



# JPA

Juvenile Protective Association



## Thank You.

The photo below that accompanies this month's case presentation "Superpowers" was taken by one of our therapists at a school on the west side of Chicago. It's the view from the therapy room where kids as young as five go for counseling. At first glance, it's easy to see the safety grate secures the window. If you look more closely you can see a hole in the window on the lower right hand side. The hole was caused by a stray bullet.

This image is a powerful one for me. Even in the safest of places, children - and adults - in some of our communities are reminded daily that they are in danger. During this month of thanksgiving, I want to thank all of you for the various ways you support JPA. Our work helps kids, families and teachers build positive relationships - which may, over time, be more powerful than any protective grate or even a bullet.

From all of us at JPA, we wish you a safe and Happy Thanksgiving.

*Karen*



## Finding Hope Amid Violence

Superintendent of Police Eddie T. Johnson addressed the City Club of Chicago last week regarding the city's violent environment. It was a sobering view of our city's condition, especially when we think about the children we work with at JPA. Take a look at these figures, as reported by Spt. Johnson:

Since January 1, 2016, 626 people have been killed in Chicago, mostly on the South and West sides. And the year isn't over.

- 92% of them were male
- 78% were African American
- 76% were between 15 and 34 years old
- 92% were killed by guns

Supt. Johnson noted that gun turn-in programs have gotten over 7,200 guns off the streets, which amounts to one gun per hour, since January 1, 2016. Yet that's clearly not nearly enough to stem the violence many of our children experience or witness every day. As you'll read in "Superpowers," this month's narrative, it takes a lot of work to help children cope with these events.

Many offenders are not strangers to the police. In fact, 85% of shooting victims (fatal and non-fatal) are known to the police because they've been arrested before. In fact, 40% of those arrested for murder have had at least one previous gun conviction. To combat this situation, the CPD connects offenders to programs offering education, housing, job skills training, and more in order to prevent more violence. About a third have taken advantage of the offer.

Supt. Johnson told the audience that 970 new police officers are being hired over the next two years. He also advocated for longer sentences for gang members, who usually see prison as a joke, since they are often released after serving short sentences. He believes that social media drives some of the violence by enabling individuals to insult others online, leading to revenge killings.

At JPA, helping children caught in the middle of this violence can mean helping to end it. Giving children a chance to see how they can rise above it can give them hope for the future, not just for themselves, but for their communities. Our therapists help them see where they have strengths and whom they can rely on for positive role modeling. Although they must navigate the streets every day, children can still see a brighter future ahead.



## “Superpowers”

**“You need superpowers, Ms. Robin. You can’t be on the street without them.”... Malik continues. “The streets aren’t safe for you!”**

It’s no secret that Chicago has suffered a rise in violent crime over the last few years. Every weekend brings reports of new shootings, new wounds, and new deaths. And violent crime knows no limits: children as well as adults are victims.

Even children who have not been victims themselves are psychologically harmed as they see friends, relatives, or strangers attacked in front of them. Nearly every child we treat in some area of the city knows someone who has been shot. As one JPA therapist explains, “I often ask the kids in a therapy group if they’ve witnessed violence. Usually about half have actually been there and witnessed someone being shot. Many tell gory stories of what they saw bullets do to someone’s body. These things are mind-boggling for adults--even more so for children.”

Many people are unaware that sections of the city are like war zones; Malik lives in one of them. He knows this reality firsthand. Only in third grade, he’s conscious of what color shirt might get him shot. He knows which gang dominates what territory and fears crossing gang lines on the way to school.

Malik was born into this community. He has never known a real sense of safety when he leaves his house. At age six, he saw his uncle in the hospital, shot in the head; he knew why the casket was closed at the funeral.

The constant sense of danger makes Malik hyperactive in class; his inability to concentrate reflects the concerns that preoccupy him, concerns that no third grader should have. The ability to learn, too, is damaged by trauma like Malik’s; he is several grades behind in reading and math even though he’s obviously bright and curious.

Children have unique ways of talking about trauma. Often they speak metaphorically; often they mix reality and fantasy. The therapist must be skilled at recognizing the real intent and feeling behind what a child says.

Malik brought up his sense of danger in his fifth session with Robin, his JPA therapist. He already feels safe with her; he has learned in their time together that she’s always interested in what he says--and that she’s never critical. His comfort level allows him to broach the topic.

Malik is crashing cars on the floor where the two of them sit. Suddenly he pauses. He frowns. Robin can see he’s working something out. “You need superpowers,” he says firmly.

“Superpowers...” Robin begins, matching Malik’s seriousness. Malik interrupts her. “I can give them to you.”

“What do you mean?” asks Robin.

“You need superpowers, Ms. Robin. You can’t be on the street without them.”

“I need them to be on the street,” Robin says, “mirroring” his words. She helps Malik stay with this thought, which is important to Malik’s progress and also difficult because it makes him anxious.

Malik continues. “The streets aren’t safe for you!”

“The streets are dangerous for me!” Robin mirrors Malik’s emphatic tone.

“For you, for me, for anyone! We need to get rid of all the guns. All the guns in Chicago. Until we do, nobody is safe!”

Malik goes on to explain that he gets “superpowers” from his video games; that’s the reason he enjoys playing them so much.

“There are tons [of guns] in my neighborhood,” he tells Robin. “When I play [video games] I feel strong, like nothing can hurt me. I play Call of Duty, and I’m in charge of a platoon. We invade. Even if we lose, I’m still safe on my couch.” Robin smiles a little, because she recognizes that Malik is talking about a way he copes with his sense of danger--a way that makes him feel like he has some control. Robin appreciates how much this fantasy helps Malik. Like a blankie to a toddler, immersing himself in this experience helps soothe Malik, helps him recharge to face the reality he knows outside.

“Wow,” she says. “In the video games, the guns are there, but you still know you’re safe! It’s like the opposite of outside, where you don’t feel safe. It’s so scary when you don’t feel safe.”

“Yeah, exactly!” Malik sounds energized by the therapist “getting” him. He continues. “It’s like my calm from my storm. It’s where I can go and feel better. It’s my safe place.” Malik pauses for a moment and then looks straight into Robin’s eyes and continues speaking.

“People get killed! People carry guns to look cool. But really they are stupid and hurt people. I hear about so many people getting killed, a lot of people I know too.”

“You hear about people being killed! Even people you know! I bet you have some big feelings about this.” Robin is helping Malik focus on his feelings about the situation. She does this because ultimately, talking about them usually makes them less powerful, less dominating.

“It’s hard to describe,” Malik responds. “Sometimes I feel so mad. Other times I get afraid...I don’t understand why people act so stupid.”

“It’s really hard to understand. It doesn’t make sense.” Robin says soberly. She doesn’t offer a solution; Instead, she reflects what he has said, holding it in the space between them. They’re facing this together. They’re facing the fact that this is Malik’s reality; they’re facing the fact that neither of them can fix the huge problems that surround him. There’s only the courage he can develop when he has confirmation that his feelings make sense and when he can share the horror with someone who listens deeply and understands.

Malik had rolled one of the cars to the other side of the room. Now he rolls the other to the same place. “They can be together,” he says. Malik is speaking in metaphor. Robin recognizes this and can respond to the feelings behind the metaphor.

“It feels good to be together. You and I are together now--like the cars!”

Malik gives a yes nod and flops onto his back, staring at the ceiling for some time. When he sits up he gets the Uno cards and begins dealing. This is Malik’s way of transitioning from a mental space of intense emotion to one in which he can better tolerate the demands of daily school life.

## **November’s Presenting Issue: Hyperactivity and Inability to Sit and Focus in Class; Resulting Academic Problems.**

**Therapist’s Reflection:** Providing therapy can feel like a hopeless response in this situation. The therapist cannot change the situation the child is responding to. Malik’s exposure to violence and personal danger has been terrible and is unlikely to improve in the near term. What a therapist can do is reduce the impact of this toxic stress and increase Malik’s resilience in the face of it. This therapy works like a digestive aid--it helps the terror and horror pass.

By helping Malik put words to the images and fear that are “stuck” in his head, the therapist helps it become unstuck, so to speak. It has an effect that seems paradoxical: when the therapist and child focus on something terrible, it actually frees the child from focusing on it all of the time. The relationship between therapist and child is the difference between feeling alone with horror and having someone there to comfort you and help you through it.

Over time, children like Malik emerge from talks like this feeling more confident, calm, and focused. When these feelings replace feelings of fear and helplessness, children become more able to handle the demands of school. School then feels better for them because they can now succeed--and each success then makes them stronger. Feeling better, albeit not all better, can make the crucial difference between dropping out of school and obtaining an education that promises a better future.



### **What: Start the conversation.**

A powerful way to help children with neighborhood violence is to talk about it. You can bring it up in the way that feels comfortable to you. You might say something like, “You heard gunshots this morning. What do you think happened? How did it make you feel?”

### **Why:**

You won’t be introducing difficult feelings, because children are already thinking about it! Talking about it usually reduces the toxicity of traumatic events--after talking about it, children’s overwhelming feelings are often soothed. It helps them get “unstuck.” In the long term, talks like this will also help your child learn to soothe his/her own feelings.

**What: Don't force a child to "talk about it."**

Many children will say "I don't want to talk about it." How you respond is important: you want to let them know it's their decision whether to talk about it and that talking about it can help them feel better. You can let them know you'll be ready to listen if they want to talk later.

**Why:**

Trauma often causes overwhelming feelings about not being able to control the situation. Letting children control when or if they talk helps counter this sense. Also, if they feel forced, they will be unlikely to feel you really understand or "get" them.

**What: Help children find words for their experience.**

Often children may be silent when you try to start the conversation. You can help them begin putting words to their feelings by guessing what they might be feeling, and then asking them if that is right. (e.g., "Maybe you feel sad! Do you think you might feel sad?")

**Why:**

Often when children shrug and fail to speak about their feelings, it's not really that they don't want to. It's that they don't know how or don't feel it's emotionally safe. Our society carries a lot of messages that it is NOT OK to talk about feelings, especially ones that might be considered weak (hurt, sadness, fear). When you start to speak about them you show children it's OK and help them start to find words for their experience.

**What: Don't worry about having the answers--just face the problem together.**

Children may ask you why it happens. This is a massive and profound question. You don't have to have the answer! You might respond by saying, "I know, it is terrible. It hurts and it's scary. It's something that's very hard for anyone to understand."

**Why:**

Facing the problem together is the second best thing to fixing it. To face it together you need to look at the problem together. Your child can express what they see, think and feel and you can show you really hear and understand them.

**What: Show you hear and understand what he/she is saying.**

A good way to do this is to "mirror" what the child says. Mirroring is repeating back to the child what they said to you--think of it as providing a reflection so the child can see him/herself. You may want to say it in your own words but you can also simply repeat the child's words.

**Why:**

It may seem silly, and you might fear you sound like a parrot, but mirroring really helps children know you are listening. It also helps the child understand him/herself--it shows the child's feelings and thoughts are important, and this helps the child remember and understand how s/he feels. Merely hearing you repeat their words helps children know and accept how they feel and think.

**What: It's OK for you to have feelings too.**

If your feelings are overwhelming you that is not a good time to have this talk with the child. But if you can stay calm while feeling your feelings, you can share some basic feelings with your child. ("It makes me mad/sad/scared too.")

**Why:**

This can show the child that everyone has feelings, making the child feel normal. It can help create the sense that you are facing the hard stuff together, because you're having feelings alongside the child. It also gives hope that these feelings won't always be overwhelming.



# NOTES and NEWS

November 2016:



- Join JPA in celebrating National Adoption Awareness Month, which focuses on raising awareness for children in foster care waiting for permanent and loving homes.
- **JPA congratulates Executive VP, Stephen Budde, Ph.D. and Akadia Kacha-Ochana, MPH, JPA's Research and Quality Improvement Specialist**, who were invited to present on their work "The Psychiatric Rehospitalization Outcomes for Children in Substitute Care" at the prestigious annual American Public Health Association's Annual Meeting and Expo
- **Interested in networking with young professionals on a mission** to improve educational outcomes? Come to our next Associate Board event.
- **Get ready for awesome new ideas, decor and overall excitement** for our largest fundraiser to be held on May 19, 2017. We have a NEW space for our largest fundraiser at Venue One.
- **We appreciated this timely article in NRP Ed:** How a Happy School Can Help Students Succeed.
- Keep track of all that's happening at JPA by checking out our Facebook page. Make sure to log in to Facebook before clicking the link.