

Tornado Terrors

The Possible Effects of Severe Weather Events on Children



Possibly the greatest trauma of my childhood was the F4 tornado that hit Wayne County, Michigan. Though the Fujita-Pearson scale came into being fifteen years after the event, an F-scale rating has been attached to that tornado after-the-fact based on reported damage.

It came at twilight. In a scenario very similar to the opening scenes of "that movie", I remember Dad had been watching the skies all afternoon and evening. I remember hushed tones shared between him and Mom, and a very worried, concerned look on their faces. I wasn't asleep, but in bed when Mom came and grabbed me from my bed and rushed me to the cellar. In those days, one opened the windows in the homes when tornadoes threatened... but there was no time. As we descended into the cellar, my main concern was for Eric, my small terrier. He was nowhere to be found. Just as Dad was closing the door, Eric emerged from where he was hiding behind the couch, and made it in to the cellar at literally the last moment. Yes, I know, familiar story.



Photo courtesy of Josh Jans, storm chaser

Searching the NOAA archives, there are various and often contradicting reports of the major tornado that day. Some say that of the outbreak of 10 tornadoes in southeast Michigan that day, the F4 actually hit Flint and tracked southeast. After some research I was able to find a report that matched exactly what I

remembered. "The strongest tornado in Wayne County since 1950 occurred on May 12, 1956 at 6:55 PM EST. This tornado was categorized as an F4 (out of 5) on the Fujita scale. 22 persons were injured, with the tornado occurring in the Allen Park and Ecorse areas before moving into Ontario. The tornado had a mean width of 1200 feet. 50 injuries were reported in Wayne County, with a number of mobile homes and houses either destroyed or damaged by the tornado". (<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/dtx/waytor.htm>)

I remember lightning, howling winds, and hail breaking the casement windows of the basement. I remember us huddled together, not knowing what would happen next. We stayed the night, and the next day emerged to ruin all around us. Our house survived, but many in the neighborhood sustained incredible damage. We were lucky. We weren't the hardest hit. After time, the images faded. The fear did not.

I received about four years of counseling to help me work through my tornado terrors. They haunted every waking hour of my early life. My relationship with my parents was affected, because I could never again believe them when they said that there was nothing in the dark that could hurt me. My schoolwork was affected, because I couldn't pay attention in class and watch the sky as well. I had appointed myself watchdog of the world, ever vigilant should the monster return. I couldn't sleep unless every member of the household was accounted for, until every pet was inside and safe. I was fearful of tornadoes. I was fearful of the thunderstorms that brought them. I was fearful of the clouds that became thunderstorms, and the rain, and the wind and the dark.

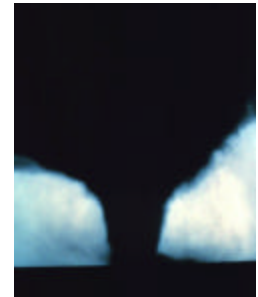


Photo courtesy of NSSL
Photo Archive

We didn't know anything about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) back then. I was lucky to have relatively modern thinking parents who weren't bothered by sending their kid to a "shrink". They combated my fears with counseling and a constant and steady influx of KNOWLEDGE; knowledge on how tornadoes formed, what my real risks were, and what to do. At some point, the fear turned towards fascination. I did a 180° turn from my childhood terrors, and now chase the very thing I feared.

My story is fairly well known, and posted at various spots on the internet and in the press. It was no surprise when I was contacted by a gentleman from Dearborn, MI about the story. Don wrote, "I share your terror at the events of that evening. It occurred for us in Dearborn at last light as we waited for my father to come home from work so that we could eat supper and then go to bed. That was a terrible time. It is one that I will not ever forget. I have never experienced anything that terrible before or since."

The final irony is that I recognized Don's name as someone I had gone to school with. Old chums reunited, but oddly, years later and a hundred miles apart, and under such a freakish coincidence. Two people, same storm, same age, 40+ years later, with the same haunting memories and obsession. Don is trying to do what I did years ago: put the demon to bed.

This spurred me to do a bit of research in the effect of natural disasters on children. The results of my brief research were stunning. Natural disaster, most prominently, tornadoes, ranks right up there with child abuse and loss of a parent in causing post-traumatic stress syndrome. The results of such an experience are listed as "catastrophic".



Photo courtesy of NSSL Photo Archive

Psychology Information Online describes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as: "characterized by any of the following groups of symptoms: re-experiencing the traumatic event through painful recurrent dreams or nightmares, diminished interest in normal activities, difficulty sleeping, flashback, crying spells, irritability, anxiety, depression, fears, or an inability to concentrate or stay focused. PTSD can occur at any age including childhood. Symptoms usually begin within the first three months of a traumatic event. The severity, duration, and proximity of an individual's exposure to the trauma are the most important factors determining the likelihood of developing PTSD."

The American Psychiatric Society states that "aspects of the disaster or trauma which increase the likelihood of psychiatric distress include a lack of warning about the event, injury during the trauma, death of a loved one, exposure to the grotesque (e.g., maimed bodies), darkness, experiencing the trauma alone, and the possibility of recurrence."

In subsequent conversations with Don and with further study, I surmised that the occurrence of PTSD in children that survived tornado destruction and/or trauma would be multiplied simply because at a young age, we simply do not have the tools to work through these terrors. We have not had the life experience. There can be and often is a lack of warning, darkness, and the possibility of recurrence.

Dr. Jessica Hamblen, of the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress disorder, states, "There are three factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood that children will develop PTSD. These factors include the severity of the traumatic event, the parental reaction to the traumatic event, and the physical proximity to the traumatic event. Children often do experience 'time skew' and 'omen formation', which are not typically seen in adults. Time skew refers to a child mis-sequencing trauma-related events when recalling the memory. Omen formation is a belief that there were warning signs that predicted the trauma. As a result, children often believe that if they are alert enough, they will recognize warning signs and avoid future traumas."

From memories, and from observations of my own children, I think children also have a tendency to personify things that frighten them. For both Don and myself, our storm was not a random meteorological wonder, but a living breathing monster, seeking us out, threatening all we had come to know as "our world". It never really left; it was always out there waiting. It would come back, unless we were very, very careful.

Tornado terrors are found even in children who have NOT lived through a violent, destructive tornado. TV and movies are rife with tornado footage, from the *Wizard of Oz* (little girl swept away from her family by a big tornado... now there's a lovely family theme) to *Twister*, filled with death, disaster, and fear. Even the documentaries show the most dramatic, gut-wrenching footage possible. Images, images, images.

The experts tend to agree that these fears and anxieties can be crippling to young minds, and that empowerment (knowledge) and conversation (verbalization) is the best way to help youngsters work through these fears. Quoting Dr. Hamblen again, "Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for children generally includes the child directly discussing the traumatic event (exposure), anxiety management techniques such as relaxation and assertiveness training, and correction of inaccurate or distorted trauma related thoughts."

The presentations MESO puts on in schools do allow a forum for children to voice their fears and concerns, and also allows us the opportunity to empower children with the tools they need to combat fear. The basic format seldom changes in my presentations. I start by asking, "Who here is afraid of tornadoes?" There are usually one or two hands. However, as the rapport and conversation grows, I would say that about 75% of the kids I talk to have some serious issues with tornadoes and severe weather.



Photo courtesy of NSSL Photo Archive

We discuss the unbelievable combination of events that have to come together for a tornado to form. I show them how big a tornado is in relation to their towns or communities. It's amazing that most of them think they cover half the state, and gratifying when I see the liberated smiles when they see that they don't. Most importantly, we tell them what to do should danger threaten, and send them home with information for their parents on making a disaster plan and a disaster kit.

It's important that we, as adults, realize that regardless of outward appearances, children that have been through a severe weather event should be encouraged to talk about it. It's important to be aware of behaviors that may indicate that there might be something lingering from the event deep inside. It's important for children with fear of severe weather to be empowered with the knowledge that will shrink those fears into smaller, easily handled concerns.

Some of those behaviors can include:

Emotional reactions: these can run a gamut from disassociation (emotional numbness), shock, terror, anger, guilt, resentment, and fear. They may manifest in a number of way, from lack of pleasure or interest in daily activities to tantrums, crying fits, nervousness and sleeplessness.

Cognitive reactions: disorientation, trouble making decisions, shortened attention span, thought disorganization, spotty memory, and indecisiveness.

Physical reactions: change of appetite, fatigue, nervousness, insomnia, nausea, edginess, and body aches and pains.

Interpersonal relationships may take on a change, both at school and at home, with feelings of rejection, distrust, withdrawal, and/or isolation. It is important to note that PTSD symptoms can disappear of their own accord, but without resolving the underlying issues, can result in permanent readjustment issues and personality alteration that becomes a permanent fixture.

In my own experience, readjustment after my childhood tornado experience was reactive more than proactive. In other words, my "treatment" came subsequent to the traumatic event, after symptoms had been manifesting for some time. By that time, fear of severe weather had become firmly entrenched in my psyche; an installed file on my mental hard drive. Yes, eventually I overcame them rather dramatically, but I cannot help but wonder what a different childhood I would have had if they had know then what they know now about defining, detecting, and addressing PTSD.

Resources abound, in your public libraries and on the internet. FEMA has a wonderful site for youngsters at <http://www.fema.gov/kids>. There is also a lot of fun to be had at The Tornado Project Online, <http://www.tornadoproject.com/>. NOAA presents another great site for children at <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/mkx/owlie/owlie.htm>.

MESO itself has a tornado safety article, more geared towards adults, which offers a Family Disaster Plan, and other tips for disaster preparedness, at <http://www.mcwar.org/> in the ARTICLES section. And, as always, we are only an email away if there is any further assistance we can offer; be it chatting with the kids or referring you to sources that can offer further or more specialized guidance.

Nancy Bose for MESO, June 2003

<http://www.mcwar.org>