PICTURE BOOKS: CAN THEY HELP CAREGIVERS CREATE AN "ILLUSION OF SAFETY" FOR CHILDREN IN UNSAFE TIMES?

Abigail McNamee and Mia Lynn Mercurio

Introduction

We cannot completely shield children from vicarious exposure to visually and verbally created scenes of violence including riots, terrorism, and war. Children may experience events such as the September 11, 2001, attacks and campaigns in the "war on terror" when they see television images and hear adult conversation. These events may heighten children's fears and sense of vulnerability as they imagine details of the current and future acts of violence. Because children's fears about these kinds of violence appear to have become more acute, caregivers might search for picture books to help children feel safe in their everyday environments when the world around them is not safe.

The "Illusion of Safety"

Unfortunately, we cannot create environments in which safety is guaranteed. What we can do is to create environments that are physically and psychologically as safe as possible. The authors of this article believe that children need to feel safe – they need the illusion of safety – so that they can develop in a healthy way. But it is an "illusion" because in reality safety is never guaranteed for anyone. At times, traumatic events disrupt the safe environments that we have created. Janoff-Buhlman (1992) describes the "shattering of illusions" – one of them being the illusion of safety – that takes place when we experience trauma. Children sometimes experience traumatic events first-hand, of course, but they can also experience trauma vicariously as well. Mudlaff (2000) writes that when children experience violence their belief system is called into question: such children's sense of security and safety has been threatened, and that cannot help but change their view of the world. This is a very real loss for a child and should be viewed as an experience that causes grief, much like the death of someone they love (p. 30). When children become vicariously aware of war, large-scale violence, and terrorism, their illusion of safety may become bruised. The bruising may take the form of worrying about whether the adults in their life, whom they have assumed to be powerful enough to guarantee their safety, may not be able to keep them safe. When that happens, the illusion of safety needs to be reestablished.

Adults can help to reestablish this illusory sense of safety using children's literature about violence – a rather new genre, within which some picture books have become available. It is essential, however, that when adults use children's literature focused on violent topics, they do so with an understanding of children's dominant age-related fears, behaviors, and needs and connect these to those fears, behaviors, and needs that may be created by traumatic events. This article focuses on how adult readers can assess children's picture books and use them to engender an illusion of safety, reestablished by caring adults.

Fear and Young Children

Fears are a common, natural aspect of most children's development. Numerous studies on the topic show that the things children fear change as they develop and mature. (Garber, Garber & Spitzman, 1993; Hall, 2003; Miller, 2004a). Fear of strangers and separation from parents usually are the first fears to emerge in infancy; these make way for early childhood fears of monsters, dark places and big, often hairy animals. The elementary school years may also bring with them new fears of isolation, kidnappers, and thieves (Garber, Garber & Spitzman, 1993; Muris, et al., 2000; Miller, 2004b), which are often categorized according to age (Robinson, Robinson & Whetshell, 1988; Hall, 2003; Moses, 2005).

Normative fears are, of course, expected in a child's development. What of fears created by life experience? Although earlier studies claim that real-life fears (e.g., fears of real violence stemming from drug use, gangs, or nuclear warfare) do not emerge until early adolescence, more recent evidence suggests that these fears are emerging at earlier ages—in the elementary school years (Owen, 1998; Nicholson & Pearson, 2003) – perhaps due to real-life experience. "With their high fear rating of social violence . . . 7-, 8-, and 9-year old children resemble older children from past research. Fears of drive-by shootings, nuclear weapons, and street drugs have supplanted fears of bad dreams, animals, and monsters in this 1990's cohort" (Owen, 1998, p. 15). Additional literature appearing before and after September 11 supports the idea that fear in young children can be created by traumatic events (Robinson, et al., 1988, 1991; Hostetler, 1991; Tarifa & Kloep, 1996; Greenman, 2001; Kleinfeld, 2002).

Normative Fears

Robinson et al. (1988, 1991) categorize young children's fears according to age as follows:

Children from birth–six months:
sudden movements
loud movements
lack of attention to their immediate needs

Children from 7–12 months:
stranger anxiety
separation anxiety
loud noises and large objects

One-Year-Olds:
fear of injury
stranger anxiety
separation from parent, guardian, or caregiver

Two-Year-Olds:
major changes in their environment
big animals
dimly lit rooms
some machines
loud noises

Three- and Four-Year-Olds:
scary images
masks
dark rooms
snakes
noises at night
separation from parent, guardian, or caregiver

Five- and Six-Year-Olds:
separation from parent, guardian, or caregiver
weather-related fears such as thunder
being left alone
witches, monsters, ghosts
bad people
wild animals
bodily injury

Seven- and Eight-Year-Olds:
being alone
kidnapping
being lost
dark
storms
monsters
guns, weapons

Fears Created by Traumatic Events

Extensive media coverage of violent events appears to have a great effect on children's fear (Robinson, et al., 1988, 1991; Hostetler, 1991; Robinson, Tarifa & Kloep, 1996). Exploring studies of children's perceptions of violence and the media, Tarifa and Kloep (1996) found that children strongly responded to world events that receive wide media coverage. Events such as the nuclear arms race (Kanet, 1983; Duncan, Kraus & Parks, 1986) and the war in the Persian Gulf (Holstetler, 1991; Knoll, 1991) led to an increase in children's fears and their anxieties about the possibility of making the world a safe place. American children are not alone. When Tarifa & Kloep (1996) examined children from other countries, it emerged that children across the world have a common fear of war and fears were also shaped by local events in their immediate environments.

A survey of over 8,000 school children in New York City conducted after the September 11th attacks (Kleinfield, May 14, 2002) reported that local children – the youngest of whom were nine years old – were experiencing chronic nightmares, a fear of public places, severe anxiety, and other mental health problems months after the World Trade Center collapsed. This study may provide "the most comprehensive look ever at the psychological impact of a major disaster on American schoolchildren." One surprising finding was that trauma experienced by children was not limited to the area near "Ground Zero." Approximately 10.5 percent of the children surveyed suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but even more suffered agoraphobia, including fear of riding public transportation. Hispanic children were disproportionately affected by psychological problems after the attack: 13.8 percent showed significant symptoms of PTSD, compared to 9 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, 8 percent of non-Hispanic whites, and 9 percent of Asians. Girls or younger children seemed to have more symptoms than boys or older children. Although the children of the study were not within the early childhood age range, it speaks to reason that younger children may also have reacted fearfully to any exposure to such traumatic events.

Caregivers' Response to Children's Fears

Children often show their emotions differently than adults do; in fact many don't talk about their feelings at all. In their article "*Parent perceptions of children's fears,*" Jones and Borgers (1988) reported that children often had more fears than parents expected, and the greatest differences occurred with fears of being hurt, the death of a loved one, and nuclear war. Recent events, including 9/11, add the fear of terrorism to that list. If adults deny that children experience fear, or fail to address it, they often increase the fear they are attempting to suppress in the child (Protinsky, 1985; Robinson et al., 1991; Poole, 2004a).

Children's Behaviors and Needs Related to Safety

While some behaviors and needs are consistent across early childhood, age makes a difference in what it takes to make children feel safe when they become aware of violence. Understanding children's behavior and needs according to age/developmental level is certainly not a new topic in child-development literature, but the focus has not typically been on connecting children's behavior and needs to the experience of an increasingly violent world.

Children Under Three

Children under three are acutely aware of their surroundings. They absorb the tension, fear, or hurt of the people who care for them at home or in school programs. Even young babies react when parents are distressed. Two-year-olds understand the concept of both emotional and physical hurt and may point out hurt people; they may want to comfort a loved one who is upset. Very young children, however, can only display their distress through behavior: eating, sleeping, toileting, clinging, being contrary, crying. They need:

- regular routines
- a peaceful atmosphere
- limited exposure to media and adult conversation about violence

- time with calm, loving, reassuring adults. (Greenman, 2001, pp. 21- 22)

Children Under Five

Preschool children are much more aware of world events than infants and toddlers are. They are imaginative thinkers and often confuse fantasy and reality, time and space, cause and effect. Their daily world is already populated with monsters, disasters, and nightmares. News images are not different from the fictional images they experience on television and in nursery rhymes and video games. As with adults, media coverage of violence and its aftermath can cause children to develop new fears: bombs, air travel, buildings falling down, and the threat of war. They pay attention to adult words: “attack,” “revenge,” and “retaliation” (Church-Booth, 2004b).

Children between the ages of three and five are aware that people come and go and may fear abandonment; they worry that someone who cares for them may be harmed. They may wet the bed, or have daytime toileting accidents; become increasingly fearful, clinging or testing; lose their appetite; have nightmares; cry or scream for help; experience speech difficulties (loss for words, stammering); experience fear of strangers or being left alone (Greenman, 2001, p. 22). If pre-school children are traumatized by the violence they experience, their behavior may evidence post-traumatic features (Johnson, 1989):

- withdrawal, subdued and/or mute behavior
- denial
- participation in reenactments and unsatisfying plans involving traumatic themes
- anxious attachment behaviors including greater separation or stranger anxiety, clinging to previously cherished objects, crying, clinging, tantrums
- regression to previous levels of functioning
- relatively brief grieving period
- denial of permanence of change. (Johnson, 1989, p. 45)

They need:

- regular routines and favorite rituals
- a peaceful atmosphere
- limited exposure to media and adult conversation about violence
- time with calm, loving, reassuring adults
- verbal and physical reassurance from adults that they and the adults are safe
- knowledge of where the adults of their life are at any given time
- opportunity for gentle conversation
- opportunity to draw and to work with clay
- opportunity for, and acceptance of, play about what they have seen/heard
- special time and reassurance at bedtime. (Greenman, p. 25)

Elementary-School-Age Children

Elementary-school-age children increasingly inhabit an outside world. They can understand *what* is real and permanent; however, they often lack perspective. They are learning how events fit together and want to understand how things happen and what impact events will have. They may ask a lot of questions and want honest answers about details that are important to them. They can understand loss and identify with people directly affected by violence. They may focus on the possibility of violent acts happening to them. They think about adult role models; heroes and villains are fascinating to them. Peers shape their thinking, their feelings, their reactions. They are interested in good and bad, right and wrong, fairness and justice and may feel outrage with strong, rigid opinions about violent acts (Greenman, 2001, pp. 26-27). If school-age children are traumatized by the violence they experience, the post-traumatic features of their behavior could include:

- lowering of intellectual functioning and decline of school performance
- attempts at denial, compensation, reversal, or retribution through fantasy
- obsessive talking about the incident
- isolation of affect
- constant anxious arousal
- behavioral alterations
- peer relational problems
- more elaborate reenactments
- psychosomatic complaints. (Johnson, 1989, p. 45)

They need:

- regular routines and favorite rituals
- a peaceful atmosphere
- time with calm, loving, reassuring adults
- adults who will find out what is on their minds, answer questions honestly and with details that matter to them
- verbal and physical reassurance that they and the adults are safe
- knowledge of where the adults of their life are at any given time
- guided exposure to news and adult discussion
- opportunity to talk and play with peers
- opportunity to play with adults
- opportunity to draw, work with clay, and take part in dramatic expression
- acceptance of dramatic play and conversation that reflect a current violent event
- relaxed expectations at school and at home immediately following a violent event
- reassurance at bedtime
- opportunity to help others and take part in community efforts
- planning for safety measures for the future. (Greenman, 2001, p. 28)

Mudlaff (2000) addresses caregivers, providing a summary of children's need specifically related to their experience of violence:

- use words that are real and accurate
- create a safe place for talking
- ask children to "tell the story" of their nightmares as they occur
- look for different issues as related to different kinds of trauma
- help children to understand that the trauma is not their fault
- watch for signs that children experience a range of feelings (fear, guilt, denial, anger, rage, confusion, desire for revenge, loneliness)
- look for physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeplessness, quietness, withdrawal)
- maintain daily routine as much as possible
- maintain rules and expectations
- do not single children out for special privileges or compensations (they need to feel part of the peer group and be expected to function accordingly)
- listen to what children teach about their grief
- consider meeting with a professional therapist (pp. 30-31)

Selecting Picture Books to Reduce Fears and Create an Illusion of Safety

Rycik (2006) writes that reading books give children the opportunity to identify with others undergoing the same problems, help them realize that they are not alone, provide catharsis, and facilitate the process of sharing their problems with others. Other authors (McMath, 1997; Alat, 2002; Stamps, 2003) describe the power of books and their usefulness in helping children feel more secure after a traumatic event. As with books in any genre, however, there are those well conceived and written and those not well conceived and written.

In Schrank's 1982 article, "*Bibiliotheraphy as an elementary school counseling tool*,"she identified additional areas of interest to take into account when selecting picture books to use with children. They are as follows:

- problems or situations that are of interest or relevance to young children
- characters developed to allow for sufficient identification
- story depth that enriches the meaning of life
- situations in the story that are appropriate for the developmental level of children
- reading levels that are appropriate to the readers
- opportunities for readers to offer alternative solutions to situations or problems
- stories that are free of sexist language and racial bias.

When specifically dealing with locating books on fears for children, other researchers have noted that it is important to find books that use fears which real children have, and that work out these fears through the story and resolve them at the end (Carlson & Arthur, 1999; Schlenther, 1999; Trousdale, 1989). We recommend the following additional criteria particularly geared to selecting picture books that deal with stressful topics including violence (Delisle & Woods-McNamee, 1981):

- **INTELLECTUAL NEEDS: Is the book accurate and age-appropriate?** Some picture books present inaccurate information; some present accurate information—most often abstract information—that young children would likely misunderstand.

- **SOCIAL NEEDS: Does the book indicate through its characters that the child reader is not alone; that others share the child's experience?** Children use the story of a picture book as social experience; its characters seem realistic—even animals do things that humans do and feel as humans feel. If these behaviors and feelings are similar to a child's own, it communicates that the child reader is not alone, that he or she is sharing a stressful life experience that others have encountered before.

- **EMOTIONAL NEEDS: Does the book indicate through its characters that the child's fears are acceptable?** Children often feel that they are "bad" if they feel a certain way, especially if they feel sad or angry, jealous or needy. If a character in a picture book feels that same way and is accepted, particularly by adults, it communicates that the feeling is acceptable and that the child reader's feelings are also acceptable.

It is important to note that reading picture books to explore a child's fears is not a lesson, nor an exercise in reading skills. It is a time to share what is important to children about a story that might help them reduce their fears and foster a feeling of well-being by presenting accurate and age-appropriate information and communicating that they are not alone in their experience.

Examples of Picture books

To date, there have not been many picture books written for children about riots, large-scale violence, terrorism, or war. Of those available, we have selected six that may be useful in whole or in part for use with children: two focus on September 11th specifically; four focus on violence more generally. The September 11th books, however, are so tied to that day that they may begin to lose some of their power as that day recedes into the past. They can be used in part, however, and we often recommend using parts of books provided readers feel able to edit as they read. *September 12th* in particular can serve as a model of the kind of picture book that teachers can create with their children following a violent event. Using the criteria set forth by both Shrank (1982) and Delisle & Woods-McNamee (1981) we will attempt to assess each book.

A Terrible Thing Happened
By Margaret Holmes
Imagination Press
Washington, DC, 2000
Suggested Age Range 4-8

This is the story of a little raccoon named Sherman Smith who saw a terrible thing happen. The story goes on to explain how Sherman tried to forget about it until he finally told his teacher. Once he did he felt much better. The book is geared toward children who have witnessed any kind of violent or traumatic event. It is accurate in its description of typical behavior that children may exhibit after witnessing a violent event. The story is age appropriate in as much as Sherman behaves like a typical "child" even though he is a raccoon. Making the main character a raccoon may help a child reader identify easily with the character. The behaviors and feeling exhibited by Sherman may be similar to a child's own. The story communicates that the reader is not alone.
The reading level is appropriate for 4-8 year olds and the story is free of sexist language and racial bias. We like the general nature of the story and feel that the ambiguity left in the story may help the reader see his/her situation as similar. We are especially impressed with the afterword and list of further readings.

On That Day
By Andrea Patel
Star Root Press
New York, 2001
Suggest Age Range: 3 years and up.

On That Day responds to the violent events of September 11th. The book's message suggests that even though bad things happen in the world, individual people always have a choice to do good things. The author uses language that young children can understand, explaining that "sometimes bad things happen because people act in mean ways and hurt each other on purpose."

Although there are no specific characters in this book, the author draws the child reader into a shared experience. She writes, "Whether you're three years old, or thirteen years old, or thirty years old, or one-hundred and three years old, you can help." The book goes on to list all the things that a child reader can join others to help with, including sharing, playing, laughing, and being kind to others. The story reassures the child that "when bad things happen, only a small piece of the world breaks. Not the whole world." The author points out that the goodness of people will win over badness. The reading level is appropriate for readers five and up and it is free from sexist language and racial bias.

In reading this story, children are encouraged to feel that they are not alone, that many people felt fearful, sad, or angry when the United States was attacked on September 11th. The book reassures young readers and makes them feel that it is appropriate for them to experience fear, sadness, anger, and anxiety about violent events.

September 12th: We knew everything would be alright
Students of Masterson Elementary School
New York: Scholastic (2002)
Suggested Age Range: 5 and up

Eighteen children in S. Robertson's first grade class tell the story of September 11th and 12th using their own words and art work. The book begins with a description of the events of September 11th. The rest of the story focuses on the next day: "September 12 was a new day. We knew everything would be all right, because . . . the sun came up and the birds started to sing again." The ending of the book has the sun coming up yet again one day later and on the last page is the book's message: "NOT the end."

Of the books presented in this paper, this book is by far the most age appropriate for the simple reason that the book was written entirely by a first grade class of children. They are candid with the reader not only in their words, but in their drawings. The vocabulary is uniquely a first grader's lexicon. We recommend this book for children as young as five because it is developmentally appropriate and free from sexist language and racial bias.
The style of this book does not lend itself to the use of characters. Instead, the child authors are the narrators and we as readers learn about their feelings through their words and drawings. A child reader could easily identify with the children who wrote this story knowing that other children experienced what they experienced and felt as they did. Many children experienced September 11th in much the same way as did the authors themselves.

This book does a remarkable job helping the child reader to understand that it is acceptable to feel frightened, because other children expressed the same feeling. The refrain "everything would be all right" is repeated throughout the book. Common experiences such as going back to school, seeing a teacher's smiling face, reading stories, and singing the national anthem helped many children across the America feel safe again.

Tusk, Tusk
By David McKee
Miller Book Publishers
New York, 1979
Suggested Age range: 5 and up

In *Tusk, Tusk,* two groups of elephants, one black and one white, "loved all creatures, but they hated each other." The two groups live on opposite sides of the jungle until a war between them starts, but the elephants who are for peace hide in the jungle. After many years of war, no elephants are seen, until one day when grey colored elephants come out of hiding. The book ends with two new groups being formed, each with different ear shapes. The drawings of the elephants make the book simple to understand; the story becomes both accessible and relevant to young children.

The characters in this story (black and white elephants) provide a model of war and reactions to violence in war-torn areas. The peace-loving black and white elephants escape in the jungle to wait out the war and emerge many years later as grey. The book is accurate in the sense that wars do happen, sometimes for racially motivated reasons (presented in the book as prejudice related to skin color and ear shape), but is it age appropriate for young children? Although young children can read the words in this story, we think that the allegorical message of the story is probably beyond the intellectual and developmental grasp of children until they reach the high end of early childhood. Older children might recognize that they, as well as the elephants, share a world in which war occurs; they might also recognize that they as well as others may choose not to participate.

The story does suggest that the elephants and the children share a world where peaceful feelings, but also prejudice and angry feelings, occur, the latter sometimes leading to violence. Children may respond to this book by offering alternative solutions, or feeling that it is appropriate to feel as the peace-lovers do, but inappropriate to feel prejudice and rage as the war-lovers do. The book suggests that peace is possible even in the endless cycles of ethnic violence. This, however, may not be enough to recommend *Tusk, Tusk* for younger children.

Why?
By Nikolai Popov

North-South Books
New York, 1995
Suggested Age Range: 5 and up

Why? is a wordless picture book that addresses the subject of war. It depicts an altercation between a frog and a mouse that quickly escalates from a petty squabble into a full-blown and highly destructive war.

Although this story is presented as a children's book, the fact that the story contains no text presents a problem: it appears, through its illustrations and animal characters, to be a children's book, but its appropriateness for children is questionable. It might seduce readers (adult and child alike) into expecting a gentle or pastoral animal story, then startle and confuse or scare young children, forcing them to create a story in their minds more or less frightening than the author intended. The familiar title, a question – "Why?" – may offer a way into exploring the illustrations that would be age-appropriate. It could also provide opportunities for the reader to offer alternative solutions to the situation set forth in the story.

The two characters in the story, a mouse and a frog, can represent any children who have ever been jealous of, or angry with, others. The story suggests that there is nothing unusual in feeling jealousy or anger, but also indicates that jealousy or anger can easily get out of control. We believe that this type of wordless picture book does not help to reassure children that their fears are appropriate responses to stress. The book suggests but does not clearly communicate that it is acceptable to feel jealousy and anger but not permissible to lose control on account of those feelings—a notion that might frighten young children. The frog and the mouse do not reflect on their feelings and decide to act appropriately; instead of using words, they act out their feelings in a violent and hurtful manner.

Conclusion

There are a variety of children's book characters who must deal with the same types of fears as contemporary child readers. We chose to focus on an unusual genre of picture books that address riots, large-scale violence, terrorism, and war, but found that few were written with young children in mind. Caregivers must carefully assess this type of literature, which will probably become more common, before sharing it with young children.

Successful stories in this genre allow children to see themselves in the main characters and to be moved emotionally by the characters' struggles and triumphs. For this to occur, a story must meet children's intellectual, social, developmental, and emotional needs. This is the question adults who select books for young children must confront: Which stories are the good ones; on what basis do we decide? We have attempted to explore this problem by examining five picture books, most of which we believe might come close to meeting young children's needs that focus on acts of violence through both concrete and abstract representations. We recognize that picture books for young children which focus on violence are a difficult genre – difficult to write and illustrate, difficult to find, difficult to assess, then difficult share and discuss with children.

As we attempt to support the development of an illusion of safety for young children in a society that is not safe, this genre of literature for young children – when carefully chosen – can become a powerful tool for helping them to reflect on the violence in their world and to develop strategies for coping with the fears that riots, large-scale violence, terrorism, and war engender.

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