wellness. P.R.I.D.E. helps parents build the knowledge and skills they need to help their children develop positive attitudes about their skin color, history, and people.

Although providing guidance to adults about how to help children cope with trauma and feel valued, acknowledged and accepted is nothing new for HC and Parent Village staff, responding after the tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue has been difficult. Understandably, like most of you, we are experiencing heavy emotions after hearing about the senseless loss of so many lives. In an effort to help, we have been working closely with Pittsburgh teachers, children, and families to process emotions, identify coping strategies and provide guidance on how adults can help young children. As a parent/guardian or teacher, you may be wondering, "what can I do to help?"

Families and teachers play an important part in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and security for children after an act of violence occurs. Even though most teachers and parents/guardians do not have skills to provide therapy, teachers and parents can create a space where children feel safe and secure. One way they can do that is by using books to help children learn about and understand frightening experiences and cope with their own feelings of anxiety or fear. Storytelling and reading have long been recognized for their therapeutic potential.

P.R.I.D.E.'s Parent Village program regularly provides books for African American parents that help their children feel good about all aspects of themselves. HealthyCHILD regularly provides and utilizes books to build children's social-emotional skills and help start conversations around tough topics and during scary times. We do this because we understand the ways books can support children's positive identity and social-emotional development. Below is a list of books parents and teachers may want to consider reading to help young children cope with trauma, anxiety, and loss.

Dealing with death

- Tess's Tree, by Jess Brallier
- Badger's Parting Gifts, by Susan Varley
- The Scar, by Charlotte Moundlic
- My Yellow Balloon, by Tiffany Papageorge

Separation

- The Invisible String, by Patrice Karst
- Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me, by Daniel Beaty

Emotions and Fear

- When I Feel Sad, by Cornelia Maude Spelman
- Scaredy Squirrel, by Melanie Watt
- Only One You, by Linda Kranz
- The Heart and the Bottle, by Oliver Jeffers

Violent and Traumatic Experiences

- A Terrible Thing Happened, by Margaret M. Holmes

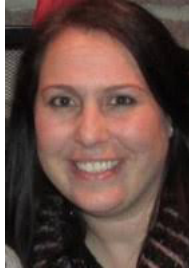
Tips for reading books with children:

Suggestions for everyday read-alouds also apply to reading during trying times. For example, adults should prepare a comfy area, preview and introduce the book, involve children, and respond to questions. While the mere act of reading to a child helps them feel safer, **how** we read aloud during troubling times is even more important in helping children feel secure. If you're reading to one or two children, take them on your lap or let them lean against one another. This can make reading time a moment for hugging and cuddling – the combination of your voice and your hug will help them feel loved and secure. Additionally, even when the world is scary, a young child can find security in a parent or teacher's voice and embrace. Allowing time for lots of questions is even more important during these times, even if it means you don't finish the story – what's most significant is that children are able to ask and, when possible, get answers to their questions.

Important guidelines for talking with children about tragedy:

- If children are unaware of the tragic event, it should not be brought up.
- Some children and adults chose not to talk about the incident at all. Children should not be forced into talking about the incident.
- If children are aware of the incident and want to talk about it, let them talk about it.
- Communicate with children on their level of understanding. Give them only information that they need or want to know and keep the answers simple and brief. Do not be afraid to say you do not know an answer.
- It is perfectly normal and ok to express feelings. Expressing and showing feelings to children allows them to understand that it is ok to express their emotions.
- When children express emotions, ask them to use words to describe how they feel and why, ask them to draw pictures to show you, reassure them that all feelings are ok.

Important Note: When tragedy occurs, children may experience fears, changes in sleeping or eating and may become withdrawn or act out behaviorally. If these signs continue and adults are worried about how a child is reacting, they should contact the child's pediatrician or a mental health professional.



(<http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=59&staffMemberID=84&appendToBreadCrumbs=Tracy%20Larson>) From the School of Education's Office of Child Development (<https://www.ocd.pitt.edu/>), Tracy Larson (<http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=59&staffMemberID=84&appendToBreadCrumbs=Tracy%20Larson>) works as the Director of Early Childhood Partnerships and HealthyCHILD, while Aisha White (<https://www.racepride.pitt.edu/our-staff/aisha-white/>) is the Director of the Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E.) Program. HealthyCHILD helps early educators and families build their capacity to promote children's social-emotional wellness with P.R.I.D.E. aiming to help parents build the knowledge and skills they need to help their

children develop positive attitudes about their skin color, history, and people.

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