



covering children & trauma

a guide for journalism professionals

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A dog attacks a preschooler on a playground, severely injuring the child. A father beats his infant son to death. A tornado tears through a community, trapping families in damaged homes. Terrorists strike on 9/11, leaving thousands of children to mourn lost parents.

When children are victims of violence, journalists have a responsibility to report the truth with compassion and sensitivity. Kids aren't mini-adults; they deserve special consideration when they end up in the news.

Yet few journalists have experience interviewing children for routine stories, let alone when tragedy hits.

What ground rules apply? Is it OK to interview children huddled outside a school after a classmate has gunned down a teacher? At the hospital after a car accident?

Should you name child abuse victims in news coverage? Juveniles who commit crimes? How do you balance children's right to privacy with telling compelling stories?

Exposure to violence affects children and adults differently. But kids are just as vulnerable to post-traumatic stress and other emotional consequences of violence and tragedy.

Journalists can write stories that help educate parents about how to recognize emotional trauma in their children. They can foster community healing by interviewing families putting their lives back together after a disaster. Editors can weigh the impact of graphic visual images on

young readers when deciding what to publish or broadcast.

And what about journalists themselves? Even the most seasoned journalist can be deeply affected while covering a story about a battered child or shooting photos at a house fire where kids have perished. Witnessing violence exacts an emotional toll that journalists often don't acknowledge. When the victim is a child, the fallout is usually worse.

Traditional newsroom culture has dictated that journalists stuff their feelings and move on. In the heat of the moment, a certain amount of distance is necessary to do the job. But over time, ignoring our inner turmoil can lead to emotional numbness and burn-out. Journalists, just like cops and firefighters, need to find healthy ways to cope with the heartbreak we encounter.

The last thing any journalist wants to do is add to the pain of young victims with insensitive coverage. These tips are aimed at producing more thoughtful coverage when children's suffering becomes news.

1. interviewing kids

No matter what the topic, different ground rules apply when interviewing children. Children's vulnerability means they have a right to greater privacy even if such heightened protection is not provided by law. Journalists must respect that right despite the competitive pressures of news coverage. Protecting child victims from further trauma should take precedence over getting a good quote.

General interviewing guidelines:

- Seek permission from a parent or guardian before interviewing or photographing a child. If that is not possible, try to contact an adult for permission before using material. Exceptions to this, such as breaking news involving a child whose parent can't be located or an interview with an older teenager who can give consent, should be discussed with an editor.
- Informed consent means explaining to a parent and child what the story is about and how the interview will be used (e.g. front-page story, inside feature).
- If possible, have a parent or someone the child knows present during the interview.
- Find a quiet place for the interview and do what you can to put the child at ease. Be prepared to spend time gaining kids' trust by chatting about their hobbies or interests. With young children, get down to their eye level, talk to their stuffed animals or play a game.

- Tell them your name and explain what journalists do in language they can understand. A camera crew or photographer can show a child their equipment and demonstrate how it works.
- Make it clear that you are doing a job. Take care not to act as just a friend.
- Explain why you want to talk to them, how the interview will be used and when it will run (e.g. a daily report appearing the next day versus an investigative series that may not appear for months).
- Remind them that their names or photos will be in print or on TV. Tell them that not everything they say will be in the story.

Give the child as much control as possible over the interview:

- Emphasize that she or he can choose not to answer a question or ask you not to use sensitive information.
- Keep your notebook out so your interview subjects can see you are writing down their words.
- Tell them they are the experts on their own lives and that there are no right or wrong answers. Children will try to please you and may say what they think you want to hear rather than being honest.
- Ask open-ended questions, such as "What was the hardest part?" rather than questions that deliver their own answers, like "Were you scared?"



- Thank the child for helping you with the story. Let her know her contribution was important.

Interviewing children at the scene of a crime or disaster:

- Avoid interviewing children at the scene. Realize they are very likely in shock and need comfort, not questioning. "Children are not necessarily OK after a bad incident, no matter how they might appear," said Roger Simpson, Dart Professor of Journalism & Trauma at the University of Washington, in an article in the *Columbus Dispatch* in October 2000.
- If you decide to do an interview, try to talk to the child in a safe place away from the chaos of emergency personnel and other victims.
- Identify yourself and try to have someone the child knows there.
- Try not to publish photographs of children without their permission and that of their parents. A photo of an injured child is dramatic and heart-wrenching but can also be hurtful and embarrassing to the victim.
- Be willing to wait until the parents and child are ready to talk, even if that is weeks or months after the crisis. You will likely get a much better interview.

Interviewing children about previous trauma:

- Find out as much as you can about the incident before the interview by talking to parents, counselors, teachers and medical professionals.

Obtain documents such as police reports and court records outlining the facts.

- Ask parents and others if there are topics or details that are especially difficult for the child to talk about, and be sensitive.
- Let the child and parents pick a familiar setting for the interview. Jane Hansen, a projects reporter at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, recalled how she handled an interview with an 11-year-old rape victim. Hansen asked to see the boy's bedroom, where he showed her his Beanie Babies. She shared how her son also collected the furry critters. Then they sat side by side on the hallway floor so he wouldn't have to look at her as he described his adoptive father's sexual abuse.
- Don't talk down to children, no matter how young they are. Respect their feelings and their way of recounting what happened. And be prepared to be surprised: Children may not grieve the way you expect them to. CNN editor Kathy Slobogin described in a March 2005 article on the Casey Journalism Center website how a group of kids she was interviewing chatted happily about memories of a young friend who died on a plane that hit the Pentagon on 9/11. When the cameraman suggested the children's mood didn't fit the somber topic, Slobogin told him to keep shooting: "They're children, I said. This is what they do."

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- Reflect back what a child is telling you and give her a chance to correct errors.
- Educate yourself. Talk to counselors, attend education programs, research child trauma through authoritative websites. Consider what questions are appropriate for different ages—e.g. a younger child won't be able to recall chronological details but can likely describe what toy he was playing with when the hurricane hit.
- Children younger than 13 should not be relied upon to provide detailed factual accounts. Use documents and other sources to corroborate whenever possible.
- Don't ask questions that imply blame, such as "Weren't you wearing your seatbelt?" or "Do you always walk alone at night?" That can make a child feel guilty or expose him to public humiliation.
- Be aware that retelling a traumatic event can trigger intense emotions in your interview subject, even years later. Be prepared to deal with strong reactions, or have someone there who can provide support, such as a trusted family member or counselor.
- Keep the interview to age-appropriate lengths: thirty minutes for those under age 9, forty-five minutes for children between 10 and 14 and one hour for teens.
- Take breaks if a child gets bored or distracted. That may be a child's way of telling you he is emotionally drained.
- Don't use information that would embarrass or hurt a child—even with her permission. Kids will tell you just about anything, but that doesn't mean you have to print it—e.g. bedwetting problems or illegal drug use (unless such detail is central to the story).
- Ask if the child has any questions before you leave. Thank her for her help.
- Check back with parents and older children after the interview and let them know how quotes will be used and when the story will run. Send them copies of the story.

After a violent incident, everyone is reeling. Remember that sometimes even parents don't know where to draw the line.

A Seattle TV station ran a news report in February 2005 about a young girl who'd been mauled earlier that day by a pit bull on a playground. The report included footage of the injured child curled up on her couch at home, sobbing and saying she thought she'd be killed. Her father stood nearby and had clearly agreed to the interview.

Compelling footage? Certainly. But the child was so obviously traumatized that it raised questions about the wisdom of putting her on camera. Remember: Parental permission does not absolve journalists' of their responsibility to use good judgment and the highest professional ethics.



2. confidentiality

The biggest hurdle when covering tragedies involving children is getting access to information. Stricter confidentiality laws govern everything from their school and hospital records to court and child-welfare files.

Overcoming this is especially important because some of the worst violence kids endure happens at home or in institutional settings. Children have no voice of their own. Journalists face the daunting challenge of finding ways to report on child abuse and neglect without causing more harm to the victims.

- Learn to use state and federal public-disclosure laws. While police or state child-welfare agencies will redact identifying information, documents are invaluable for providing context and establishing patterns in stories on everything from teachers abusing students to teen rape.
- Challenge confidentiality rules that do more to hide institutional malfeasance than to protect children. Get your employer's attorney involved if necessary.
- When it's not possible to interview a victim, work around that by tracking down and interviewing everyone else in the child's life. Talk to parents, teachers, neighbors, friends, police officers, child advocates.
- Be willing to talk to sources as "background only" as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of the problem. Sometimes it's

the only way to find out crucial information.

- Interview other children or families who have suffered similar trauma in the past but can now talk more freely (e.g., adults who suffered child sexual abuse; foster children who are now adopted).
- Talk to experts who can put a violent incident into context. For example, find out if child abuse rates are going up or down or how many school shootings have happened in the previous five years.
- Be clear about your newspaper's or station's policy for withholding the names of child victims or juvenile offenders. Most don't identify child abuse victims except in special circumstances. Juvenile crime suspects are also usually not named unless a defendant ends up in adult court. Explain those rules to sources.
- Identifying a child is not always an "all-or-nothing" decision. Sometimes children and their parents will be comfortable with a first name only or a middle name. Consider taking "non-identifying" photos that can help tell the story. Such photos, while far more difficult to shoot, can powerfully convey a victim's struggles to a reader/viewer.
- When a victim and the parents/guardian agree to be identified, clarify exactly what that means. Explain to them the possible ramifications of such a decision.

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- Just because a victim agrees to be named doesn't mean you should do it. There may be circumstances where the potential harm is greater than the benefit. In the case of the 11-year-old boy who had been raped by his adoptive father, Hansen, of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* decided not to name him or use identifying photos, even though both the child and his mother said it was OK. The newspaper decided it wasn't fair to the boy to subject him to publicity about the graphic abuse—something that could follow him into adulthood.

The bottom line: Treat kids like you'd want a reporter to treat your own children.

Identifying a child is not always an “all-or-nothing” decision. Sometimes children and their parents will be comfortable with a first name only or a middle name.

3. for editors

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The single best way for editors to improve coverage of child trauma is to create beats where reporters regularly do stories about kids. That means expanding beyond the traditional education beat and assigning journalists to specialize in social policy, child trends or family issues. Those reporters will become experts at interviewing and writing about kids. They will know whom to call when a 13-year-old boy is charged with killing his parents or an infant is found abandoned on a sidewalk.

- Make sure your newspaper or broadcast station has thoughtful policies, whether written or unwritten, about naming child victims or teen crime suspects. Try to balance the public's need to know and the importance of the information with the harm that can be done to a juvenile, especially since cyberspace has a permanence of its own. The best policies are flexible and take into consideration the special circumstances of each case.
- Don't let pack journalism dictate your decisions about naming juveniles. Just because your competitor is naming a 13-year-old sexual offender in the wake of community hysteria doesn't mean you should.
- At the same time, be flexible when an ethically sound opportunity presents itself. Don't automatically refuse to name a 16-year-old foster child who wants to tell her story just because she is a minor.
- Work with the photo editor to ensure that the photographer assigned to a story knows about any ground rules (e.g., non-identifying photos, sensitive topics).
- After a disaster, assign stories that will educate parents about the effects of violence on children and how to minimize trauma. Encourage parents to limit media exposure, especially with younger children. Provide information about where to turn for help. Tell readers what government officials are doing to protect the community and how to develop safety plans. Look for hopeful stories about victims rebuilding their lives.
- Don't rerun the same graphic photos again and again. Consider the negative impact of violent headlines/photos/details on younger readers who are part of your audience. Run "graphic content" warnings. Exposure to disturbing images can cause or exacerbate post-traumatic stress in children.
- Be careful about anniversary stories. Ask what you want to accomplish with the story: Is there a way to go beyond rehashing painful details yet again? Be aware that such stories often reopen victims' wounds. There is no such thing as "closure" for most victims. Never trivialize their grief in an effort to neatly and over-optimistically wrap up a story.
- Avoid turning one victim into a "poster child survivor" when many have suffered similar losses.

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Turning victims into heroes can be confusing for kids who just need to grieve over what's happened.

- Look for follow-up stories that go beyond the immediate event and examine systemic issues—e.g., a string of dog attacks on kids might prompt the question “Are leash laws being enforced?” or a school bus crash that kills a student might signal a larger problem like sloppy vehicle maintenance or improper screening of drivers.
- Allow reporters the extra time it takes to find and interview children. Recognize that hurdles such as confidentiality and getting permission from parents slow down the reporting process.
- Challenge institutions that refuse access to important information about children’s lives.
- Be sensitive to the emotional fallout reporters and photographers experience when covering violence. Take them for coffee and ask how they’re doing. Often, journalists have a hard time admitting they’re struggling emotionally. Give them time off to rejuvenate.
- Set up employee-assistance programs that offer confidential professional counseling and encourage journalists to use the resource.

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Children encounter many types of violence, from collective events like war and natural disasters to individual tragedies like accidental shootings, interpersonal violence, car accidents and illnesses. Research has found that just like adults, kids' reactions vary widely. Most kids are frightened and anxious at first but those feelings fade with time and support. Others suffer longer-term problems, like re-experiencing the event, depression, withdrawal and anger, that are signs of post-traumatic stress.

What is trauma?

Emotional trauma is a response to an extreme event that is painful, shocking and upsetting. The event creates emotional memories deep in the brain. In general, the more direct the exposure to violence, the higher the risk for emotional harm. But even secondhand exposure can trigger trauma that may not become obvious for days or even weeks after the incident. Kids who have suffered previous abuse or who lack family support are more likely to have trouble recovering.

How do kids react to trauma?

Children 5 and under: Reactions can include fear of being away from a parent, crying, immobility, trembling, clinginess and screaming. They may regress to earlier behaviors, such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting and fear of the dark. Young children are strongly affected by how their parents respond to the event.

School-age children: Kids may withdraw, have trouble concentrating or act out with disruptive behavior. They may have nightmares or irrational fears, refuse to attend school, get in fights or complain of stomach aches and other physical ailments. They might avoid places that remind them of what happened.

Teens: Adolescents can experience flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbing and depression, and may become antisocial. They may turn to drugs or alcohol, have academic problems or lose hope in the future and feel suicidal. Adolescents may feel guilty about being unable to prevent the violence or might fantasize about revenge. They may rebel against everything in the face of a world that no longer makes sense.

Kids do best when they are allowed to express their feelings, get plenty of reassurance from adults and return to normal routines as soon as possible.

But some will need professional help.

Danger signs include kids who continue to avoid places/situations that remind them of the traumatic event, who appear "emotionally numb" or suffer disturbed sleep and other physical problems for longer than a month after the event.

Post-traumatic stress affects an estimated 2 percent of adults and children after a natural disaster to almost 30 percent after a terrorist attack or plane crash.

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Violence shatters children's view of the world as a safe place and their belief that adults will protect them. Journalists can help adults recognize and respond to kids' emotional pain by providing information about post-traumatic stress, sharing their stories and providing a voice for our littlest citizens.

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5. journalists are human too

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The nightmares began for one reporter after reading dozens of gruesome fatality reports about babies who had been suffocated, starved or beaten to death.

The sight of a child's shoe lying in the rubble of a plane crash haunted a photographer years later.

Children's innocence makes their suffering all the more disturbing. Journalists who write about violence don't escape unscathed. We are at risk for post-traumatic stress. It can hit after a couple of years spent covering the child-welfare beat and writing countless stories about abused kids. Or it can be triggered by one horrifying event.

Former Fresno TV news reporter Allison Ash covered the slaughter of nine people at a local home in March 2004. Most of the victims were kids. Afterward, she was interviewed for a story in the *Fresno Bee*. She told the reporter she had trouble sleeping. And she had trouble getting away from the story because strangers who recognized her would corner her in the grocery store to talk about the murders. One thing that helped Ash cope was reaching out to other reporters and photographers—and even a police officer—at the scene to acknowledge the horror of the event. Hugs were offered, tears were shed. “As for reporters with children, we did what we always do—went home and hugged our children,” Ash said.

Other coping strategies include:

- Talk about your feelings with other reporters or your editor. Ask a colleague to go for coffee and vent. Have a good cry. Get over the myth that emotional toughness equals good journalism.
- Take time off to rejuvenate after an emotionally draining story. Try to get away from work: Don't check e-mails, phone messages or call for updates.
- Seek to balance your life away from work: Play with your puppy, read fiction, garden, join a baseball team, cook dinner for friends, go camping with your kids.
- Educate yourself about the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. If you have trouble sleeping or eating, can't concentrate and find yourself off balance after a week or so, talk to a professional counselor.
- Ask to cover a different type of story from time to time. Alternatively, ask for a different beat if you need a break from covering emotionally intense subjects like child welfare or the latest domestic-violence-related murder.

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The **Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma**, based at the University of Washington, is a resource center and program developer for students, educators, journalists and news organizations interested in the intersection of journalism and trauma issues. The Dart Center recognizes and encourages excellence in reporting on victims of violence and trains journalists on issues of trauma.

Established by a congressional Initiative in 2000, the **National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)** is a unique collaboration of academic centers and front-line community service providers dedicated to understanding and treating children and families who have experienced traumatic events. The NCTSN's work encompasses all trauma types, from natural disasters to school and community

violence, child abuse, and life-threatening illness. Its reach extends across settings and disciplines and to institutions and systems integral to children's lives. The mission of the NCTSN is to raise the standard of care and improve access to services for traumatized children, their families, and communities throughout the United States.

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