

MONDAY OCTOBER 11, 1999  
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:30

**Helping Children To Learn About The Holocaust  
A Psycho -Educational Approach.  
“Why, What, How And When.”**

*By  
Batsheva Dagan*

**The Problematics of the Topic**

The subject of the Holocaust is very problematic since it is inextricably linked with a sustained aggression, the like of which has never before been seen in the annals of human history. The subject arouses existential anxiety which is linked with fear of death in itself a prototype of human anxiety. The very word “Holocaust” arouses painful associations both among those with direct experience during the war (survivors, relatives of victims as well as those whose knowledge has been drawn from the media (films, books etc.). Added to this is the result of the devaluation of the concept “Holocaust” caused by its use in inappropriate situations.

The encounter with the Holocaust raises the basic conflict between man’s natural tendency to repress the subject and the need and the obligation to remember. The topic creates a barrier made up of the events of the past and the fear of their possible repetition in the future. Another obstacle in dealing with the subject is the perceptual level. In general, it is difficult to perceive and to understand things with no previous experience of them. The events of the Holocaust are beyond conceptual perception because of the disparity between life in the present and events in the past as depicted in the media. The encounter with the topic generally causes traumatisation (often with no opportunity of working out one’s feelings) because the overall approach is to deny atrocities. Dealing with the topic, which is inherently contradictory to man’s tendency to repress and forget, raises the question whether there is a moral justification for teaching it and the dangers it holds. Both of the above reactions i.e the tendency to repress and forget, and the expression of doubt about introducing the topic at all, are clear evidence of the erroneous approach to its teaching.

The rise of neo-Nazism and the peril of the denial of the very existence of the Holocaust around us and the repression of the phenomenon within us require an active stand on the part of educators through various educational frameworks.

The anxiety adults display about the possible traumatic reactions of children to the Holocaust is twofold because it deals with killing, and thus with death, in a distorted form. In general, the anxiety focuses on the horrific aspects of phenomenon-- the large scale of victims involved and the incomprehensible nature of the extermination machinery (gas chambers, torture, shooting etc.). This child’s encounter with death, in itself is difficult.

At this point it is worth mentioning the Festivals linked with the history of the Jewish people, such as Chanukah, Purim and Pesach, in which danger to Jewish existence

stands out although there are differences. The destruction of the Temple or the killing of the firstborn are also difficult subjects, but in spite of this children are told about them at an early age because the historical perspective frees us from the anxieties linked with the events and diminishes the extent of our involvement. The distant past is lost in the midst of time and there are no statistical records, like those published about the Holocaust today. Topics such as death, sex and God are no less complicated and yet we undertake to teach them. Children's questions about any of those subjects require answers in spite of the difficulties and particularly about the Holocaust because we are dealing with extreme evil inflicted by man upon man.

Fairy tales also contain anxiety-arousing content, yet we tell them to a child. In Bethlehem's (1976) opinion, fairy tales imply an inevitable struggle against great difficulties as being an inseparable part of human existence. Bethlehem takes issue with those who favor concealing from children the dark side of man. He claims to give legitimacy to the expression of content relating to the problems and difficulties in a child's existence.

The presentation of problems of existence is done in a harsh, brief and polaric manner. Good and evil are revealed as separate, specific figures and actions. This dichotomous presentation of figures helps the child distinguish between the two. The heroes in fairy tales go through series of struggles, failing and once again overcoming, and the story concludes with a happy end.

### **The Child Up Against Threatening Factors**

The question of whether or not to expose the child to any kind of experience regarding the Holocaust is no longer our decision. Let us not forget that we live in a technological era; television has removed the aura of secrecy from world events from which the adult would like to protect the child. Today's child grows up in a world without secrets.

Massive amounts of information penetrate into the home. Television, thanks to its extra visual dimension, brings to the child past events and causes greater involvement. Today Auschwitz is in every home regardless of time and space. Giving a child answers is essential, for the sake of guarding his mental health. Many reasons support the need for answering a child's questions:

1. The answers are a part of education about the facts of life.
2. They satisfy the child's natural motivation to know what's happening around him.
3. The child has developmental strengths which will help him to accept the facts of life according to his perception of the world.
4. Saying things out loud decreases the child's anxiety.
5. Knowledge of the Holocaust on an appropriate level helps to develop consciousness of one's roots. It happened to us, to Jews, to Gypsies, to Poles and to Russians. Without this knowledge the child will not feel complete.
6. The topic helps the child to deal with death without being directly involved in it.

7. The experience in treatment of traumatic states, such as death in the family, indicates the importance of receiving clear and unequivocal information that a parent who has passed away will never come back. (Smilansky 1981)
8. Adoption of a child in the family is another area which should be explained to the child at an early stage of development in order to prevent damage to the formation process of personal identity and to the bonds of trust between the child and its adopting family.

### **Perception of The Topic: A Gradual Developmental Process**

Perception of the Holocaust and formation of attitudes towards it should be considered as a gradual developmental process. Each child reacts according to his own level of emotional and cognitive maturity to information presented about the Holocaust, but in addition there are general developmental features in each of the areas of his growth. Three developmental phenomena complicate the young child's "historical perception" of the Holocaust.

- Firstly his orientation in concept of time, in the chronological sense, is very poor and limited to his immediate experience.
- Secondly, the child's thinking is syncretic, seeing things in a general encompassing fashion, which lacks differentiation and accuracy. When two events are shown side by side or have similar features, the child transposes from one to another and confuses them. It is well known that children transpose figures from one festival to another so that Pharaoh and Hitler are not separated by time.
- Thirdly, the child's moral perception is different. According to Kohlberg's stages of moral development, the child is on the pre-conventional level, characterized by obedience and punishment orientation. Children are concerned with whether they will be labeled "good" or "bad". Their judgement is linked with physical consequences. "The Nazis were bad because they killed many people."

The above characteristics of the young child's thinking prove clearly that we should not rely on rational explanations because they are beyond his capacity to understand. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the need for some kind of explanation and to take into account the danger of confusion (peculiar to early childhood) which the child outgrows as his experience widens.

### **The Role of Identification in Coping with the Subject of the Holocaust**

Early childhood is characterized by learning through identification and imitation. According to Freud, this is a process during which the child's "ego" and the "superego" are formed through imitation of a specific model and as a result of the effort to resemble the model by internalizing him. Such learning is based on a deep emotional attachment to the object of imitation. Identification in the initial stages is with the parents, later on expanding to kindergarten and school teachers and others in his life, as well as figures from the movies and literature.

The identification with authority figures can occur in two ways:

1. Through admiration, fondness and respect.
2. Through hate and fear which lead to identification with the aggressor. Identification with the aggressor reduces anxiety, builds self-worth and gives

back to the individual his self-confidence-“ I’m more like the great and powerful.”

“If our goal is teaching tolerance and love for our fellow- man. This may be achieved through positive identification which will arouse, on the one hand, sympathy, the ability to see the good In man, sorrow and mercy and, on the other hand, the awareness of hate as the source of evil”.(Minkowich, 1961).

### **Desirable Themes in Dealing with the Topic**

Very profound impressions can be made by offering the child the correct experience; the question is around which theme should the very first directed experience be created. One of the main problems is how to preserve the child’s faith in man. Even in the most tragic social reality there are positive aspects of human behavior which can be made accessible to children. This can be done by using two themes which compliment each other. :

1. Heroism
2. Helping others

We must remember those who did all in their power to save others while endangering their own lives. A garden has been laid out in their honor in Jerusalem called the Garden of the Righteous Gentiles, where trees are planted, each commemorating an example of human love and devotion. From the annals of prisoners in concentration camps and partisans in hideouts have come countless stories of courage and mutual help. There can be no stronger basis for faith than the example of these people who retained their dignity and moral sense in the face of the indescribable hell.

### **Preparing the Child for the Encounter with the Subject**

In Israel there is Holocaust Remembrance Day. At 8 o’clock in the morning sirens are sounded throughout the country, traffic stops and people observe a two-minute silence. Flags are flown at half-mast and memorial candles are lit. In the evening and all recreation centers are closed. Radio and television services present special programs about the Holocaust and in schools and kindergartens the topic is given attention by teachers. The Day of Remembrance has a special significance and has grown out of the background of the people. In other countries there is no such official recognition and expression of the events and what particular attention is given depends on voluntary groups who initiate symposiums, film shows, lectures etc.

In the USA, the Holocaust has been put into the school curriculum. In order for educators in other countries to bring the child into contact with the facts about the Holocaust, the educator must himself be aware of the need to impart his knowledge and attitudes, and must be sensitive to finding the most appropriate moments to relate the topic to an experience of sorrow or fear in the child’s own life or apply any of the recommended topics and teaching techniques.

Many teachers express great difficulty in respect of how to treat this awesome subject. What to say and what not to say; especially when children bring up precise details of the way Jews were killed in gas chambers, the burning of bodies and all sorts of cruel deeds. The only appropriate way to relate to such revelations is to accept the child’s reactions and enable him to release anxiety , anger and sorrow not only in words but

also through various activities such as drawing, clay modeling and the like, and by supporting the attitude of denouncing evil.

### **What should we tell Children?**

Holidays connected with the history of the Jewish people are presented to the child through the story of deeds and costumes.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day the ceremonial part stands out, and it has become traditional during the course of time. What is required is to tell the story of deeds which will raise the child's intellectual and emotional level.

The book, *What Happened in the Holocaust* (Dagan 1991) is an expression of an attempt to describe the Holocaust in an "almost historical" sequence, in a way which the child will be able to understand and accommodate within his psychological world. The book can assist the kindergarten and school teacher to present the history of the Holocaust without the use of horrifying descriptions. The Holocaust period produced a special terminology. Teachers will need to explain concepts like ghetto, concentration camps Nazi, partisan, the red army and so forth.

### **Typical Questions**

The Israeli child's main encounter with the topic is on *Yom Hashoah Ve Hagevura* (Holocaust, Heroes' and Martyrs' Remembrance Day). The word "Shoah" is not used in the child's everyday vocabulary. "Shoah" means a great disaster. There was a disaster because many people were killed.

Questions reflect the adult questions, "Why didn't we defend ourselves?" "Why did we go like sheep to the slaughter?". This is a generalization which ignores acts of resistance which occurred in many places. According to research, one and a half million Jews fought in various armies in Europe. The Warsaw Ghetto resistance lasted longer than the fighting of Poles and French in the Second World War.

Another issue that occupies the child's mind is his inclination to cling to faith in God. "Why didn't God help?". This is a particularly difficult question, not only for children but also for religious people. It is hard to find a satisfactory answer. Despite this. The question must be dealt with in some way, for example: "God created good and evil and left the choice to man. There are people who choose good and others choose evil." Another possible reaction is to join in the child's amazement "I absolutely agree with you, but I really don't know."

Is there an optimum age to begin? The Holocaust is so horrifying an event that if one could, one would postpone telling one's children about it indefinitely. However, dealing with it is a necessity of life. Whenever it may be, the encounter with the topic should be prepared in advance, especially in respect of the very young child. (3-5 years old).

These are the possible steps (not necessarily in this order):

1. Recollection of sad personal experiences of children.
2. Presentation of a picture which expresses sadness, thus serving as stimulus for personal associations.
3. Listening to a sad tune or piece of music.

4. Lighting six candles.
5. No continuance of sadness should be imposed on the child, such as “ today laughing is not allowed”.

### **The Role of the Educator (or any other adult)**

It is important that any adult undertaking the task of presenting the subject of the Holocaust must prepare himself both content-wise and emotionally for his role and also be constantly aware of and sensitive to the effects of his presentation on the young child.

Sometimes the child is forced into a situation where too much information is given either too early or too late. In either case he is unable to cope emotionally with the subject because the developmental level of the child and the timing and quality of the content do not correspond. As a result, feelings of doubt and guilt are aroused in the teacher. However, these feelings can also be present in teachers who cannot bring themselves to face the subject at all. It is important to examine what the child already knows, what he'd like to know and what the teacher is capable of giving him. Many teachers express great difficulty deciding how to deal with this subject.

How then are we to tell our children effectively about what happened without scaring them? The child's behavior during the telling must be observed and his questions must be listened to carefully. It is best not to give more information than was asked for and our answers must be as clear, direct, and truthful as possible. We must not be shy in communicating our feelings of concern and our expressions of sorrow.

Parents should be called upon in order to widen the support system to allow the child some continuity to deal with the subject and to protect him against over-reaction. It is not enough to deal with the topic once. Children repeat their questions as well as what they have heard from the kindergarten teacher. They should be given the opportunity to express themselves not only in words, but also through creative arts and dramatic play in their daily activities.

### **Guiding Principles**

In order to carry out the task we have to act according to the following principles:

1. A step by step approach according to the child's developmental level.
2. A selective approach to the content in order to avoid trauma.
3. Give priority to a personal account over a generalization about six million.
4. A systematic study of the account from various aspects (i.e historical, economic, psychological) at an older age.
5. Take into consideration the student's emotional state whatever that may be.

I do not wish it to appear that the approach I have suggested is avoiding the issue of violence in connection with the Holocaust. We are talking about a period in which the extent and nature of the violence and atrocities are such that they remain incomprehensible even to the adult; how much more frightening and indeed incomprehensible must they seem to the child. If in our presentation we concentrate on

the “techniques” of the horror we will achieve disgust and alienation rather than identification and compassion. Therefore, our selection of appropriate material is crucial.

We must present the topic to the child in order to involve him as a compassionate participant in the historical experience of our people. On the plaque in Dachau there is a quotation, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. We have to teach about the Holocaust and introduce the topic as early as possible, because it has a central place in the collective consciousness of the Jewish people. Our hope is that appropriate treatment of the topic will lead in the long run to an ongoing personal involvement, out of which will emerge a strengthened moral stance. On the one hand, denunciation of evil and an active stand of self-defense in time of danger; and on the other, in spite of all, a reaffirmed faith in man.