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Understanding Post-traumatic Stress in Children by Robert Needlman, M.D., F.A.A.P.

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., have exposed everyone in the country to a great deal of emotional stress. Such horrifying events can, in some people, lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly referred to as PTSD.

Not everyone who has experienced a traumatic event develops PTSD, but it will be a sad reality for many of the people who were directly affected by the recent devastation through the loss of a loved one, because they witnessed the events, or because they live near the scenes of the attacks. And even those who only saw the destruction on TV may exhibit some symptoms. Here are some details about the disorder that can help you to know if your child has developed this serious problem or is at high risk of doing so.

- **What is PTSD?** PTSD is an emotional and behavioral response to severe stress, something beyond the scope of life's everyday stresses. Key features of PTSD include generally heightened fear or anxiety and specific unwanted memories of the stressful event that may seem so lifelike that the person feels as if she is reliving the event over and over. These memories may be triggered by sounds, sights, or smells (episodes that commonly are called flashbacks), or may come in the form of nightmares.

People with PTSD try to avoid things that will bring back such memories, an effort that often severely restricts their daily activities. Other symptoms include a numbing of regular emotions (happiness, for example) or, in the case of children, a loss of interest in their usual play.

- **PTSD in children.** Because children express themselves in their play, one of the primary symptoms of PTSD in children is repetitive, compulsive play that reenacts the traumatic event. For example, a child who has been traumatized by witnessing violence between his parents may act out violent scenes between dolls for hours at a time. The difference between this play and normal play is that the latter has more variety. Even if there are violent themes in the play, the child himself is joyful; children with PTSD, by contrast, are usually very somber in their play. They are not really having fun.
- **Who is at risk?** Children at risk may have been exposed to natural disasters, such as earthquakes, or to man-made horrors, such as the recent terrorist violence. Among the largest group of children with PTSD are those exposed to frequent, severe violence in their communities or homes. In particular, children who have witnessed severe violence between their parents often develop PTSD symptoms.

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A child who has a history of anxiety, such as a strong fear of separation from parents or frequent missed school days because of vague physical complaints without apparent medical cause, may be more at risk for developing PTSD symptoms when exposed to traumatic events. This exposure can happen either directly or indirectly via television. If there is a history of anxiety problems in the family--for example, a parent with panic disorder or other anxiety diagnosis--the risk of PTSD for a child is greater.

- **Preventing PTSD.** Most often, the traumatic events that trigger PTSD are not easily prevented. But parents can shield their children from violent images in movies and on television that can trigger PTSD-like symptoms in those who are susceptible. However, even if you think Hollywood's make-believe violence is more entertaining than frightening, it's still a good idea to limit your children's exposure to the very real images of the recent terrorist violence.
- **Treatment for PTSD.** Treatment for PTSD generally requires a collaboration with psychiatrists and therapists. Play and talk therapies are both useful, and medication can help control some of the symptoms. Treatments for children often are quite different from treatments for adults, so it is especially important that both the therapist and the doctor have experience working with children.

Find more information online:

<http://www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,677,00.html>

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