In light of last week’s attack in Har Nof, Jerusalem, Chai4ever shares approaches to helping children following a trauma. This is an important read for parents, educators and administrators with practical tips for moving forward.

For more information or to speak with a trauma counselor, please call 646.519.2190.

When Terror Strikes
Speaking with Children: When the Unmentionable Needs to be Mentioned
**Education**

- The basic rule of thumb is: if children are going to hear about an incident, make sure that they hear it from *you*. That way, you can control the flow of information and the manner in which it is delivered. Your tone of voice and body language will have a large impact on how children understand, and react to, the situation.

- The terror factor exacerbates an already difficult subject: how to explain death to young children. In an effort to protect children, adults may employ euphemisms (“very deep sleep,” “long vacation,” “passed away”) to describe death. Unfortunately, such phrases are often counterproductive, leaving some children confused, pained and unnecessarily fearful of activities like sleep or family trips.

- Experience has shown that it is healthier for children to hear the basic realities of death than to ponder the unbridled fantasies which can ensue when the matter is ignored, denied or misstated.

- Younger children often need some explanation regarding the physical general meaning of death. Start by explaining the basics of *life*. Speak simply: a person is comprised of a body (*guf*) and a soul (*neshama*). The joining of these two entities is miraculous and what constitutes life.

- Death occurs when the soul has left the body: at any age (young or old), at any rate of time (gradual or sudden) and due to any reason (illness, injury, attack).

- It is important to stress that, “The body no longer works and absolutely cannot be fixed. Since it has served its purpose, it is now going to be buried in the ground with great respect (*kavod*)”

- In age-appropriate terms, explain that the soul returns to Heaven and is eternal. This essential concept of Jewish tradition provides comfort and solace (*nechama*) for children.

- Younger children may ask questions that we would usually consider inappropriate: was there a lot of blood, what does the body look and feel like, is the deceased coming back soon, etc. This is not a breach in etiquette, upbringing or education, but rather a child’s way of trying to process the difficult information he/she has just heard.

- Children may also ask the same question repeatedly in an effort to make some sense of what has happened. The blunt questions, combined with the ongoing repetition, can be very unsettling to adults. Keep in mind that children are designed to use these methods to cope with trauma. Be patient with them and don’t engage in arguments or power struggles.

- For teenagers, the information they seek, or even crave, may be presented as grappling with issues of spirituality, emotions, politics, religion. These weighty matters may reflect the concerns they have already begun to ponder as they navigate adolescence and approach young adulthood. But, such questions may also mask the difficulty they are having in verbalizing, or admitting, that they are scared and confused about what has occurred.
• Teens in particular may be intellectually, emotionally and spiritually bothered by the deaths at hand. They may also expand their questioning to broader issues of why death (or any type of “bad,” evil or suffering) exists at all.

• Answer questions gently and skillfully. Do not be afraid to say, “That’s a good question; I really don’t know the answer,” especially if difficult theological questions arise. Keep in mind that sometimes the real issue at hand is emotional, not intellectual.

• Whatever your answers are, be empathic and genuine, not dogmatic, manipulative or condescending. Once he/she senses that you are answering sincerely and sensitively, you may have a chance to engage in a meaningful dialogue.

• Situations like these are often referred to as “teachable moments.” Many critical topics have become highlighted due to this attack, including sanctifying Hashem’s name, anti-Semitism, the role that Israel plays in your family’s life and in the broader scope of international Jewry. These issues can be very personal, complex and laden with emotion. When to teach these topics, and to what extent and depth, are issues that parents should discuss thoroughly between themselves before sitting down with their children.
Emotions

• See last week’s “Common Grief Reactions of Children” for classic responses that children may have (physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive and spiritual) following a loss.

• Validate children’s reactions. Children often harbor inner fears that “I’m going crazy” or “I’m the only one going through this.” Hearing that these reactions are normal and common can help calm them significantly.

• Sharing your own experiences may be helpful and reassuring to children. Through sharing and modeling for them, children will hopefully sense your sincerity and genuineness.

• Make sure that they do not misinterpret your openness and think that you are “falling apart.” Assure them that while it is normal to feel sad or scared, you are coping with the situation at hand. Children always need to sense your resilience, strength and support, and especially at times like these.

• Reactions often fade relatively quickly. This is often a relief for children, but not always. When painful feelings subside, teens and pre-teens may express, “How do I have the right to feel better so quickly? Why am I so cold and insensitive to my friend’s sorrows?”

• When a “silver lining” results from a tragedy (for example, becoming more introspective or helpful), children feel guilty and frustrated when such feelings/behaviors diminish. “Someone died and I became determined to take my life more seriously. Now I find myself thinking and acting just like I used to. I can’t believe that I’m back to my ‘old self’ so quickly. What’s wrong with me?”

• As a concerned adult, you are trying to gauge whether children’s reactions are so severe, intense or longstanding that their everyday functioning has become impaired. Certainly, if a child poses any potential danger toward him/herself or others, immediate action should be taken.
**Practical Applications**

• One of the scariest feelings that death in general, and a terror attack in particular, triggers is a lack of control and autonomy. Children often cope better when they are able to “do something” during times of trauma. Some may prefer to work on a project directly related to what has happened, while others busy themselves with distractions which help them avoid facing the tragedy. Avoidance can be a very valid method of coping. Don’t push children in either direction.

• It is important to recognize and respect each child’s style of coping. There are no specific “recipes,” “formulas,” “roadmaps” or “timetables” on how to handle grief.

• Some children will appreciate arts and crafts; others may prefer composing a letter or poem. Many opt to record their feelings in a journal.

• Sharing heartfelt wishes (and memories when applicable) with the bereaved family can be extremely cathartic and empowering for both the family as well as for the children offering them.

• Sending individual or group condolence cards, creating special photo albums (“memory books”), or keeping a journal, can all provide much needed solace for children. It gives them a project to focus on, and restores a sense of control, community and *chessed* to their lives.
Jewish Perspectives

• Judaism contains many concepts and traditions that promote healing, comfort and solace. *Tzeddakah* or *chessed* are extremely popular, meaningful and fulfilling.

• There is a tradition to study *Mishna* in memory of the deceased. The words *Mishna* and *neshama* (soul) share the same Hebrew letters, thereby uniquely linking this particular part of tradition to the spiritual enhancement of the deceased’s soul.

• In the event that a child were to be making a condolence call, it is important to know that *shiva* allows mourners, and those who visit them, to take a “time out” from everyday life to concentrate on the loss at hand and recall memories of the deceased. It also provides an opportunity to glean important lessons from the character traits, actions and legacy of the deceased.

• The importance of “just being there” (irrespective of what you say or whether you speak at all) should be explained to students prior to a condolence call. Girls are often much more attuned to this concept.

• Judaism’s vision of a “cosmic tapestry” often provides some measure of comfort. “I know that I’m suffering, but I don’t know why. I have hope and faith that at some point it will become clear how all of this fits into the larger scheme of life and history.”

• Introspection and growth in any aspect of one’s life (personal, interpersonal or in relation to G-d) often helps others find meaning in the life, and death, of the deceased.

• Identifying a positive character trait of the deceased that can be emulated, even for short periods of time, can be quite meaningful. This process helps maintain a connection/relationship with the deceased, and provides solace and meaning to survivors that their actions are helping the deceased in some spiritual sense. Following this attack, newspapers (from the Wall Street Journal to national Jewish publications) have provided vignettes about the victims. It is quite possible to learn from the men who were killed even without having known them.

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At Chai4ever, we help mitigate the impact of parental illness or loss by providing families practical and emotional support, and helping children to maintain a semblance of normal childhood throughout the challenging times of healing.

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