

BOOK REVIEW:  
TOO SCARED TO CRY:  
PSYCHIC TRAUMA  
IN CHILDHOOD

By:  
Lenore Terr, M.D.

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*Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*, by Lenore Terr, M.D., was published in 1990 by Harper and Row, New York, New York.

Lenore Terr, a child psychiatrist from San Francisco, is perhaps best known for her important naturalistic and longitudinal study of the children involved in the Chowchilla school bus kidnapping. Her efforts to understand the impact of a single, prolonged trauma on a roughly normative group of children, and to compare her observations with reasonable control groups, sheds considerable light on how trauma becomes interwoven into the psychological and behavioral repertoire of children. In this book, Dr. Terr supplements these naturalistic studies of trauma with clinical case examples from her practice and numerous, non-first hand references to the creative works of famous adults. At times this strategy works well; there is a clear concordance between clinical cases, naturalistic study, and psychobiography for the specific topic she is discussing. However, at other times she seems to lack a solid clinical foundation to anchor her discussions. For example, it is not unusual to find an apparently unsubstantiated conclusions such as "if you combine the trauma with a death or new disability, then you will see depression, paranormal thinking, and/or character change—count on it" (p. 107). This tendency, combined with her efforts to analyze the works of famous people (which may have been part of an effort to broaden her audience,) unfortunately often leave the clinically grounded reader frustrated by vague conclusions and attempts at psychohistory that at times seem less than substantial.

Dr. Terr's book is divided into four parts focusing on the following aspects of childhood psychic trauma: emotions, mental work, behavior and treatment, and contagion. The strongest chapters relate to her description of the cognitive processing of trauma and treatment recommendations. When reading these chapters one appreciates the breadth and depth of Dr. Terr's clinical experience. For instance, in one of her best chapters, "Remembering Trauma," Dr. Terr makes a number of fine points. She describes several cases that illustrate the troubling problem of children's statements and behaviors that are based on factitious traumatic events. She then details the results of her review of twenty preschoolers, and concludes that trauma suffered before the age of three years was rarely able to be fully described verbally.

Instead, behavioral reenactments were the rule, and Dr. Terr makes the crucial observation that she knew ahead of time what specific trauma had occurred, which enabled her to understand the behavior as a reenactment. Finally she notes the distinction between a single, sudden traumatic event as being clearly held in a child's mind and subsequently accessible to verbal remembering, versus repetitive or prolonged trauma that severely compromises accurate verbal recall. Observations such as these, and her well thought out treatment recommendations, make this book worthwhile for any clinician who encounters traumatized children or adults who were traumatized as children. ■