

Healing Trauma in Children

Picture Book for Parents



Based on Somatic Experiencing® Trauma Prevention and
Recovery Program by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline

This book is a valuable resource for those people who are working to alleviate the suffering of the children caught in the nightmares of war, in Syria and other war torn countries. I am glad to have had even a small part in making this book available to those in need.

Peter A Levine, PhD.

My heart's desire is that this little picture book, created by a team who loves children, carries hope to those suffering hardship. May unknown blessings be discovered by the courageous caregivers who use these practical strategies to strengthen family resiliency and begin to heal the wounds of traumatic events.

Well Wishes for a Brighter Tomorrow,

Maggie Kline, MS, MFT.

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Not for sale

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Content of this parents guide is based on the book:
Trauma-Proofing Your Kids: A Parents Guide to Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience, by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Kline.

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Dear parents and caregivers,

We understand that it is almost impossible for someone from the outside to imagine the horrors of war or the hardship of living as a refugee.

Through this little picture book, we would like to make your life a little bit easier by giving you some information about trauma and what you can do to help your children, with or without professional help, which may be lacking.

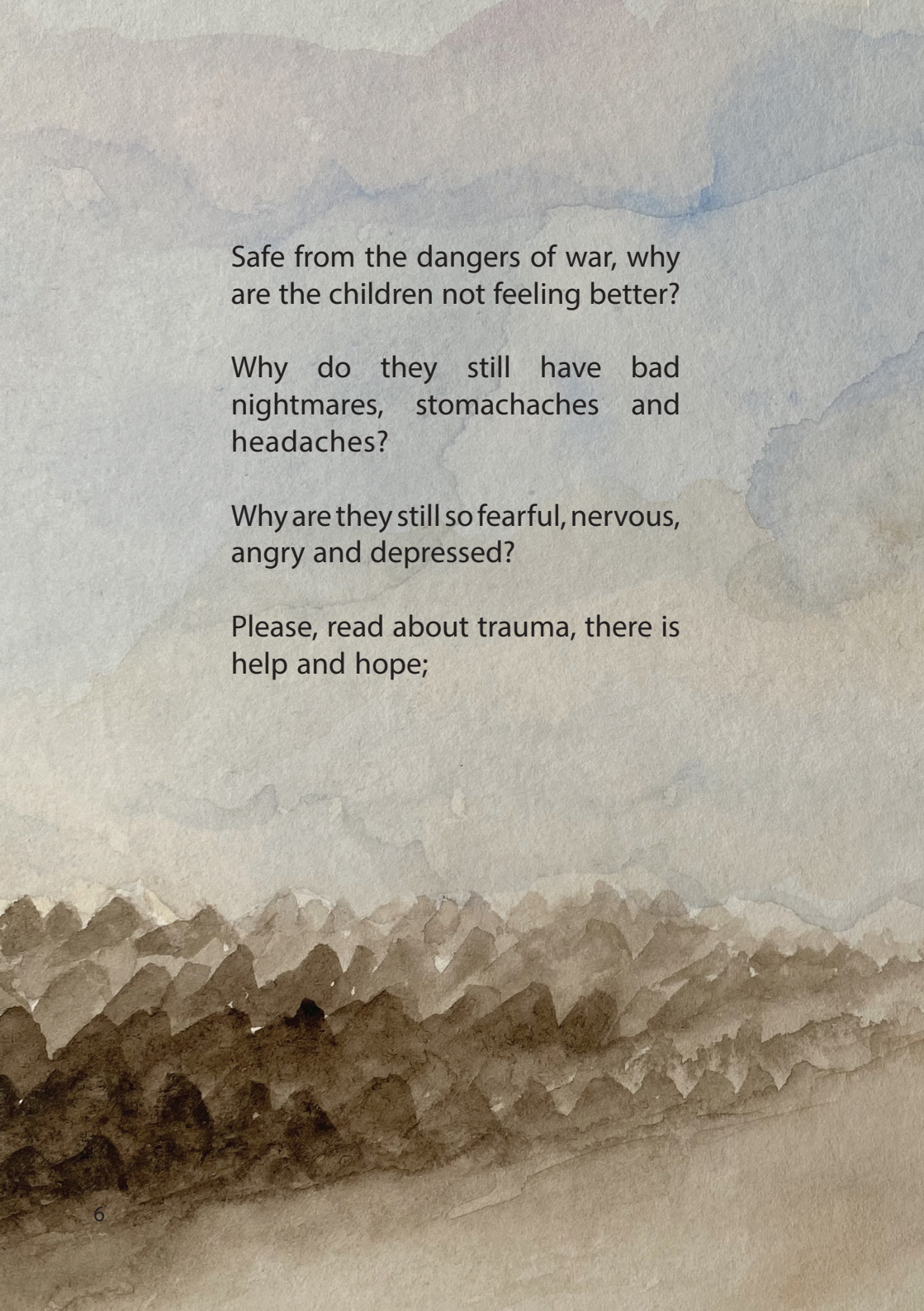
On the following pages, you can find concepts, skills and activities that were designed for the parents of traumatized children to help release the energy of the overwhelming traumatic events.

You are probably naturally doing some of what is written here. Therefore, please, feel free to find more inspiration and choose whatever suits you or your child or adapt it to their specific needs.

Thanks to:

Zlata Koštejnová for first content reading, and *Jana Koutníková* for cooperation in preparation of the storyboards.

Sincerely,
Češi pro Sýrii, z.s.

The background is a watercolor illustration. The top half features soft, blended washes of light blue, grey, and white, suggesting a hazy sky or distant mountains. The bottom half is dominated by a range of jagged, brownish-grey mountains, rendered with more textured and darker watercolor washes. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Safe from the dangers of war, why
are the children not feeling better?

Why do they still have bad
nightmares, stomachaches and
headaches?

Why are they still so fearful, nervous,
angry and depressed?

Please, read about trauma, there is
help and hope;



War and migration and other catastrophic events are scary and painful, but they do not have to cause trauma for life.

We would not like in any way to underplay the suffering, but also would like to tell you that there is something that you can do.

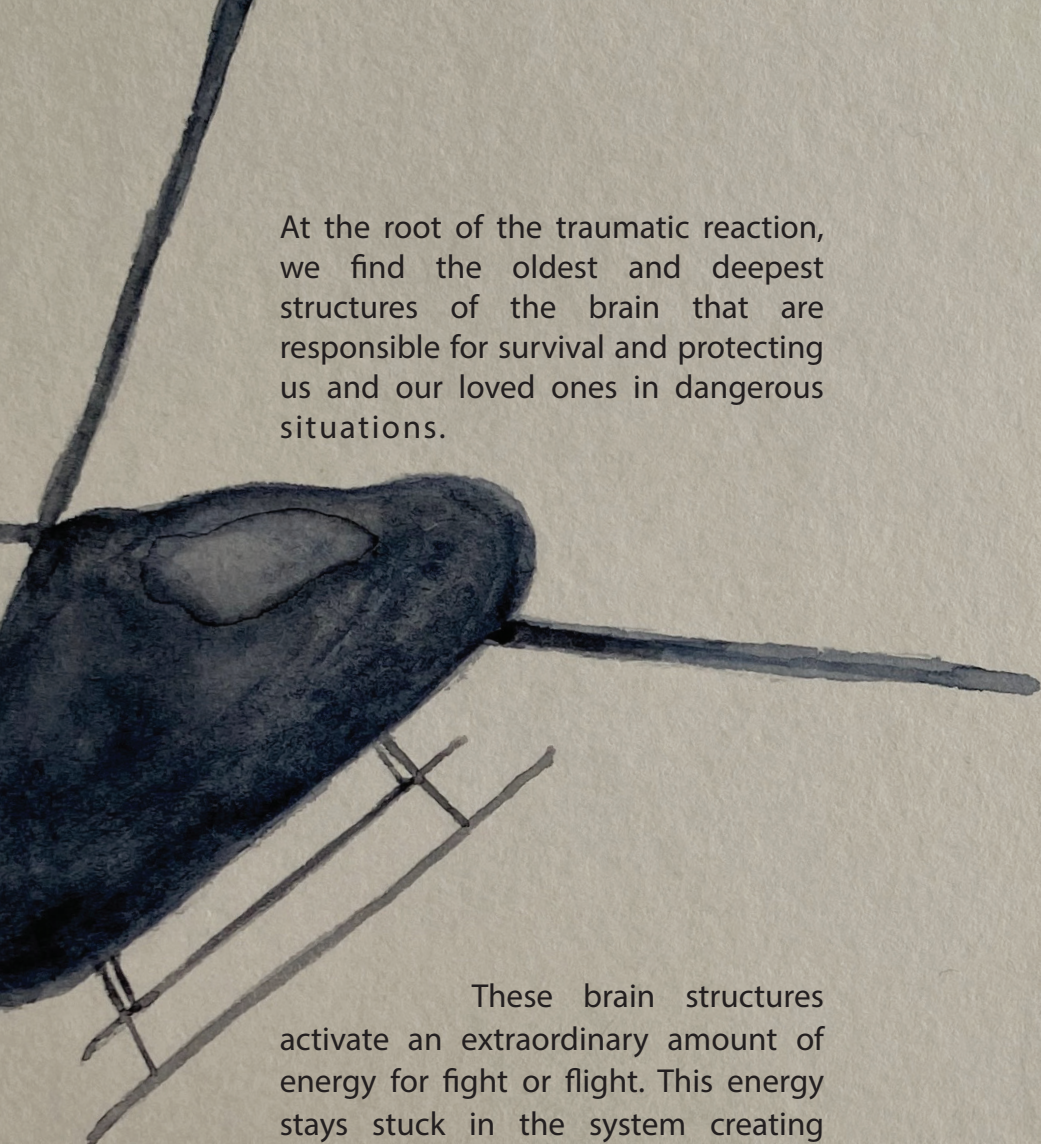
Trauma can be helped.





What is trauma?

Trauma occurs when something happens too fast, too sudden or is too intense. It can also result from ongoing fear and nervous tension. It is anything that is simply too much and the child cannot cope with it.



At the root of the traumatic reaction, we find the oldest and deepest structures of the brain that are responsible for survival and protecting us and our loved ones in dangerous situations.

These brain structures activate an extraordinary amount of energy for fight or flight. This energy stays stuck in the system creating trauma symptoms. Later, even simple reminders can send the same alarm signals through the body, continually turning on a survival system for acute emergencies, even though the danger is over and you are safe.

To heal from trauma, this mobilized energy needs to be accessed and used up in a slow, regulated way, it does not go away by itself.



What are trauma symptoms? How do they show up? How can I tell if my child needs this kind of help?

In trauma, children carry on in life as if the traumatic events are still happening. It is as if they were stuck in the past.



Child stuck on OFF state:

- Collapsed body posture (“a rag doll”)
- As if “nobody is inside”
- Vacant eyes
- No interest in favorite activities
- Refuses to eat
- Extremely sad
- Not interested in friends
- Does not finish anything
- Hurts himself/ herself
- Sleeps badly, has nightmares
- Always tired
- Anxious or guarded

Child stuck on ON state:

- Looking for a “fight”
- Hurts other children
- In play, repeats war stories
- Strong reactions to slight impulses
- Breaks things
- Almost never feels safe
- Fidgeting, restless legs, darting eyes
- Cannot concentrate
- Responds too fast
- Often agitated and angry
- Screams and shouts loudly
- Nervous or anxious
- Nightmares or night terrors

All these symptoms are normal reactions to trauma, and with gentle and informed care they can, and will, change.



Support to the parent

In a child's difficult emotional reaction, to be able to help, you need to be calm enough to do it:

1. Stop.
2. Look around – you are safe, there is no danger, feel the ground, stand tall, feet more apart, bend your knees a bit, maybe take a step back.
3. Look inside – what do you notice in your body?
4. Let the fear and stress settle so that you can react calmly.
5. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly.
6. Use the method described in the handbook.
7. Or use your own method of calming down.
8. Repeat if needed, it is time well spent.

With practice, this procedure will take only a very short time.

To be able to help your child, you need to take care of yourself

- Meet other parents, host and share supportive stories.
- Create support groups (grief groups, care for the elderly, religious practice, care for the environment, knitting, food making, gardening, etc.)
- Try to keep regular daily regime, rituals, holidays, or anniversaries.



What can I do for the child?

Children recover in the context of relationships. With your love, full attention and skills, you can create the safe space for releasing some of the traumatic energy so that the child can cry the tears that need to be cried, share the fears that need to be spoken about, and allow the shaky or trembly feelings to gently be felt and released.

Follow your child's needs.

If they get it out and it is heard, it is good enough!

Note: children have very rich imaginations and sometimes imagine non-existing dangers, it is important to talk about their fears.



Resources

Help children find their resources. Notice or ask what makes them feel good. Strengthen the brain and create new neural pathways by asking them to show you where they feel good in their body and reminding them of their resources frequently. Even in your difficult present environment, try to reconnect with old resources, and find new ones, as these experiences are the antidotes.

Make a list for your child of their resources:

- Things that make them feel safe
- Things that make them smile
- Things that make them feel powerful and competent
- Things that help them feel connected with others

Examples: Family members, access to the natural environment, objects and other things that stimulate and/or comfort the senses (a warm blanket, soft cushion), access to toys (plush and fluffy), relaxing and rhythmic music, books, construction and art materials, children's activity groups and playgroups for young children, volunteer groups for teenagers to improve the environment or based on common interests, natural gifts or talents (science, music, art, languages or construction), sense of humor, charisma, healthy constitution, personal characteristics or spirituality.



Power of words

Words and tone of voice can calm a child or make them more tense. You might say something to:

Ensure the child feels safe and connected, rather than alone, "I am here for you and will stay here with you until the feeling wears off, I will protect you. Relax, take a deep breath, then we will figure out what to do."



- Reassure him/her that whatever happened is over (if it is), "It is over now, it is over, look around, you are safe".

- Help “move time ahead” from the past to the present by guiding them to notice sensations until there is a discharge and shift, “And what do you feel now? Has something changed?”
- Normalize the feelings: “Yes, these feelings are normal after what happened, but they will go away. You will be ok.”
- Remind the child of resources to help him to cope: “Would you like to play with this/ try this with me..”



Safety

When the child is traumatized, almost nothing feels safe. Help the children to find things that make them feel safer. Your calm nervous system and kind words will help them to settle. Ask them to point to or name where the safe feeling lives inside of them.

You can:

- Hold, rock, hug or use any safe touch that the child responds to in a positive way
- Give them a favorite toy
- Use a reassuring voice
- Wrap them in a warm blanket, it establishes safety and recreates the broken personal boundaries
- Invite them to build a "little home" or draw a safe place.
- Notice what makes them feel safe. How can you tell they feel relief? There could be a spontaneous long breath, eye contact, the body relaxes and there are signs of orienting to the environment.



Safe touch

The touch of a caring adult can help a child to feel more secure. The intention when touching the child is to convey acceptance, safety and warmth so that the child knows he is not alone. Connection to your calm and confidence helps; feelings are contagious.

Some examples:

A solid embrace, gentle pressure (like when puppies play), tickle, gentle squeeze of the nose, clapping hands, touch on the arm, shoulder or the back, gentle play with the hair.

In crisis interventions, you can place your hands on the child's feet and softly press towards the ground while they are sitting or standing.

Note: If you touch a child and you see it is not comfortable, don't do it.



Anger and aggression

There will be anger!

It is very normal that a traumatized child will respond dramatically to a rather minor stimulus.

Yes, you have the power to de-escalate a hostile frightened child! First, settle down yourself, take an upright posture and speak calmly in a firm, but kind, voice. Reassure them it's OK to be mad but not OK to hurt anyone. They can tell you or show you their feelings by coloring where the anger lives inside* and how the anger wants to be expressed.

(*)_Examples: Eyes, face, voice, belly, arms, fists legs and/or feet.



Shaking

Shaking might be scary, but it is the best understood way of extinguishing fear and discharging the energy mobilized for fight or flight. So, when it happens, do not stop it, do not fear it, it will help!

Tell your child it is ok!

Note: if it is too intense, try to slow it down a bit with a calm tone of voice or a reassuring touch but not too tight



Nightmares

Wake the child up, and orient him/ her to the present. "It was just a bad dream. Look at me. I am here with you. You are in your bed, see? Here is your blanket and your teddy bear."

After the child settles a little, offer to read/ tell another story to help him not associate sleep to nightmares.

The next day you can ask the child what was the feeling that they had upon waking up, but do not ask them to describe what frightened them, instead, give them papers to draw and color their nightmare.

If the nightmare is some monster or strong characters like veiled men, have the child pretend that he or she is the one that is strong and powerful in the image, pretending to scare or chase or fight until they win.

When children "play" the role of the character or animal, they use movements that reflect the action needed to resolve their nightmare. Help the child to find new, victorious endings to the nightmare.

In the case where houses, structures or nature and people have been destroyed or displaced, have children draw and color their dream on one sheet of paper.

When they are finished, give them a second sheet of paper and ask them to draw a picture of what the opposite would look like...



Grief

Nothing is harder than losing someone (or something) we love. It is natural to feel anger, hurt, fear, emptiness, rage, disappointment, loneliness, sadness, numb and/or guilt.

Ask your child often how he/she feels and what he/ she thinks to help unload their burdens. If they are not ready to talk about their emotions, try again later or invite them to draw their feelings.

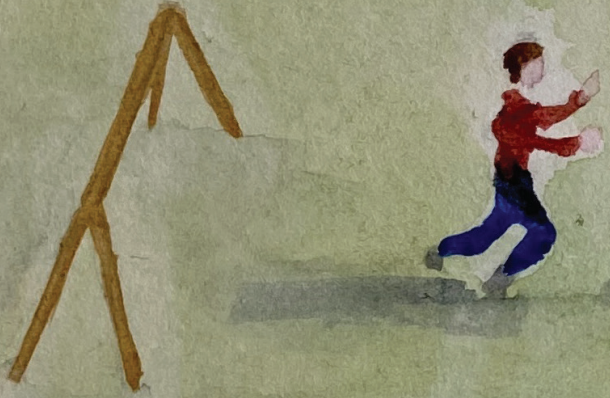
It helps to talk, cry, play, be with friends (e.g. in grief groups), do a goodbye ritual, make a memory album (maybe with drawings instead of photos), tell good stories, do arts and crafts (make memory objects), pray, plant a tree for the deceased, name a toy after them or do what they taught you to honor them.



Activities

The specially adapted games and activities (see the trauma handbook) give children positive feelings, contrary to trauma, i.e. strength, power, fun and competency.

The pleasure of play itself improves the brain chemistry.



Make sure that there are alternating periods of pleasurable activity and settling down to check inside, feel grounded and debrief. Have them rest by sitting in a circle and sharing sensations and emotions and changes they experienced after playing.

In order not be stuck on ON or OFF, change the rhythm. Strong survival energy can be directed into specific physical activities.

This type of release helps complete the incomplete responses from the traumatic event.



Arts

For all children, but maybe especially teenagers, you can use music. There can be compilations of fast, rhythmic rhythms leading to relaxing music.

What do they feel?

Also, writing in diaries, drawings of safe places and storytelling can help.



You can tell stories that you know about how some heroes overcame some difficult situations, either ordinary or big heroes. Children love stories!

(See all the arts and crafts activities in the handbook).



Conclusion

Again, we recognize the horrors of war and the hardships of living in a refugee camp, and respect the power that has taken you this far to help your children to release the tension, build resilience, take small steps and put seemingly small things together.

Choose anything that you like and if you manage, take the next step.

Thank you!





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 **HAYAT**
LIFE
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Revival
hope
From suffering to self-resilience

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