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Developments

Serving children and families by promoting
Interdisciplinary education and research • University-community programs • Dissemination

Kids and Trauma

In Tragic Times, Healing Words and Actions Help Children Work Through Their Emotions

Helping children cope with the terrorist attacks of September 11 and ongoing threats of terror poses a challenge to parents and professionals, but it is not unfamiliar ground.

Natural disasters, neighborhood violence, plane crashes and other catastrophes, and previous acts of large-scale violence and terror, such as the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, have all provided behavioral scientists opportunities to examine the impact of such events on children.

And from past tragedies come lessons that might assist parents, professionals, and schools help children through today's trying times.

What follows is a summary of information from a number of reliable sources about how children react to traumatic events, warning signs of possible emotional problems, and what steps can be taken to help children cope and heal.

Reactions Vary

No hard and fast rules govern how children react to traumatic events. Some only worry and hold troubling memories for a short time, while others show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder

*(**Healing Words** continued on Page 2)*

IN THIS ISSUE

University Directs Statewide Initiative

Innovative, Coordinated Training Approach Tried to Strengthen Child Welfare Agencies

The job of a public child welfare caseworker has gone from tough to tougher – so much so that 40% of entry-level caseworkers leave the profession after one year of dealing with the high caseloads, stress, heartbreak, and ever-changing legal demands involved in protecting society's abused and neglected children.

Hoping to lower turnover rates, bring fresh recruits into the ranks, and raise the level of knowledge among Pennsylvania child welfare workers, the state Department of Public Welfare and U.S. Administration of Children and Families recently awarded $20.5 million to the University of Pittsburgh to fund the first year of a three-year initiative to coordinate and improve training for caseworkers and agency supervisors.

The comprehensive initiative provides specialized child welfare education programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels and includes training in the statewide computer-based information management system and competency training for certification.

Low salaries, low public appreciation, heavy workloads, and high levels of stress from dealing with families in crisis are all factors that contribute to high vacancy and staff turnover rates among public child welfare agencies.

*(**University Directs** continued on Page 10)*

*(**Healing Words** continued from Page 1)*

(PTSD) and quietly fall at risk for long-term problems.

PTSD may be diagnosed if certain symptoms last one month or longer. Symptoms include re-experiencing the event through play or nightmares, avoiding reminders of the event, diminished interests or a gloomy sense of future, sleep disturbances, irritability, poor concentration, increased startle reaction, and regression.

When emotional reactions may surface varies. With some children, they are seen immediately. With others, they surface some time after the event.

And certain children are more at risk of emotional harm than others. In the high-risk group are children directly touched by the events, such as those related to victims, and children with pre-existing conditions, including those who previously were victims of abuse or some other type of trauma and children with mental health problems.

"It's like putting a pebble in a sack. The more pebbles you put in, the harder it is to carry," said Emie Titnich, Infant and Child Development Specialist, Pittsburgh Early Head Start.

Experts say parents need to find out what their children know about a particular traumatic event, such as those of September 11, and be aware of their children's emotional state. Although the impact is likely to be greater for children who are closest emotionally and physically to the events, even children living far from the sites of terror are not immune, thanks to intensive news media coverage that delivered the horror, grief, and anger of that day into homes across America.

Age A Key Factor

Many factors influence how children react. A child's personality and temperament, for example. Some children are simply more fearful than others and are more likely to experience heightened feelings of anxiety following a traumatic event.

Age is one of the more influential. The National Institutes of Mental Health reports that certain reactions are common to specific ages in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

- Children under the age of 5 may react with a fear of being separated from parents, crying, immobility, trembling, excessive clinging, and regressive behaviors, such as a return to thumb-sucking or bedwetting. The reactions of parents are particularly influential to children this young.
- Reactions among children 6 to 11 years old include extreme withdrawal, disruptive behavior, inability to pay attention, regressive behaviors, sleep problems, refusal to attend school, and outbursts of anger. Schoolwork may suffer. Depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt and emotional numbing are seen as well.
- Although adolescents may seem more resilient, they can be hard hit by events such as the September 11 attacks and subsequent threats. Reactions may include depression, confusion, disturbed sleep, fatigue, substance abuse, problems with peers, anti-social behavior, academic decline, and lack of pleasure in activities they previously enjoyed.

Media Exposure

Most American children were not directly touched by the September 11 terrorist attacks. And most were not counted among the survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing, either, or knew any of the victims of the 1998 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO. But the news media widely reported those events and, in the case of television, delivered graphic images of the violence and its emotional aftermath.

Nearly four decades of research concludes that media violence can result in harmful consequences for children, particularly when they get a steady dose of it. Risks include heightened aggression, fearfulness, and becoming less sensitive to the consequences of violence and less compassionate toward its victims.

- A television news broadcast can contain as much graphic violence and action as some popular entertainment programs. The important difference is that the news carries the weight of being real. How children process that information depends a great deal on age and level of maturity.
- Preschool age children have trouble telling what is real and what is fantasy. They can be frightened by frightening events on TV. Experts warn that violence can become less shocking to them if they are exposed to a steady diet of it on television.
- Very vulnerable ages are between 6 and 10 years. They worry about real dangers like car wrecks and tornadoes. Although they know the difference between fantasy and reality, they lack perspective. Media coverage of a handful of anthrax exposures, for example, might lead them to believe that exposure is common.
- Adolescents are more media savvy and have a better-developed perspective on the news. But exposure to

*(**Healing Words** continued on Page 9)*

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Interdisciplinary Fellowship Program in Policy and Evaluation

Training Next Generation Of Evaluators Continues Under New Director

Demand for the skills they are learning is not likely to be an issue for the latest doctoral level class admitted to the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development's Interdisciplinary Fellowship Program in Policy and Evaluation.

Nearly 900 nonprofit agencies serving children and families in Allegheny County are under pressure to evaluate their programs in ways that not only document outcomes but suggest how to improve them. The problem is only about a dozen evaluators are available who can apply state-of-the-art techniques to community human service agency settings.

The Heinz Endowments recently renewed its financial commitment to the three-year-old Ph.D. fellowship program, enabling it to continue developing new evaluators who specialize in working with community nonprofit organizations.

The program is under the leadership of a new director, Pamela Meadowcroft, Ph.D. Dr. Meadowcroft succeeds Hide Yamatani, Ph.D., under whose leadership the fellowship program began.

In September, the program welcomed its second class of student fellows.

Experts say that demand for the specialized skills the students are learning and using could climb even higher during a weakened economy as human service spending tightens, putting a premium on agencies being able to demonstrate outcomes and become more efficient.

"In the nonprofit arena, people come to the work with great values, commitment, creative ideas, and knowledge of the community, but not a great background in looking at their services and making decisions based upon critical data," Dr. Meadowcroft said. "People aren't trained in evaluation, but funders are demanding more accountability. So we have a big task ahead of us."

Learning First Hand

Community human service agencies present evaluators with a number of challenges. These agencies work with people with complex and varied needs. A recent emphasis on integrated collaborative services requires evaluators to understand the perspectives of a broad range of disciplines. And because these programs deal with people, not product units, there are some ethical considerations, such as not withholding treatment from those who need it just for the sake of providing a control group for outcome measurements.

The fellowship program, begun in 1999, mixes course work and field study to give students who are pursing advanced degrees the skills they will need to evaluate preventive, rehabilitative and empowerment-focused programs for families and children.

Each student works with an experienced evaluator in the field and is assigned two or three community programs each year of the fellowship.

Recent programs include helping a community board determine how to evaluate the effectiveness of their grant-giving, assessing the impact of a children's mental health program, assessing a new approach by child advocate attorneys to represent dependent children, and evaluating the effectiveness of a health care intervention plan for pregnant teens.

"I couldn't ask for a better dynamic for learning while positively impacting our community with the help of these talented fellows," Dr. Meadowcroft said of the blend of course work and hands-on experience.

Dr. Meadowcroft was named director of the fellowship program in July after leaving The Pressley Ridge Schools, where as Deputy Executive Director she helped build a $55 million-a-year agency that provides more than 40 programs to troubled children and their families in Pennsylvania and three other states. Also, as a leader in the field of outcome evaluation in children's services, she worked with more than 30 agencies to develop a common outcome evaluation system for all services to seriously troubled children.

New Class

Of the new goals in the fellowship program, at least one – a greater emphasis on marrying course work to the students' projects among community agencies – was inspired by feedback from previous fellows.

The fellows' class work is designed to help them contribute effectively to their community-based projects and, in turn, these projects bring to life what they have learned.

Course work and hands-on practice in the field are

***(Training** continued on Page 4)*

Coming Events . . .

Summer Institute Offered For Family Researchers

The Family Research Consortium III, supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, is taking applications for a 2002 Summer Institute for family researchers.

The theme of the 2002 Summer Institute is "Family Processes, Mental Health and Positive Development in Diverse Contexts." It will be held June 20-23, 2002 at the Ballantyne Resort in Charlotte, NC.

The Institute offers a forum for dissemination, evaluation, and discussion of important new developments in theory and research design, methods, and analysis in the field of family research.

The Institute accepts a limited number of junior and senior researchers as participants and allows for intellectual exchange among participants and presenters in addition to the more structured program of presentations. Minority family researchers are particularly encouraged to participate.

Deadline for applications is March 1, 2002.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact Dee Frisque, Center for Human Development and Family Research in Diverse Contexts, Pennsylvania State University, 106 Henderson Building, University Park, PA 16802-6504; (814) 863-7108; fax, (814) 863-7109; e-mail: dmr10@psu.edu; web site: www.hhdev.psu.edu/chdfrdc. ■

*(**Training** continued from Page 3)*

also supplemented with the Interdisciplinary Policy and Evaluation Guest Lecture Series, which exposes students to regional and national experts, who are brought in to address topics ranging from the future of evaluation from a funding organization's point of view to how to design an evaluation in ways that minimize threats to its validity. The speaker series is also open to the broader university community and agency staff.

The new class of four graduate students bring diverse backgrounds to the fellowship program. They are:

- Andrea Gruber, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, who has worked with grassroots organizations in Hungary for 20 years, including initiatives serving with children and youth.
- Prisca Moeti, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, whose interests include looking at the barriers to and cultural appropriateness of health and wellness services to find ways of improving access for African Americans.
- Mary Ohmer, School of Social Work, whose interests include how community development and organizing contribute to the development of social capital and healthy communities.
- Carrie Rishel, School of Social Work, whose interests include prevention programming and evaluation for youth, especially programs that address adolescent pregnancy.

The program's first class of four fellows are working toward completing their doctoral degrees in various disciplines while they continue their work in the field of evaluation. For example, one former fellow, Jennifer Post, is working on a number of projects, including an evaluation of the Heinz Endowments Education Program grant-making.

The fellowship program is designed to attract advanced graduate students from multiple disciplines to become local leaders in the effective use of evaluation in community agencies. Fellows may eventually become professional evaluators within a university setting or take positions of influence within human services agencies.

"People in nonprofits have to become more competent to anticipate the need for evaluation and build it into their programs," said Anne Farber, Director of OCD's Planning and Evaluation Division. "With the skills the fellowship program provides students, they can become evaluators or they can become managers and directors of programs who are sensitive to the issues of evaluation."

The fellowship program is part of OCD's overall response to the need for program evaluators to work with community human service agencies. In 1993, OCD established the Planning and Evaluation Project (PEP) to conduct evaluations for community human service agencies. In 1996, PEP developed the Evaluation Technical Assistance Project, which offers community agencies training in the basics of program evaluation.

To date, PEP has evaluated 64 programs, provided technical assistance to 108 agencies, completed 28 policy studies, and trained more than 300 people in evaluation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Interdisciplinary Fellowship Program in Policy and Evaluation contact Pamela Meadowcroft, Ph.D., Director, at (412) 683-0957; e-mail: pmeadowcroft@aol.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Guest Speakers Series, call (412) 624-1188. ■

ENDING WELFARE: COMMON APPROACHES TO REFORM AND HOW THEY INFLUENCE FAMILIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

Special Report

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development
Serving Children and Families By Promoting
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A full understanding of how welfare reform affects poor children remains elusive some five years after state and federal policies were redrawn to limit benefits, reduce dependency, encourage employment, and cut government costs.

Recent studies, however, shed some light on the question. Among them are national studies by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation based on the experiences of early welfare reform initiatives in several states that adopted common features, such as mandatory work rules and time limits on benefits.

No alarming evidence was found to suggest welfare-to-work policies seriously diminish children's health, development, and overall well-being. On the other hand, few significant gains were reported among children whose families moved off welfare under reform initiatives. Welfare-to-work has been linked to better school performance among some children, but reported gains are modest and limited to families in programs that try to "make work pay" by subsidizing job earnings with cash awards.

What is clear is that family employment and income are not benign influences. And it is growing up in poverty, not welfare receipt, that threatens children's development.

Welfare Reform

In 1996, the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act brought profound changes to welfare, including a time limit on receiving cash assistance. It capped nearly three decades of efforts to move low-income Americans into the workplace and cut dependence on once-guaranteed government subsidies and benefits.

Earlier policy changes included increasing the benefits offered to working-poor families through the Earned Income Credit, a federal tax credit that supplements the earnings of low-income families. Publicly funded health insurance and child care were also expanded in many states to support and reward work outside the welfare system.

Individual states responded to the 1996 law by adopting a variety of reform initiatives of their own. Key features of these programs include:

- **Mandatory Employment.** Most approaches are designed to encourage recipients to search for, find, and hold a job. This rule is usually enforced by reducing and eventually discontinuing the welfare benefits of those who don't work.
- **Time Limits**. The 1996 federal law requires cash welfare assistance to be limited to five years over a person's lifetime. States may shorten limits or extend them using state funds. States may exempt 20 percent of their caseloads for hardship reasons.
- **Earning Supplements**. Some programs offer earnings subsidies and other supports, such as child care, to lift low-paid working families above poverty levels.

In Pennsylvania, welfare reform brought mandatory work rules and a five-year limit on cash assistance over a recipient's lifetime. No cash earnings supplement is offered, but child care subsidies and other benefits are available to working families. Some working families may also be eligible to retain Medicaid coverage and a percentage of their food stamps. For example, a single mother who works full time for $8 an hour and has two children under age 6 would receive Medicaid, $94 worth of food stamps each month, a $258-a-month Earned Income Tax Credit, and child care subsidies.

If reducing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseloads is the sole measurement, welfare reform has been a resounding success. Between August 1996 and June 2000, the nation's TANF caseloads fell 53% to 5.8 million cash subsidy recipients, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Pennsylvania's TANF caseload dropped 56% during this same period.

Less clear is how children are affected by welfare reform programs that require parents to work and weaken the safety net for jobless families.

Risks To Children

Changes in employment and family income can affect resources that influence a child's health, safety, and development.

Employment

Studies of how a mother's employment affects her children suggest that much depends on the characteristics of the mother's job, quality of child care, and whether family resources increase. Also important are factors not directly related to employment, such as the mother's personality and her child-rearing practices.[1]

One danger is that low paying, routine jobs that offer little autonomy tend to erode a mother's emotional well-being, which can influence her child's development. Another is that unconventional hours and frequently-changing work schedules – characteristics of many low-wage jobs – make it difficult for parents to manage work and family responsibilities.

Family Income

Family income determines, in large part, the resources parents are able to provide their children and influences other factors, such as stress and parenting behaviors.

Income consistently predicts a child's academic and cognitive performance. And studies suggest low-income children are more likely to have behavior and health problems than children of more affluent families.

Other outcomes associated with poverty include low birth weight; delayed physical, cognitive, and social development; school dropout; and teenage pregnancy.[2] The chances children will experience such outcomes are increased the longer they live in poverty and the earlier in their lives they experience it.

Receiving Welfare

Welfare may carry a stigma, but there is little evidence that receiving welfare – apart from income level – influences children's cognitive and social development.

Poor outcomes tend to follow children of welfare families. They face a higher risk of low academic achievement and of dropping out of school than children who do not live in poverty, for example. But poverty, more than welfare status, produces these risks. For example, families who leave welfare and poverty before their children are 3 years old have children whose cognitive ability is higher than children from families who leave welfare but remain poor and children from families who do not leave welfare or poverty.[3]

Job loss, parents separating, and other major changes not uncommon among families who move into and out of welfare programs can affect children's outcomes. Higher levels of behavior problems are reported among children of families who had recently become welfare recipients, as well as among children whose families had recently left welfare.[4]

Child's Age

Young children who have not yet reached school age may be more profoundly influenced by family income and a mother's employment than older children.

Research suggests that infants and preschool-aged children are more sensitive than older children to separation from their parents. And the development of cognitive and language skills may be influenced by the quality of child care – a factor that may be associated with family income.

Among older children, adolescents are more able to appreciate the value of their parents' work away from home and may even benefit from the role model a working parent provides. However, a single mother's employment has been associated with delinquency and poor school performance in households where supervision is lax and communication between parent and child is poor.[5]

Welfare Reform & Children's Well-Being

Neither studies of early reform measures or indicators of the well-being of children in Pennsylvania suggest welfare-to-work programs do low-income children significant harm. These latest findings, however, offer an incomplete picture.

The most comprehensive studies of the impact of welfare reform are based on the evaluations of programs enacted prior to the landmark 1996 federal reform legislation. Pennsylvania's child well-being indicators, while reporting encouraging trends, do not define what role welfare reform played, if any, in the statistical improvements. In fact, many indicators began to improve prior to the state's welfare-to-work program.

Pennsylvania Indicators

Several key measures of child well-being in Pennsylvania have shown improvement in recent years.[6] For example:

- **Child abuse**. The rate has fallen steadily after it peaked in 1992, when 3 substantiated cases of abuse per 1,000 children were reported. In 1999, the child abuse rate was 1.8 cases per 1,000 children. In 1996, before welfare reform, the rate had already dropped to 2.2 cases per 1,000 children.
- **Out-of-home placement.** The rate of children placed in foster care and other placements rose from 5.5 per 1,000 children in 1989 to nearly 8 children per 1,000 in 1999. The increase has slowed since 1997, when it stood at 7.8 per 1,000 children.
- **Drop-outs**. The percentage of high school students who drop out of school fell from 4% of all students in 1996 to 3.75% in 1999. However, a more marked decline was seen from 1989-1995 – again, before welfare reform – when the rate fell from 4.7% to 3.7%.
- **Teen births**. Births to teenage mothers fell slightly

from 9.4% of all births in 1996 to 9.2% in 1998. However, the 1998 rate was still higher than the 8.9% teen birth rate reported in 1989.

Employment & Income

Nearly all of the early welfare reform programs studied reported higher employment rates among poor families, particularly programs that had a mandatory work provision – a feature that today is at the heart of welfare-to-work programs nationwide.

Unfortunately, studies suggest the shift from welfare to work did little to improve overall family income. Early welfare-to-work programs in 11 states reported that reductions in welfare, Food Stamps, and other benefits matched or exceeded earnings gains in most cases.

So while more families came to rely on job earnings rather than welfare payments as their chief source of income, few were lifted out of poverty. And research shows that it is poverty, not welfare receipt, that is associated with poor outcomes for children.

Subsidized Earnings

Not surprisingly, children fare better when welfare reform programs ensure that families are better off financially for taking jobs and leaving welfare. These programs lift working families out of poverty by supplementing low earnings with cash awards and other supports, such as child care subsidies. Some also relax eligibility rules to allow working families to retain at least a portion of some benefits, such as food stamps and Medicaid.

Studies of welfare programs in six U.S. states and two Canadian provinces that featured earnings supplements report the following outcomes among children.

- **School Performance**. School achievement scores improved 10% to 15% among children whose families left welfare with the help of earnings supplements. The scores reflected teachers' ratings, parents' ratings, and tests measuring children's knowledge in certain areas, such as mathematics.
- **Behavior.** Most programs reported only very slight reductions in measures of problem behavior among children. In Minnesota, however, the Family Investment Program reported gains of about 10% using parents' responses to a 12-item externalizing subscale of the Behavioral Problems Index that assesses problem behaviors such as bullying and cheating.
- **Health**. Few programs evaluated health outcomes. Available data suggest programs neither improve or degrade children's health. However, a Canadian program that supplemented earnings of parents who worked full time reported a 5% increase in scores based on parent surveys and ratings of their children's health.

Earnings subsidy levels of these programs vary, but all help boost family income above poverty lines. For example, the Minnesota program enabled a single mother working 20 hours a week at $6 an hour to make about $250 a month more than she received while on welfare. The program also included child care subsidies.

Mandatory Work Rules

Welfare reform programs all have rules designed to encourage families to move from welfare to work by requiring parents to work or to participate in education and services related to finding and retaining a job. Such rules are associated with higher rates of employment among poor families.

The impact on children and families of imposing mandatory employment services without offering families cash earnings supplements is suggested by the outcomes of early welfare-to-work programs in Georgia, Michigan, and California. The programs required welfare recipients to work or at least participate in basic education or employment-related activities. Those who failed to meet those requirement faced sanctions that included loss of benefits.

- **Income**. Although employment rates increased, family income did not. Parents traded welfare benefits for earnings no higher on average than those of families in comparison groups who were more likely to receive welfare.
- **School Achievement**. Programs were not found to influence young children's school achievement. Nearly all reported gains of less than 1% in children's scores on the Bracken School Readiness Composite test.
- **Behavior.** Behavior problems did not consistently increase or decrease among children aged 3-5 years.
- **Health.** The impact on children's health, measured by parent ratings, was found to be neutral in most programs. However, two of six sites reported decreases of 1%-5% in children's health ratings at a two-year follow-up survey.

The findings suggest little benefit for children as a result of mandatory employment services, in contrast to programs that provided cash earnings supplements and other supports to raise working families out of poverty.

Policy Implications

In 2002, federal policymakers will debate the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform law and the outcome is expected to influence state policies across the nation. This time around, lawmakers will have the findings reported above to help guide them. More specifically:

- Welfare-to-work programs do not appear to significantly degrade children's health and development as earlier feared.

• State welfare reform programs can help low-income children, even when policies require their parents to work under the threat of losing their benefits.

• Mandatory employment services yield higher employment rates.

• The least expensive programs are those that require parents to work or participate in employment services without offering supports, such as earnings subsidies, but do not benefit children.

• Mandatory employment services alone usually fail to lift families out of poverty, and it is poverty that harms children.

• Programs that offer low-paid working parents cash earnings supplements or other supports, such as child care subsidies, lift families out of poverty and tend to improve outcomes for children. Such programs typically are the most expensive.

The importance of family income cannot be overstated. It is linked to stress levels in the home, and it influences the availability of resources that affect children's health, safety, development, and academic performance.

When parents in a federal Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP) site in Pittsburgh[7] were allowed to set their own goals and choose services to achieve them, those who were not receiving welfare cash awards were more likely to choose goals and services that pertained to them as a parent and to the development of their children. Children of these parents scored the highest of any other group in mental performance measures, and their achievement scores improved over time.

CCDP children whose families were on welfare did less well mentally than might have been expected. Their parents tended not to set goals and select services related to parenting and children. Their goals and services addressed basic needs such as medical care, housing, and education for themselves.

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*(**Healing Words** continued from Page 2)*
violence in the media can be harmful and their emotional well-being should not be taken for granted when the news is awash with reports of terror.

Adults Set Examples

How parents and other key adults in children's lives respond to a traumatic event or ongoing crisis goes a long way toward determining how well children cope and what lessons they take from the experience.

Experts say parents and other adults should understand their own emotional state when dealing with children during a crisis. Parents who fall into long periods of crying and grieving or overtly express fear make it more difficult for their children to cope.

Rather, parents should model calm, be understanding, try to maintain as normal of a routine as possible, and encourage children to talk about what worries them. Studies suggest children's prospects for recovery improve when they have a supportive, safe, and healthy home.

"It is important for parents to show they are in control, particularly parents of young children," Titnich said. "Maybe we can't say something like September 11 won't ever happen again, but we shouldn't portray helplessness."

Being There

Having a parent or other significant adult around in a time of crisis comforts a child and gives adults opportunities to observe a child's behavior and emotional state.

Comfort comes in many forms: plenty of hugs and kisses, letting a child sit close to you, and cuddling, to name a few.

Taking extra time to read or playing quiet games before bed are the kinds of activities which foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a feeling of normalcy.

Talking About It

Communication, a key ingredient of any healthy parent-child relationship, is particularly important in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Contrary to the concerns of some adults, allowing a child to talk about violent acts will not increase the child's fear. In fact, having children keep scared feelings bottled up is more damaging than open discussion.

However, experts suggest adults consider a few guidelines when talking to children about events such as September 11.

• Keep explanations developmentally appropriate. Young children need brief, simple information balanced with reassurances and dispensed on a "need to know" basis. Upper elementary school children may need help separating fact from fantasy. Adolescents can handle varying opinions and will likely have a few of their own.

• Tell the truth. Children may become worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

• Don't embellish facts or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. And don't dwell on the scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

• Listen to children's thoughts and concerns.

• Respect a child's wish not to talk about particular issues until he or she is ready.

• Adults should regulate their own conversations, being careful to avoid making generalizations about groups of individuals that tend to dehumanize a situation.

Giving Assurances

Whether at home or school, adults should assure children that they are safe during a time of crisis.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that given what children may have seen on television or heard from any number of sources, they need to know that the violence is isolated to certain areas and they will not be harmed.

Parents and professionals can comfort children by assuring them that they have done everything they can to keep them safe, and by giving them facts about how people are protected--by police, for example--along with some safety measures that can be taken.

Experts emphasize taking a positive approach and warn that adults should never dismiss a child's fears or criticize them for being afraid.

Media Exposure

News of terrorist attacks and other large-scale tragedies can itself be traumatic. The September 11 attacks provided an abundance of horrific images that accompanied print and broadcast news reports. Even to adults, such dramatic images can be mesmerizing.

Experts warn it is unwise to let children or adolescents view footage of traumatic events over and over. If they do watch such footage, they should not watch it alone.

Schools Can Help

Home is not the only place where children should be able to find comfort in times of crisis. School should be seen as safe harbor, too.

To help children through the aftermath of traumatic events, the National Association of School Psychologists suggests that schools take several steps, such as:

• Maintain structure and stability within the schools.

• Have a plan for the first few days back at school and include school psychologists, counselors, and crisis team

*(**Healing Words** continued on Page 11)*

(**University Directs** *continued from Page 1)*

Few workers enter the field prepared for the difficulties they encounter protecting abused and neglected children and helping to make dysfunctional families whole. Only about 25% of child welfare workers have a background in fields that help prepare them for the job, such as social work, child development, sociology, and psychology.

"They are serious, well-intentioned, bright people. But, at least when they start out, they don't know much about child welfare," said Edward W. Sites, Ph.D., a professor in the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work and principle investigator of the five programs that fall under the child welfare training initiative.

"What happens is that people take these jobs and don't know what they are getting into and they don't know what to do. As a consequence, they don't feel good about their work. They don't get self-satisfaction. They don't feel they're able to meet the expectations of the job. So, after a while they quit."

High Demands

The evolution of the role of the nation's public child welfare agencies has expanded with heightened public awareness of child abuse and concern over protecting children at risk.

In 1962, for example, the American Medical Association reported that a significant number of parents batter their children, even to death, and within five years, 44 states had adopted mandatory child abuse reporting laws. Other key legislation followed. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, for example, freed funds for investigation and prevention of child abuse. And the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act made child safety the key consideration in dependency decisions and ordered courts and agencies to more quickly place dependent children in permanent homes.

Mix in high rates of poverty, the dissolution of the family, a persistent drug problem, and other factors and the result is a steady flow of dependent children into the child welfare system – 8,118 children in Allegheny County last year alone.

Nearly all become the responsibilities of county child welfare agencies, which investigate reports of abuse and neglect and provide foster care, residential care, independent living, adoption, family preservation and reunification services.

Pennsylvania spent $1.24 billion on child welfare in fiscal 1999-2000.

Five Programs

High staff turnover within agencies is corrosive, disrupting continuity, diminishing oversight, and adding to the caseloads of already overworked colleagues. It is also very expensive. It costs an estimated $14,000 to train a single caseworker in Pennsylvania.

The University of Pittsburgh initiative bundles five educational programs in an attempt to ease the turnover and vacancies within public child welfare agencies.

- **Child Welfare Education for Leadership** (CWEL), begun in 1996, offers graduate-level education for child welfare workers, who can attend the University of Pittsburgh or another of the five Pennsylvania schools of social work affiliated with the program. They receive up to 95% of their salary in addition to tuition and other benefits. In return, they agree to work with the sponsoring agency for at least two years.
- **Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates** (CWEB), begun this year, offers social work degrees with child welfare content to undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh and 13 other state schools in an effort to strengthen child welfare agencies. Students receive tuition and fees for their senior year, a stipend and book allowance. In return, they agree to work at a public child welfare agency for at least one year.
- **Competency-Based Training** program, begun in

(**University Directs** *continued on Page 11)*

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*(**Healing Words** continued from Page 9)*
members in planning the response.

- Provide teachers and parents with information about what to say and do for children.
- Have teachers provide information directly to their students.
- Identify and monitor students who recently experienced a personal tragedy or have a personal connection to victims of the traumatic event and offer them extra support.
- Inventory available community resources for children who may need extra support.
- Allow time for age appropriate classroom discussion and activities.
- Instruct teachers to be careful not to stereotype people or countries that might be involved in a terrorist attack. Use the event to teach tolerance and justice.

Whether at school or at home, adults play a key role in helping children work through their emotions in the aftermath of a traumatic event and even learn from the experience. Above all, said Titnich, "we need to show children that life goes on--that you might be sad or afraid, but life goes on."

For Further Information

The above article was based on information from a number of sources, including those listed below. Further information on children and traumatic events can be easily found by visiting the following Internet web sites:

- American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org). The site posts summaries of information on the roles of parents and pediatricians in helping children in the aftermath of traumatic events.

- Child Advocate (www.childadvocate.net/disaster.htm). Site contains suggestions for helping children cope with disaster and tragedy.

- National Association of School Psychologists (www.nasponline.org). Site offers suggestions in an article: *Helping Children Cope With Tuesday's Acts of Terrorism: Tips for Parents and Teachers*.

- National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov). Offers articles and research summaries on school violence and helping children cope after witnessing violent events.

- Children Now (www.childrennow.org). Organization offers detailed information and advice regarding children and their response to news reports and media violence.

- Penn State Cooperative Extension (http://agexted.cas.psu.edu/fcs/dp/fyrp.html). Extension provides a listing of online reources dealing with children and traumatic events. ■

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*(**University Directs** continued from Page 10)*
1991, was this year placed under the direction of the University of Pittsburgh. The program provides legally-required pre-service and in-service training for 3,800 Pennsylvania child welfare caseworkers and administrators.

- **Pennsylvania Child Welfare Information System** training, begun in 1996, was placed under the direction of the University of Pittsburgh this year. The program provides training in the use of the statewide child welfare information management system.
- **Independent Living Program** training for staff who work with dependent children who "age out" of the child welfare system at age 18, but lack the support and skills needed to succeed on their own. The program was placed under the direction of the University of Pittsburgh this year.

Building On CWEL

The comprehensive initiative evolved from the university's success with the CWEL program, which is designed to improve the knowledge of child welfare workers and keep experienced workers on the job. About 87% of the program's 300 graduates continue to work in public child welfare.

Dr. Sites said the program also demonstrated the need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing staffing problems. "After CWEL was in place for a while, we realized that while we were assisting the counties to strengthen their staff, we were not plugging the holes left by vacancies." The result was CWEB, the effort to encourage social work undergraduates to look at public child welfare work as a career option.

Placing other related training programs under one roof gives the state and university an opportunity to put some of the best minds to work developing curriculum and studying issues important to child welfare. "It makes sense to house all of these at one university where we can shape them so they compliment each other," Dr. Sites said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work's child welfare web site at www.pitt.edu/~pittssw/Cwel/index.html or contact Dr. Edward W. Sites at (412) 624-6305; fax (412) 624-1159; e-mail: esites+@pitt.edu.■

Announcements . . .

State Grants Support Child Care Providers

The Pennsylvania Department of Welfare, through its Office of Children, Youth and Families, is offering a range of grants for child care providers.

These grants include:

- **Capacity Building Grants**, which provide up to $10,000 to start a new center or to expand the number of children served by a current child care provider.

- **Quality Improvement Grants**, which provide for improvements such as training and supports for family day care homes, accreditation, supports for children with special needs, and specialized services for infants and toddlers.

- **Operational Planning Grants**, which are available one per county to help build a richer array of local child care resources.

Applications for grants are accepted all years. Anyone with eligibility questions should contact the nearest Child Care Resource Developer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact PA Department of Welfare, Health and Welfare Building, Room 333, PO Box 2675, Harrisburg, PA 17105; Western Region, 1-877-349-4850, Central Region, 1-800-436-3020, Northeast Region, 1-800-528-7222; Southeast Region, 1-877-660-2273. ■

Economic Development Grants Offered To Uplift Communities

A range of organizations, including community action groups, are eligible to apply for a state-sponsored program that provides financial and technical support to stimulate economic development and opportunities in Pennsylvania communities who need it the most.

The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development accepts applications for the Employment and Community Conservation Program (ECC) at any time.

In general, the program seeks to improve the quality of life in communities and to help ease unemployment and other social conditions that contribute to poverty and dependency on government welfare. The program is also interested in:

- Encouraging local government and nonprofit organizations to collaborate on community development initiatives.
- Supporting local, comprehensive initiatives aimed at improving social, physical, and economic infrastructures in communities.

Applicants are encouraged to contact DCED about a project before submitting a proposal.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact: Ellen G. Kight, Director, DCED, 413 State Office Building, 300 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15222; (412) 565-5002. ■

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