

Moving children and families beyond trauma

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Pediatricians can play an important role in helping children and communities recover following episodes of school and community violence and disaster, while working to prevent and prepare for future tragedies, said David J. Schonfeld, MD, FAAP, a world-renowned expert on school crisis and bereavement.

Dr. Schonfeld is giving a presentation, "Aurora, Newtown, Boston and Beyond: Violence and Its Impact on Children," on Oct. 28 during a plenary session at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) National Conference and Exhibition in Orlando.

Dr. Schonfeld is the founder and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, [pediatrician](#)-in-chief at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children and chair of pediatrics at Drexel University College of Medicine. He has traveled throughout the world to counsel and train school, pediatric and mental health care staff on caring for [children](#) and [communities](#) impacted by crisis and loss.

Dr. Schonfeld provided pediatric bereavement and school crisis consultation in the aftermath of hurricanes Sandy, Katrina and Ike; and following the shootings in Aurora, Colo., and Newtown, Conn. Dr. Schonfeld has been named to the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission which will make recommendations on school safety, mental health and gun violence prevention in that community.

"These are life-changing events," said Dr. Schonfeld. "You don't go back, you don't undo it, and you don't return to the perceived 'normal.'"

These children and communities are changed and impacted by these tragedies forever. And yet it does not mean that these children are damaged."

Pediatricians can help children impacted by crisis events, including those who are grieving, experiencing loss, or exposed to violence throughout their childhood, said Dr. Schonfeld.

These child victims either remain impaired or grow from their experiences, he said.

"This is where pediatricians can help shift the balance; by helping these children and families to emerge from these events with healthier coping abilities. There is an opportunity to promote post-traumatic growth that will make these children more resilient."

Pediatricians also can help children and families within their own communities to deal with the impact of tragedies, even those that occur many miles away.

"When a disaster like this happens you start to think of your own life experiences, difficulties you've had in the past, things you worry about for the future," said Dr. Schonfeld. "If pediatricians are sensitive to that and help kids who are struggling because of their own thoughts, fears and experiences, they are doing a lot. You don't have to go anywhere in the world to find adversity. Just look where you are."

Pediatricians should work collectively and within their communities to decrease [violence](#), by advocating for meaningful change in gun laws, for example, and setting systems in place that prepare school and other officials for shootings and [disasters](#) in ways that minimize child exposure to these events.

Dr. Schonfeld said these goals can be a tall order for pediatricians.

"It's hard to be a pediatrician in good times, and tremendously challenging after a disaster. If you're a pediatrician in Newtown constantly seeing patients who are struggling—and it's like that after these major events—there's not an influx of financial and other resources to help with this response," said Dr. Schonfeld.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, through its Friends of Children Fund, is working to provide support to pediatricians in communities impacted by disaster, and [mental health](#) training for pediatricians so they are better prepared to help children dealing with trauma.

"We need to help pediatricians impacted by these events if we want to help children and communities," said Dr. Schonfeld.

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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