

CHILDREN VICTIMS OF DISASTER – THEIR NEED FOR SPECIAL PROTECTION*

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Children are inevitably faced with stress-for the child, birth is stressful, the slightest runny nose or elevation in temperature is stressful, not being given a particular toy at any given time is stressful. Stress in normal life is ordinary for the child and is mitigated ordinarily by loving parents, relatives, caregivers, doctors. The topic of this session is stress that is not at all ordinary. It is the stress caused by "difficult circumstances", by war, by natural disasters, by pestilence, by famine, by abuse, by sexual abuse, by exploitation, economic and otherwise. Children attempting to survive under "difficult circumstances" need special protection commensurate with the particular conditions that cause the stress. In this presentation I shall dwell upon the child victims of disasters and the stress they undergo as a result.

As many of us are aware, the concept of special Protective Measures was developed by a Committee on the Rights of the Child, in order to provide guidance for those states party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was in response to the plight of children in circumstances of war and other forms of large scale violence, of exploitation and sexual and other abuse, of detention and imprisonment, as well as to harmful and disabling exploitative child labor and for children separated from parents and family by circumstance.

The identification and assessment of potentially harmful situations form the basis of the design for appropriate basic services and protective measures for children at risk.

For those children already exposed to conditions potentially harmful to their development and well-being, special measures that can alleviate, if not compensate for, the harm already done to them need to be taken, together with the provision of access to basic services and overall protection and security.

Victims of Violence

Violence has always been and always will remain an important factor among the causes of stress in children. It is a matter of fact that violence seems to become more pervasive as the level of economic development decreases. This

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ratio seems to be global. The violence referred to here is not that which the child is prey to outside the home. Most often, an infinitely sad causal chain of victimization can be perceived among the perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a much greater source of stress for the child than the violence it perceives outside the home, stressful as that may be. The aggressor within the home is usually either a parent or a close caregiver, known intimately by the child and upon whom the child is dependent for security and "protection" as well as for love. The immediate effect for the child is chaos, a loss of its sheet anchor. Thus begins the perilous drifting, without trust, without security, with at best a "dangerous" love. The child swiftly learns to repress its natural curiosity, its affection, its natural reactions. And the symptoms of post, traumatic stress disorder appear.

For the parents, themselves more often than not victims of childhood abuse, the reactions of their children are not seen for the depression and/or stress-induced neurosis they usually are, but as signs of sullenness or worse still, of "being spoilt". It is essential for the therapist to explain and ensure the parents', caretaker's or teacher's cooperation, as the case may be. The therapist and/or clinician must take into account the special features of each case accordingly. A complex interactive model of disaster-related child psychopathology needs to be constructed if one hopes to achieve the emergence of a stable personality after the disaster.

Victims of Economic Exploitation

The child victims of economic exploitation need special protection. As with domestic violence, there seems to be a positive correlation between lack of economic development and the pervasiveness of child labor. It is important to emphasize however, that one is not referring here to the ordinary after-school jobs children do in order to augment their pocket money, but to the relentless drudgery children are subjected to in menial, exhausting tasks that are more reminiscent of slavery than anything a civilized society should allow.

This form of in human labor at young ages has dire consequences for the child, both physically and mentally. Their young bodies, usually already malnourished, exhausted by long hours of work, are even less resistant to disease. Carrying heavy loads leads to deformed bones, and the general lack of hope for change leads to a deformed view of existence, of life.

UNICEF and the ILO are seeking to eliminate child labor in the garment industry in India, and in order to provide those children with educational opportunities currently denied them, have jointly launched a series of programs. These include educational grants and family allowances to compensate for the income lost to the family by the removal of the child from the work force.

These efforts by the international community are welcome and deeply appreciated. However, the problem posed by child labor and even more deplorably, by child homelessness, is vast and in dire need of increased world awareness.

Victims of Sexual Abuse

The sexual abuse and exploitation of children is a worldwide phenomenon that unfortunately knows no economic or cultural boundaries. The fact that it is more widespread and blatantly commercial in economically less privileged countries should not blind us to the pervasiveness of the evil.

The World Congress Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children, which gathered together representatives of more than 122 states as well as the representatives of more than 400 NGOs and a large number of intergovernmental organizations, was the culmination of a global mobilization against the commercial sexual exploitation of children initiated by the End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) campaign.

The World Congress is but a beginning, albeit an important and essential one, yet the road ahead is long and, due to the extreme nature of the problem, very arduous. No one can allow himself to flag in the effort to eradicate this most evil phenomenon.

Victims of Natural Disasters

Earthquakes, fires, floods and other natural disasters are among the factors that traumatize children as well. The symptoms of this form of trauma are not in essence different. All the elements of post traumatic stress disorder manifest themselves. A growing body of literature addresses this form of psychopathology resulting from natural disasters; these studies note that children afflicted by natural disasters exhibit such typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as anxiety, aggression and regressive behavior.

Victims of Armed Conflict

Of all the horrors that humankind is heir to, war is arguably the worst. It is invariably man-made, and therefore should be avoidable. A multitude of wars of every description are being waged all over the globe at present. Children are the innocent victims of bilateral, multilateral, civil, guerrilla and ethnic warfare: children come directly under fire; must bear arms willy-nilly; and are the victims of torture, maiming and brainwashing. Children are the helpless spectators of the death, injury or defeat of their parents, the hapless part and parcel of endless migrations caused by the necessity of fleeing death and destruction. It is self-evident that the physical survival of children must have absolute priority. Yet, a great deal of attention needs to be given to the emotional well-being of these children in order to avoid the many appalling psychological problems they face, as well as to break the spiral of violence that festering emotional wounds are known to cause from one generation to the next.

In the climate of violence and fear that wars bring about, some families manage to protect their children from the worst emotional damage that war causes. Many, if not most, however, are physically incapable of doing so or they are so overwhelmed by events that they are themselves in dire need of care and protection. The same applies to the community. Some communities manage to harbor their children against the rigors of war. Others, themselves exhausted, can do little. It is then up to the national and local governments, civil sectors and the international community to provide succor.

In the very short term it is of course a human and moral imperative to help child victims of war in every possible way. For those of us who wish to see war obliterated from the face of the earth, however, it may well be the height of rational self-interest, in the long-term, to invest and invest heavily in the moral and emotional well-being of the children of war, in order to eradicate as much as possible the impulses to violence and aggression implanted in them by their experiences.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force on September 2 1990, gives both ethical and political legitimacy to direct involvement by the international community in the protection of the rights of children in zones of conflict.

How this is to be done is a question that requires careful consideration both of war-induced traumas and of their avoidance where possible.

Recent research concerning very diverse theatres of war, from the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina, to Lebanon, Central America, Mozambique and South Africa, indicates that the war-related experiences of children are multifarious and that their effects can continue over considerable periods of time.

Research conducted into the experiences of children during the war in Lebanon (1988) showed that, on average, a Lebanese child was subject to five or six different types of traumatic experience during its lifetime. These can be summarized according to a scale of frequency as: exposure to shelling and combat, 90%; displacement, 54%; seeing the injury, torture, death or intimidation of a person or persons close to it, 50%. The children of Iraq and Kuwait during the Gulf War were exposed to similar horrors, at similar frequency. In Mozambique, however, children were even more directly involved in the war as victims of abuse, torture, kidnapping and subsequent brainwashing, and by being forced to become soldiers trained to kill.

In the name of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia children have been forced to assimilate or have simply been murdered. No one yet knows the full toll that the wars in the former Yugoslavia have taken. One relatively small yet potent tragedy concerns the children born of rape. Unwanted by their mothers or their mothers' families,

unknown and unsought by their fathers, these totally innocent children were victims of war even before being born and many are condemned to an institutionalized childhood.

Similarly, children growing up in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, forced to grow up amid constant political, ethnic and religious tension, to say nothing of economic, social and educational discrimination, who have often witnessed their homes being bulldozed, cannot be expected to become future model citizens. Innocent Azeri child victims of the 1992 Armenian invasion in Hodjali (Xocalı) in Karabagh who survived the massacre are subject to all kinds of stress secondary to their difficult circumstances.

Whatever may cause the trauma, the effect on children is remarkably similar when they are studied by age group. On the level of immediate reaction there may quite often be signs of regression, taking the form of habitual bed-wetting, a refusal to become toilet trained, regression of speech patterns. Disturbed sleep and nightmares become the norm among many; other widespread symptoms include short attention spans, inability to concentrate on anything for any period of time, learning disabilities where there had been none before, re-enactment games constantly played and replayed, brief states of hyperactivity followed by periods of lethargy, detachment and at times avoidance of adults, even those nearest to the child before the trauma.

In developmental terms the child feels itself doubly, sometimes trebly, betrayed by the adults closest and dearest to it. In the first instance, the closest adults have not "protected" it from the trauma; in the second, the adult has "betrayed" the child by causing the trauma, by being himself a victim, or worse, by dying and leaving the child quite bereft; and third, by behaving in ways totally incommensurate to the moral dicta previously inculcated into the child. Thus, the whole system of role models falls into disarray and with it the moral development of the child may sometimes be forever interrupted.

The total chaos war creates and the disruption of normal patterns of cause and effect and of the laws of probability reduce the adults' belief in reason. The child sometimes ends up having chaos in all its dimensions as the only recognizable reality it possesses. Under these circumstances of utter randomness a child's reactions, ranging from total nihilism to total altruism are equally logical, as would be its belief in a number of supernatural entities and irrational sequences. Given these factors it is not easy to predict whether a child will turn into a psychopath or a saint. Thus the mitigating and the remedial factors in the child's immediate and wider environment, as well as its own development, need to be taken into account in order to render the child more resilient.

In general it seems that certain forms of parenting and rearing, involvement of the community, the degree to which personal identity has developed in the child, how well the notion of self has developed, and a strong bonding with the parent,

most significantly the mother, all seem to be important factors in the degree to which children can tolerate the trauma they face daily during war time.

In conclusion, providing protection for child victims of disaster, shielding children adequately and appropriately from the multitude of disasters that they may face, is not an easy task. But what renders us human is our constant attempt to achieve the impossible. Therefore we must continue to struggle to render the world a better place... possible only through the health and happiness of all our children.