Post-Traumatic Stress Reactions in Children

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Surprisingly, far less is known of the manifestations of post-traumatic stress reactions in children than in adults. Research over the past 10 years has begun to describe phenomena very similar to PTSD in adults, particularly among young adolescents. This paper will briefly review recent research and will describe our own experiences working with children who survived the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry disaster. Attention will be paid not only to the reactions of the children, but also to the reactions of their families, and to problems experienced subsequently at school. An account will be given of two therapeutic groups run in parallel for children and parents. It is concluded that children, at least in the 8- to 16-year age range, show problems very similar to adult PTSD, but that these will not be picked up by commonly used screening instruments.

KEY WORDS: post-traumatic stress; children; disaster; Herald of Free Enterprise capsize.

INTRODUCTION

Much less is known of the manifestations of post-traumatic stress reactions in children than in adults. In part, this is because of the difficulty in mounting adequate studies in the immediate aftermath of a disaster; in part, it is because adults are understandably very protective toward children who have survived a disaster; and in part, it is because adults, unwilling to acknowledge what children may have suffered, deny that children have major psychological sequelae that warrant investigation. Thus, there are very few

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systematic studies of the effects of major trauma on children, and most of
the published ones suffer major methodological weaknesses (Garmezy,
1986).

Garmezy and Rutter (1985) sum up the distilled wisdom from published
studies. Regarding the effects of a variety of stressors on children, they con-
clude that, "... behavioural disturbances appear to be less intense than might
have been anticipated; a majority of children show a moderate amount of
fear and anxiety but this subsides; regressive behaviour marked by clinging to
parents and heightened dependency on adults appears and then moderately
mild sleep disturbance persists for several months; a later less severe stressor
such as a storm may lead to a temporary increase in emotional distress, al-
though this is variable; enuresis occurs in some cases, while hypersensitivity
to loud noises may be evident in others" (Garmezy and Rutter, 1985, p.
162). In their view, severe acute stressors such as occur in major disasters re-
sult in socially handicapping emotional disorders in some children, but in
the majority of those cases, the disturbances are short lived. Because chil-
dren tend not to show amnesia for the event, nor to show "psychic
numbing" or intrusive flashbacks, they argue that there is no need for a spe-
cific diagnostic category for stress reactions in children parallel to PTSD in
adults.

While these conclusions fit reasonably with the bulk of the evidence
surveyed, the difficulty is that the studies themselves have rarely dealt with
the aftermath of major disasters in which the children have been exposed to
life threatening factors. For example, Handford et al. (1986) carried out a
detailed study of 35 children aged 5 to 19 years 1 ½ years after the Three
Mile Island nuclear accident. This study is important in establishing that
parents under-report the extent and severity of their children's reactions and
in demonstrating that the widely used Quay and Peterson (1979) Behavior
Problem Checklist completed by parents is insensitive to the children's reac-
tions. However, it must be seriously questioned whether this is really a study
of the effects of a major disaster in that, as the authors put it, Three Mile Is-
land was a silent disaster with no apparent physical damage to people or
property, and the children were not separated from their parents during the
time of the evacuation that some of them experienced.

Galante and Foa (1986) undertook a very impressive study of children
badly traumatized by the massive earthquakes in a remote mountainous re-
gion of central Italy in November 1980. Many thousands of people were
killed and many more made homeless. As part of a coordinated response to
dealing with the tragedy, Galante and Foa set up treatment groups for the
children. Before the groups started, 300 first to fourth grade children were
rated on an Italian translation of the Rutter (1967) behavior rating scale for
completion by teachers. Detailed notes were taken of the content of discus-