



## Real Stories, Real Kids

*(Note: All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the individuals involved.)*

**Presenting Issue: Hyperactivity and inability to sit and focus in class; resulting academic problems.**

**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.

**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.