
Healing Your Traumatized Child

ALSO BY ALETHA J. SOLTER, PH.D.

The Aware Baby

Tears and Tantrums

Raising Drug-Free Kids

Attachment Play

Cooperative and Connected

Healing Your Traumatized Child

A Parent's Guide to
Children's Natural Recovery Processes

Aletha J. Solter, PH.D.

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*This book is dedicated to all the traumatized children
in the world in the hope that they will receive
the support they need in order to heal.*

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Warning/Disclaimer

As an educational resource for parents, this book offers information about identifying symptoms of trauma in children and recognizing their attempts to recover. It also offers suggestions for facilitating their natural healing mechanisms. These suggestions may not be appropriate for children suffering from certain physical, emotional, or behavioral problems. This book is not intended to replace psychotherapy or medical help from competent professionals. If your child is suffering from physical, emotional, or behavioral problems, it is recommended that you obtain professional advice and treatment.

The mention of specific therapies in this book is for informational purposes only and does not entail endorsement by the author. Some forms of therapy can be dangerous if carried out by improperly trained practitioners, and some therapies can cause symptoms to worsen. If you are considering choosing a therapist for yourself or your child, it is important to carefully review the therapist's credentials and references. Some traumas can overwhelm children and families, and the suggestions in this book may be inappropriate or insufficient to help children recover, especially in cases of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, medical trauma, the death of a family member, natural disasters, and terrorism or war.

The author and publisher offer no guarantee for the effectiveness of the suggestions in this book, and they shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person or entity with respect to any damage caused, or alleged to be caused, directly or indirectly by the information contained in this book.

Healing Your Traumatized Child

Introduction

My personal experience with trauma

When I was five years old, a strange man entered my bedroom, wrapped me in a white sheet, and carried me out of my home into a waiting ambulance. I needed to be hospitalized because of an infectious illness, and no visitors were allowed during my nine-day hospital stay. I remember this experience with vivid detail. The nurses who brought me food and medicine were my only sources of social interaction, and most of the time I was left alone. I didn't experience much physical pain or discomfort, only pervasive feelings of anxiety, loneliness, boredom, and abandonment. I had picture books and craft activities, but I had nobody to talk to or play with. One evening, a friendly nurse told me a bedtime story about a sheep, and this stands out in my memory as a rare moment of connection.

While riding home from the hospital in the car with my family, my curious eight-year-old brother kept asking me questions about the hospital, but I refused to answer him. In fact, I remained mute for the rest of the day. I remember feeling totally disconnected from my family, almost as if they were strangers. By the following morning, I appeared to have returned to my usual self. However, I suffered from later posttraumatic symptoms.

This separation trauma had a major impact on me. During my entire childhood, I had a recurring nightmare of trying to use a telephone to call for help, but the telephone never worked properly,

and I couldn't reach anybody. This dream always left me feeling powerless and abandoned. At the age of ten, I had chronic anxiety that my mother was going to die. This fear was triggered by the fact that she had recently begun studying for a master's degree, and her university class schedule prevented her from welcoming me home every day when I returned from school. My two older siblings were home, so I was not alone, but I missed my mother. Whenever she arrived a few minutes later than she had promised, I was convinced that she had been killed in a car accident. (My mother lived a long and healthy life well into her nineties!) Later, when I fell in love with my future husband, I felt frightened that he was going to die, and I had nightmares of being separated from him. Another impact of this experience was a fear of hospitals. I felt terrified whenever I needed to be in a hospital because of illness or surgery.

My parents were loving and attentive, but they didn't know how to help me heal from this trauma. In fact, nobody suspected at that time that such an experience could be traumatic for a child. If my parents had implemented the information in this book, I would probably not have suffered from nightmares, separation anxiety, or hospital phobia later on. Luckily, I was able to heal from this early traumatic separation through therapy as an adult, and I no longer suffer from the effects of this experience.

This hospital experience at five years of age sparked my interest in childhood trauma. As an adult, I felt motivated to help parents become aware of the impact of trauma and learn ways to support their children's healing process.

Scope of the book

The purpose of this book is to describe the impact of trauma on children and to help parents recognize and facilitate children's natural healing mechanisms. Childhood trauma can have lifelong consequences. It is now recognized as a major contributor to adult depression, anxiety, substance abuse, violence, mental illness, and even some physical illnesses. The behavioral and emotional effects

of trauma often become evident early on. Aggressive, uncooperative, anxious, hyperactive, or inattentive behavior in children can be an indication of unhealed trauma. In fact, trauma-informed psychiatrists now consider childhood trauma such as abuse or neglect to be a major contributor to childhood psychiatric diagnoses.

Children are born with the ability to heal from the effects of traumatic experiences. They know how to recover and will do so spontaneously, but only if certain conditions are met. The basic requirement for healing is connection with a loving, trusted adult who helps them feel safe and who allows them to do what their bodies are biologically designed to do. Loving parents are uniquely qualified to help their children heal from trauma because parents are usually their children's primary attachment figures.

I have developed a trauma-informed approach to parenting (Aware Parenting), which is both preventive and reparative. It includes information for preventing trauma and also for helping children recover from trauma if it should occur. Three basic aspects summarize the Aware Parenting approach: how to meet children's attachment needs, how to solve behavior problems without the use of punishments or rewards (non-punitive discipline), and how to help children heal from stress and trauma. My other books cover these three aspects and offer much practical advice. The purpose of this book is to give parents practical tips for helping their children recover from trauma and also to explain more about the theory underlying the Aware Parenting approach to emotional healing. It is not necessary to read my other books in order to benefit from this one. However, if you want more practical advice for implementing all three aspects of the Aware Parenting approach, you will find answers in my other books.

This book focuses on the ways in which children (from birth to age twelve) can heal from specific traumatic events in the context of everyday life with their own parents acting as guides through the healing process. These traumas can range from a bee sting to a sudden death in the family. However, this book is not meant to replace medical advice or professional therapy. Children who have

disturbing symptoms or have experienced complex trauma such as ongoing sexual or physical abuse, neglect, or domestic violence may need help that is beyond the scope of this book.

Even with loving and attentive parents, children can experience frightening or painful events, such as accidents or playground bullying, which leave them feeling traumatized and vulnerable. If your child has been traumatized, this book will help you recognize and facilitate your child's natural healing mechanisms. When children have been hurt or frightened, their behavior will indicate whether or not they have been traumatized and need support in order to recover. Unfortunately, children's symptoms of trauma and their attempts to heal are often misunderstood or considered misbehavior. You may have been led to believe that some of your child's posttraumatic behaviors or recovery efforts should be discouraged, ignored, or even punished. However, with information and support, you can learn to identify and understand your children's symptoms and behavior and effectively help them heal from trauma.

In the past, parents were advised to avoid talking about traumatic events with children because of a mistaken belief that children would forget about them if they were never mentioned. The assumption was that children would recover on their own with time, and there was very little understanding of children's need for emotional support. For example, adults told children, "Don't cry. Your mother has gone to heaven," and expected them to adapt to the tragedy of their mother's death. Physical injuries usually heal on their own with time. Unfortunately, however, time alone does not heal the emotional wounds caused by trauma. Children are born knowing how to recover, but they need support and help in order to do so.

The healing processes described in this book differ considerably from encouraging children to forget about traumatic events or to simply calm down. Healing from trauma is an active process. It involves gradually assimilating and integrating the experience by processing the emotions and completing the survival behaviors that were blocked or ineffective during the event. In this way, children

can decrease the emotional charge associated with their memories of traumatic events. Traumatic experiences will always remain a part of a child's life story, but it's possible for children to release the tension in their bodies and transform their memories so that the experiences don't lead to lifelong posttraumatic symptoms.

If the traumatic event has affected you as well (such a death in the family), you will need all the support you can find. Even if the trauma has not impacted you directly, it's only natural to feel worried, upset, helpless, guilty, or angry when your child has been traumatized and is struggling to cope. If you suffer from your own unhealed trauma or from depression, anxiety, or illness, you may find it especially difficult to implement the suggestions in this book. Stress from financial problems, relationship difficulties, or social isolation can further limit your confidence and effectiveness. Please be gentle with yourself and look for sources of support as your family strives for emotional health. Don't hesitate to seek professional therapy for yourself or your children, and remember that healing takes time.