

# The Post-Traumatic Gazette No. 31

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## PTSD and Parenting

If you are a parent or planning to become one, it is important to observe yourself honestly and think about how you would like to parent. Kids are not toys or possessions. Quite often they are not even much fun. Our society is entirely unsupportive of parenting (low-paying jobs with no benefits and no reliable childcare system), just as it is of trauma survivors. PTSD impacts parenting in many ways.

Traumatic childhood experiences may cause survivors to lack empathy because they don't think childhood events hurt them. (This is emotional numbing by the way, not proof that it didn't hurt you.) Survivors may think they are toughening up a child so he or she won't be hurt by life. Some survivors traumatize their children through "physical discipline" because their own experiences made them so numb they can't tell how damaging it is.

We know that interpersonal violence is traumatic for children. We also know that witnessing or experiencing blows makes kids more violent and aggressive. People who spank kids are in a sad Catch-22 situation. They may have hit and yelled at the kids to the point that it means nothing to them while making them ever more needy, aggressive, hyperactive and violent.

Survivors may also be trying to make up for what they didn't get so they may be overly-protective and/or permissive. Sometimes permissiveness shades into denial because it is easier to be permissive and deny the problems it causes, whether it is the problem of not knowing how to earn money or the problem of not acknowledging that some behavior is a signal that something is wrong (violence, premature sexuality, setting fires, etc.). If you feel unsure about how to protect your kids, Gavin de Becker's book *Protecting the Gift* gives very good guidelines.

Survivors may try to get parenting from their kids to make up for what they didn't get. This reversal is damaging to kids.

Survivors may find themselves feeling jealous of small children who are being raised in loving, healthy ways. They are usually ashamed of the feeling, but it really hurts to be in the presence of child-centered good parenting when you didn't receive it yourself. Jealousy that is not acknowledged or identified often comes out as anger, so it is good to be aware that jealousy is a normal response and doesn't have to be denied. It doesn't have to be acted out either.

Children are by nature valuable, vulnerable, imperfect, needy and self-centered. They are made that way. Learning the stages of development, what children need at each age, and how to supply what they need to help them learn and grow and develop self-control, etc., is the job of parenting.

Pia Mellody's *Facing Codependence*, or Steven Farmer's *Adult Children of Abusive Parents* are two insightful books. Many of us grew up in families where children were "a pain," crying got you "something to cry about," where you acted right "or else," where needs were met with shaming and blaming, and where the child was expected to meet the parents needs, either by being perfect, or by being bad so the parent has someone handy to hit. No stages of development were acknowledged or understood. If this is the case, resources for parenting include any of T. Berry Brazleton's books on child development, *Bringing Up a Moral Child* by Michael Schulman and Eva Mekler and *Self-Esteem, A Family Affair* by Jean Illsey Clarke, among others. There are classes on parenting, too. Avoid those that imply if you are just stern enough, you can have perfect kids. Kids are not meant to be perfect.

People who were not allowed to be children may find the sound of a child's talking, laughter or misbehavior fills them with rage. This is evidence, not that kids should be seen and not heard, but that the survivor was punished for normal childhood behavior. Nothing is sadder than a perfectly-behaved parentified little child. Being overcontrolled is very hard on the child.

I used to get really angry when kids interrupted grownups. After I got into recovery, I saw that the level of my anger meant something was from a different time zone. I felt a lot of repressed pain at having been scolded for interrupting. Now I notice that children who interrupt are often rudely

ignored until, driven to distraction, the parent yells “Don’t interrupt,” (which hardly teaches politeness). Saying, “Dear, when I am talking to someone else, please say ‘excuse me,’ if you want to talk to me,” would probably be more effective and less shaming.

If you find yourself really angry at a particular kind of behavior, trace it back and you may find a way to feel and heal your own painful childhood experiences.

PTSD symptoms may make parenting difficult. For instance, emotional numbing, which enables you to survive traumatic situations, may also make you unable to empathize with the pains of childhood, depriving your children of the support they need in normal developmental tasks. If you don’t see the point of planning for tomorrow, your children may live in chaos, without the stability they need, and they may not learn the skills they need to make a budget, train for a well-rewarded occupation, or even get along with those they love. Avoidance behavior may also disrupt child-rearing. The sounds of childhood may trigger memories in survivors of childhood trauma. Many veterans also have difficulty with babies crying or hurt children because of combat experiences. Not being able to stand crowds, games, and so forth may leave your kid feeling left out.

Hypervigilance and arousal patterns may cause eruptions of anger. Irritability is compounded by lack of sleep. You may be unable to give the child attention because it is a form of concentration, and you can’t concentrate. Hypervigilance may make you overprotective or constantly intrusive. An exaggerated startle response can turn a well-meant leap onto your lap into an episode of violence.

A parent re-experiencing in the form of nightmares and flashbacks is terrifying to kids. Reenacting, a form of reexperiencing means you might without meaning to, create situations like the ones in your past.

### **What helps?**

**1. You don’t have to be perfect.** I think this is the hardest lesson to learn in parenting and the most important. You won’t be perfect! You can’t be perfect! You are a human being. That doesn’t mean give up, it means do your best and find help if you need it.

### **2. If you make a mistake:**

**Take responsibility.** When you make a mistake like blowing up or being overly-protective or buying your kid something you always wanted

that the kid hates, acknowledge what is going on. Use “I” statements (I wanted this so I thought you’d like it) not “you” statements (You ungrateful brat). Don’t guilt trip.

**Explain.** Kids usually think they cause everything around them. They have “magical thinking” until they get older. “I was mad at Daddy so he died.” If your PTSD causes some disruption, tell them what is going on with you in simple language. Make sure they do not feel like they have the power to ruin your life by being a kid. Remember you do have the power to cause them great distress and future problems if you blame them for your PTSD symptoms. Put the blame where it belongs, on your traumatic experiences, and get help.

**Apologize.** If you do something that scares or hurts your kid, or was unjust, apologize. Think of how much it would mean to you to hear the people who hurt you say they were wrong and they were sorry. What you did may be nothing like what you went through, but it may be pretty scary or upsetting to this little person here in front of you. Be a grownup. Apologize.

**3. Seek help and support.** In #26 Inventory, I interviewed my friend W., who takes parenting classes with a therapist who not only gives her information but also demonstrates things like how to talk to a baby. This can be invaluable if you don’t have memories of how you were treated. (You may have body memories that come up as rushes of fear or rage, but that’s not what we want!). If there isn’t a therapist, you can read books, join a play group or mom’s group or dad’s group, and observe other mothers and fathers, ask your friends whose children you like, look on the internet, and/or ask your doctor or minister.

#### **4. Educate yourself.**

Much is known about the stages children go through, but new material is being learned all the time. I just read that a suddenly fussy baby may be preparing for a growth spurt, and spurts can be almost an inch in a day (measured!). If you take it personally, thinking you are doing something wrong, it is a lot more upsetting than if you know it might just be a growth spurt. Knowledge is power. It is also a relief sometimes!

I look back on my own parenting mistakes and wish I had had some of the information available today. I did my best then, but I would do it differently today, and I have told my son that and told him I was sorry. It is a

very freeing experience, to admit past mistakes and be open to new learning. Try it. You'll like it!

You do have a right to your own parenting style. I hope you will make it a kind, caring, considerate and effective one.

If you have already parented your kids in dysfunctional ways, saying so can go a long way towards healing your relationships.

## *Children Changed by Trauma*

Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.

Between this book, and *Risking Connection*, I've been having a treat this month! So much good information out there on dealing with childhood trauma.

*Children Changed by Trauma* is written to help parents deal with recently traumatized kids. It discusses normal reactions to trauma, using examples of kids traumatized in various ways, and presents an attitude of respect and understanding which would also make it a valuable resource for any adult survivors who have difficulty understanding why they aren't over it yet.

Children are strongly affected by trauma. Some become aggressive, some develop paralyzing fears, some seem not to care while struggling with thoughts and images they can't reveal, some get into power struggles with their parents or other authority figures. All kids need help and compassion to get through the after-effects of trauma. This book offers a wide variety of ideas and is written with compassion and flexibility. Here each child and parent can find ways of healing that suit them. This is one of my main concerns, that there are no one-size-fits-all treatments for survivors of trauma, so I can recommend this book without reservation.

Part One is divided into 8 chapters on Facilitating Your Child's Healing: Healing the Heart, Healing the Mind, Healing the Body, Healing the Soul, Healing through Grieving, Healing through Humor, Healing through Parenting, and Healing is an Everyday Miracle.

Part II is How You Can Help: A Guide for Nonparental Adults with a chapter for friends and relatives and one for teachers and therapists.

As an example of the author's wonderful attitude, the chapter for family and friends says, "Traumatized children are forced into pain they weren't prepared for. If you can help them feel less alone and better understood, you can significantly change the course of their distress. Listen to what your loved ones say they need and respect their wishes. When in doubt, just ask." This is followed by a list of examples of how to do this and ways to assist (be realistic, be supportive, be available, be a diversion, be an advocate, be respectful, and be yourself), followed by examples.

In the chapter "Healing through Grieving" she offers the following advice about choosing a therapist for your child:

It is important to involve children and hear about their ideas and wishes, but be careful not to let them make the decision for you. A child of any age cannot always be expected to know what help he or she needs...

Seek out a caring child therapist who has special training in trauma work... Choose someone who will consult with you first and answer any questions you may have. Most importantly, trust your feelings about whether or not this is someone you feel will care for your child in a loving and respectful manner...

Placing your child in the hands of another adult, allowing them to care for deep personal wounds, may cause you to feel tremendous loss and inadequacy...

Letting go and asking for help is an opportunity to show your child the value in asking for help. It is an opportunity to teach your child the wisdom in recognizing and accepting your own limitations.

Your children need you to be their parent. Focus on that role. Try letting another loving and concerned adult help you in a professional capacity. [108- 109]

In this chapter she discusses how kids who seem "fine" after a trauma are often not fine, but utterly unable to deal with what has happened so they simply deny it, act as if it hasn't happened, while struggling with images, fears and nightmares which they can not reveal to anyone.

In “Healing through Parenting,” Dr Alexander discusses **Attitudes That Promote Healing** which include:

- unconditional acceptance (even if they make mistakes or misbehave as traumatized kids often do)
- flexible (as opposed to rigid)
- creative
- supportive
- compassionate

She also mentions that this is hard work, sometimes thankless, tiring and full of lows as well as great moments. So she adds acceptance for the exhaustion parenting can bring. If exhaustion causes you to become abusive, she suggests seeking help immediately. Other bad signs are perfectionism, lack of empathy, hitting and yelling, the child taking over your responsibilities as a parent, a family rule of not talking about it, and needing a child to make you look good.

Nurturing homes promote healing from trauma. As Dr. Alexander points out, nurturing is a skill you can learn.

Highly recommended!

## *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*

Robin Karr-Morse & Meredith S. Wiley,

Reviewed by Anonymous

I felt incredibly sad while reading *Ghosts from the Nursery*. I also felt elated because we now are starting to realize the impact of early damage. *Ghosts* inspired compassion in me towards myself and others. It describes how powerful the experiences of our first three years on this planet are. They form our personality, our expectations and to some degree our physiology. These early years groove patterns in our brains and nervous systems that deeply influence the type of person we will become.

My own patterns of ineffectual behaviors have frustrated me for years. I have spent a lot of time and money on different therapies. They have all helped in different ways. When difficulties come up in my life, I still find myself automatically wanting to go back to old solutions that got me in

trouble in the first place. I am far enough along in my recovery (I hope) that now I only THINK and TALK about the old solutions. I no longer take the actions. I am quickly able to ask for help and support, but I still am scared that negative thoughts and depression could lead me to backslide. My patterns are very deep and I still need constant re-programming and support.

I thought when I first started therapy that I would go for one or two years and that I would be fixed and all better. I was wrong which has been really frustrating. *Ghosts from the Nursery* has curbed my frustration by informing me how infancy is the foundation of how we act in the future. What happened to me as an infant was beyond my control. I have always had trouble focusing and completing my goals. I feel sometimes that there are so many thoughts buzzing in my head that I am unable to focus. According to this book, many of my problems, such as lack of concentration and reactive, impulsive behavior could be hereditary BUT these tendencies were probably worsened by neglect, lack of love, and stress in my infancy. Later, to add to my already shaky foundation, my father sexually abused me.

Therapy and support groups helped me get out of the sex industry and establish some sort of normalcy, but the only sort of therapy that helped with my focus was a behavior therapy: and this book explains why. The infant brain is in a pre-verbal state, so to fix problems from this pre-verbal period, a non-verbal approach has to be used. “For children with developmental disabilities or damage (e.g., attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder) cognitively based therapies may be an exercise in futility. To be effective, interventions need to be directed at limbic and mid-brain levels.” [p. 33]

People, myself included, used to think (and still do) that if a baby can't talk they won't be affected by trauma and will easily get over it. Children and adults carry the traumas of infancy in their cellular memory. Our brain chemistry and neural patterns can be physically changed by traumatic experiences, creating a template for future behavior. An example of cellular memory from *Ghosts*: “Unwanted children have a higher suicide rate than children that were wanted. They are also at greater risk of psychiatric and social problems. ‘An interesting study of boys by Andrew Feldman in 1974 followed 4 suicidal boys. Through extensive interviews of the families of



these adolescents, Feldman found that in all cases the suicide attempts were taking place at the same time of the year as their mothers had tried to abort them, a fact none of the adolescents had consciously known.” [p.95] This principle also applies to trauma experienced as an adult. P.T.S.D. survivors often have to fight the urge to go back to old coping mechanisms in stressful situations. *Ghosts from the Nursery* explains that, “The more a certain type of stimulation is experienced, the more the corresponding cells in the brain will be called upon or sensitized. Once sensitized, the same neural activation can be called forth by less and less stimulation.” [p.159]

Children who have P.T.S.D. from abuse at home from over-stressed parents will grow up and may not ever get treatment to help them recover. I am a lucky one. I met Patience when I was very young and she encouraged me to get help. These children may become very dysfunctional adults who will hold jobs as politicians, policemen , school janitors ,etc. They will vote and govern.

*Ghosts from the Nursery* says, “The baby is the father of man.” We all arrived on the planet with such simple needs. If they were not met appropriately we may take on any number of roles that society deems undesirable. I know the truth in this from personal experience.

I was taught to be sexual at the age of seven. I became a prostitute. I was good at it. My young body and mind absorbed this lesson and I retraumatized myself because it felt normal. *Ghosts in the Nursery* helped me understand my past much more deeply.

“Everyday 8,493 children are reported abused or neglected.”[p.272].

## *Survivor Guilt: A Self-Help Guide*

Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., Reviewer: Douglas J. Waples

Being a combat veteran of the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1969 my major emphasis will be on this work as it pertains to combat veterans. It is of course, applicable to all who suffer PTSD for any reason!

Author Background: Aphrodite Matsakis is a clinical psychologist from Silver Springs, Maryland. She worked with combat veterans in the mid-1970's before the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) even existed. Also, she was active in the women's movement, with a particular interest in battered women,

pornography, and child abuse. She assisted survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

Review: Most of us combat veteran's (survivors) often wonder why we were spared when others suffered and died. I have been struggling with that for over thirty years. My visit to the Wall (the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC) two years ago was extremely emotional, and proved that to me beyond a doubt.

Aphrodite Matsakis, author of *Survivor Guilt: A Self-Help Guide*, says these feelings are not a sign of mental illness, neurosis, or are they reflections of intelligence or strength of character as have been suggested by some in the Department of Veteran's Affairs and others in the "helping" fields. Rather, she believes survivor guilt comes from the noblest emotions: the love of one person for another.

Guilt, particularly survivor's guilt, is a powerful, sometimes unrecognized, trauma issue in most combat veteran's lives. It motivates us and affects our relationships and emotions much more than we realize. When we are on the brink of achieving the freedom, happiness, and self-love we have been working so hard to obtain, we come to a halt. We sometimes even regress into self-punishing or self-destructive modes. Survivor's guilt plagues any person who has suffered trauma, but it is a particular problem for combat veterans. It forced us to ask questions about our existence, the meaning of life itself, and the nature of the universe at the age of nineteen (on the average). Stole our innocence!

According to Matsakis, if we were free of survivor guilt, it is likely that our lives would radically change. We would make more time for play and recreation, be able to confront our spouses, and insist on having some of our needs met; something that we do not feel we deserve when in the throes of survivor's guilt.

The author offers five strategies for overcoming survivor guilt in this wonderful book:

1. Identify exactly what you feel guilty about. Examine what happened accurately and in minute detail (could be a problem for the combat veteran who has repressed the memories). Look at the actions, thoughts, and feelings that caused your guilt. Finally, examine what you did not think, feel, or do during the crucial incident and consider if these might be sources of this guilt.

2. Identify the other types of guilt you are feeling besides survivor's guilt. They need to be separated from survivor's guilt and from other emotional issues.

3. Reconstruct what happened as rationally as possible. Walk through the incident(s), step-by-step to define when your thinking was logical and when it was plagued with cognitive errors. Once you complete this you will know which guilt

is based upon cognitive delusions and which guilt truly reflects misdeeds or wrongful intentions.

4. Allow yourself to grieve. It is your next emotional task, and may involve making some kind of memorial. All the rational thinking in the world is not going to take away the pain, but cognitive reformations can spare you the unnecessary pain of unfounded self-blame.

5. Realize the costs. Take an inventory of how the guilt effects your physical, mental, and spiritual health, as well as others around you. As in a 12-step program, make a list of all the damage so you can be motivated to do something about it. A lot of work and honesty will go into this process, but it can be well worth it.

A note of caution here. Combat veterans with PTSD should work with this under the supervision of a psychiatrist or therapist. I found reading this work does open old wounds and can cause emotional flooding. If done with care, support, and supervision. it should greatly benefit the suffering veteran. Ms. Matsakis again proves that she is the benchmark for PTSD recovery methodologies.

This book is very worthwhile. I give it a five-star rating.

## *Vietnam Veterans' Homecoming: Crossing the Line*

Carey Spearman

Don't judge a book by its cover is a useful concept. I probably would not have picked up this book based on its red and black cover, but I had read some of Carey's meditations before and liked them, so I read the book.

Carey has a way of phrasing things that gets right to the heart of the problems many veterans deal with every day.

We waited for 365 days to catch the freedom bird...back into the world where everything would be fine...

For some the plane has not landed yet. It has been flying for over 20 years... The plane has plenty of fuel because you have

been giving up pieces of your life for fuel: peace, family, joy, happiness, love, and children. Guilt and anger are the pilots.

We have to come in for a landing soon, because we will run out of fuel. We will be dead, and will never have touched down in the world. So we will take the only place we know with us... the place we wanted to get away from.

Vietnam Veterans' Homecoming is a book of meditations or vignettes ranging from the past to the present. Some are addressed to veterans, some to significant others. Some are about casualties, others about the Vietnamese.

111 pages of interesting thought provoking writing. Carey doesn't offer any easy answers, but he poses a lot of useful questions for those of us who are struggling with issues that grow out of Vietnam.

## I Thought It Was Just Me...

for the adult and older children of Vietnam veterans

My name is Adele Leslie-Adams and I am a professional counsellor and have been involved with the military for over twenty years, as a partner of a soldier, and as a counsellor for veterans, service personnel and their families.

I have written a booklet, *I Thought It Was Just Me...*, specifically for the adult and older children of Vietnam veterans about the impact of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the family. Many families cope with the serious effects of PTSD and war related trauma on family relationships.

The booklet, the first of its kind, outlines in plain language PTSD, its symptoms and how it impacts on the functioning of the person suffering with the disorder. It identifies issues faced by children who have grown up in a family where a parent has been suffering with the symptoms of war trauma.

The feedback in Australia has been that the booklet fills a void not only for the veterans and their families, but also for their doctors and therapists.

Veterans from many conflicts have found the booklet most helpful in providing long overdue information for themselves and their families.

The booklet is now in its third reprint. In response to a number of requests for the booklet from veterans outside Australia I have now made it available to veterans of other countries. For further information please contact [www.in-balance.com.au](http://www.in-balance.com.au) or write In-Balance, PO Box 203, Kinglake Vic 3763, AUSTRALIA.

Although written specifically for the adult/older children of veterans, “I Thought It Was Just Me...” is also a valuable resource for parents, friends, teachers and health professionals. The booklet provides information and insight into the impact of PTSD on the family. Veterans have stated that it helped them to understand themselves and explain for the first time to their kids.

—Adele Leslie-Adams

## Risking Connection

Karen Saakvitne Ph.D., Laurie Ann Pearlman, Ph.D

The Sidran Foundation’s training manual for agency staff and mental health professionals is available for \$75.00 from 200 West Joppa Rd., Suite 207, Baltimore, MD 21286, 410-825-8888, fax- 410-337-0747, [www.sidran.org](http://www.sidran.org).

Some quotes:

“I have participated in this training and I have seen it work! Risking Connection is extremely valuable for workers in large public mental health systems, but it is equally effective for sensitizing staff in all the other agencies that serve trauma survivors, such as welfare and social services”

Jacki McKinney, Consumer/Survivor/Recovered Person, Independent Consultant, Women and Violence Study

“Risking Connection is a long overdue and much needed resource. Its breadth and depth are quite astounding yet it has a flexibility and accessibility that will allow it to be used in a

variety of settings service with a wide variety of professionals and paraprofessionals alike.”

Christine A. Courtois Ph.D., Clinical and Training Director, The CENTER: Posttraumatic Disorders Program. The Psychiatric Institute of Washington

Sidran is a nonprofit organization devoted to educating professionals about traumatic stress conditions. All of us in the PTSD field must be grateful for the development and publication of *Risking Connection: A Training Curriculum for Working with Survivors of Childhood Abuse*. The authors are trauma specialists Karen Saakvitne Ph.D., Laurie Ann Pearlman, Ph.D., and their colleagues at the Traumatic Stress Institute. This compassionate and effective system was developed in conjunction with the Maine and New York State Departments of Mental Health and tested in the field. Feedback from clients and staff was used in rewriting the curriculum several times to make it more effective and useful.

Risking Connection is the only comprehensive trauma training curriculum specially designed for staff in all mental health settings, including public systems. It was written for personnel working in community mental health, community hospitals, partial hospitalization programs, state psychiatric hospitals, substance abuse, addiction, and recovery programs, domestic violence agencies, sexual assault centers, crisis services and any other place that treats adults who were abused as children which includes prisons and VA Hospitals. This is really good news for trauma survivors. Many of them have difficulty finding the help they need because so many people, including the staff at health care institutions, are unaware of why they can't just “get over it.”

Some of the effective attitudes they recommend include that the relationship between treater and survivor has a healing power, that symptoms are adaptations, that crises can best be managed by the development of feeling skills, that the person of the treater is an essential part of the healing process, and the work will have an impact on the treater that parallels the impact of trauma on the survivor. The right attitude!

From Sidran's announcement:

The curriculum is useful for all mental health, public health, and substance abuse staff--from inexperienced, non-degreed front-line workers to highly trained social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The 20-hour

curriculum is divided into flexible modules, which can be tailored to a particular audience. Although the content is sophisticated, the language is accessible and jargon-free, making the material user-friendly for staff at all levels and disciplines. Interspersed in this living document are client/treater worksheets as well as assessment, self-reflection, group discussion, and clinical practice exercises. A variety of live on-site training options is being developed to support this curriculum and will be widely available in the fall of 2000.

- Loose leaf format with divider tabs and binder
- Annotated bibliography
- 8.5x11, 312 pages
- Over 40 pages of reproducible clinical forms, client handouts, and worksheets
- Index

*“Because There Is A Way to Prevent  
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: Facts About Abuse  
and Those Who Might Commit It”*

edited by Joan Tabachnick available from the Safer Society Press

This groundbreaking pamphlet brings together current research, clinical experience, and conversations with survivors of abuse and recovering sexual abusers in simple, clear language.

Highlights:

- Concrete checklists of what to look for in children, in adults, and in the victim-abuser relationship
- Valuable information about the adults and children who choose to sexually abuse a child.
- Suggestions for positive family and community responses to community notification

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