

Prepared by Heather M. Pederson, Ph.D.

## INTERVIEW WITH DR. AZMAIRA MAKER

Author of

# Where Did My Friend Go? Helping Children Cope with a Traumatic Death

### ABOUT AZMAIRA

Dr. Maker is a licensed clinical psychologist and consultant in private practice in San Diego, California where she specializes in the treatment of children who have experienced trauma and loss. She has written children's books on difficult topics, including the award-winning book, *Family Changes: Explaining Divorce to Children*. TFP had the chance to interview Dr. Maker about her recent book, *Where Did My Friend Go?*, written on the night of the Sandy Hook shooting<sup>1</sup>. In this interview, Dr. Maker clarifies the need for tools and interventions that address the mental health needs of young kids in the aftermath of gun violence—a relevant community and clinical issue in many major U.S. cities.

*“I am committed to writing and distributing this book, as I know that sometimes even the smallest intervention can profoundly shift a child’s developmental path and life experiences for the better. My dedication to children and families will continue through *Where Did My Friend Go?* as we work together to educate, heal, and empower kids exposed to trauma, violence, and death.”*

— Dr. Azmaira Maker



<sup>1</sup><http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/12/us/sandy-hook-timeline/>

## TFP: How did you become so dedicated to trauma work?

**Dr. Maker:** I have volunteered and worked in orphanages, schools, non-governmental organizations, the British Council, and The Goethe Institute in Pakistan, Kenya, and The Republic of Congo since I was 15 years old. Working in developing countries, I have had significant contact with children and families struggling with trauma and poverty. I also completed my graduate and post-doctoral training at University of Michigan, which is very close to Detroit and Flint. Hence, my clinical training and research included working with children and families with a range of trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, abandonment, neglect, and domestic violence. To further my training, I completed a fellowship at the Child Advocacy Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School. This fellowship included home visits and court hearings to represent children, which cemented my dedication to trauma work. I was also fortunate to train under Dr. Graham-Bermann at University of Michigan, who is a pioneer on research and interventions for women and children exposed to domestic violence. We ran clinical and research groups for children and women living in shelters and in the community, which were invaluable in learning about the impact of violence. I have been immersed in working with kids and families exposed to trauma and loss for many years, and my commitment to helping some of our most vulnerable children and women remains strong.

## TFP: Can you paint a picture of the current problem of child and teen deaths by gun violence in this U.S.?

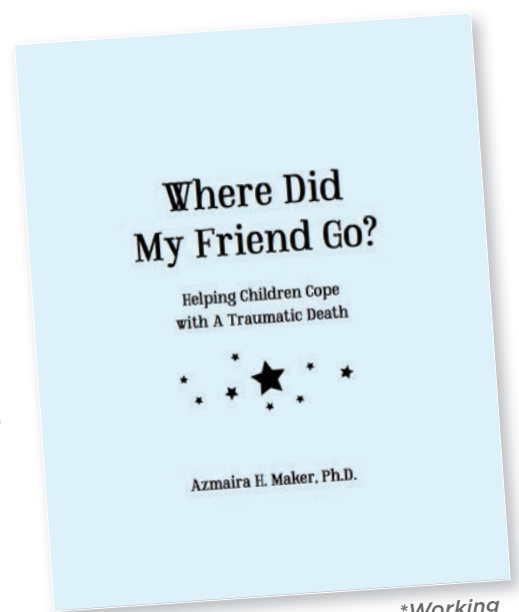
**Dr. Maker:** The Brady Campaign reports that there have been 160 school shootings in the U.S. since Sandy Hook. The Brady Campaign also reports that everyday, 7 children and teens die of gun violence in the U.S, and 40 children are shot and survive everyday in the U.S. Most of us are unaware of these statistics, and I know I was

shocked when I started doing the research and learned the facts. It is hard to believe that American kids die by guns 11 times more often as children in other high income countries.

Gun violence, mass shootings, and witnessing death are now unfortunately a fabric of our society, and it is imperative that we provide support not just for the mourning families, but also for the surviving witnesses – especially young children. Gun violence is happening in schools, in inner cities, and in random mass shootings that affect all of us. For instance, a recent article outlined that in Chicago<sup>2</sup>, 12 people are shooting victims a day! The American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>3</sup> has identified gun shootings as a national health crisis for children and teenagers, as more than 1 in 5 U.S. children and teenagers report having witnessed a shooting, with PTSD, depression, anger, withdrawal, and desensitization to violence being some of the outcomes. Therefore, as mental health providers it is critical that we begin to contribute to addressing this epidemic any way we can.

One of the reasons I wrote this book is that given the statistics, we know there are hundreds of young kids who have witnessed or survived shootings. Although there are many wonderful and visible organizations that focus on gun policies and research on violence, there are far fewer institutes that focus on helping children cope and heal from the trauma and loss associated with surviving a shooting or a traumatic death.

Through *Where Did My Friend Go?* I wanted to focus on the youngest children, who may be very vulnerable in comprehending and coping



*\*Working  
Draft Cover*

<sup>2</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/aug-2016-chicagos-bloodiest-month-decades/story?id=41792681>

<sup>3</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mzikawXXh0&feature=em-share\\_video\\_user](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mzikawXXh0&feature=em-share_video_user)

with shootings and death. Although gun violence often makes the news, we rarely hear a discussion about who is helping the child witnesses and survivors. For instance, recently in Minnesota, there was a shooting in which a mother's boyfriend was killed with her 6 year-old girl in the back seat<sup>4</sup>. We heard about the shooting, we heard about the death, but nobody mentioned the kid in the back seat and the impact on her. Even in Florida (Orlando), we heard about the support being provided to a larger adult community, but the people who died were also some kid's teacher, some kid's brother, some kid's neighbor, and these children may also need means to process the trauma of a mass shooting and multiple deaths.

### **TFP:** Can you tell us about the purpose of your book?

**Dr. Maker:** I see *Where Did My Friend Go?* as a first step, cost-effective, and immediate mental health intervention for the youngest survivors and witnesses of gun shootings. It is perhaps easier to talk about death, grief, trauma, and fears with older kids and teenagers. But how do you process something so terrifying with a 3, 4 or 5 year old? We need a tool that incorporates displacement and play therapy interventions and that focuses on trauma and death in non-threatening ways to help young children process, understand, and cope with gun shootings.

So I wrote *Where Did My Friend Go?* as a picture book to be read by an adult to a young child (3-8 years old) who has witnessed or survived gun violence, with therapeutic questions and child-based interventions provided at the end of the book. The images and words are presented in a child appropriate and non-threatening manner. The purpose of the book is to help the child understand and cope with his/her trauma, loss,

confusion, and fears via displacement (story telling). Graphic images and details have been intentionally avoided to allow the child to process the content in safe ways. Process, therapeutic, and support questions and interventions are presented at the end of the book for the adult to work through with the child to begin a dialogue, address what happened, identify feelings, explore fears, confusion, and loss, cope with the trauma and grief, and identify safe mechanisms and adults in the child's existing environment.

My initial goal for this book is to distribute 1000 free copies of the book to schools, Head Start, emergency rooms, trauma centers, shelters, and community mental health organizations in Detroit, L.A., N.Y., Chicago, and other high-risk cities across the U.S. I see the book being used by mental health professionals, teachers, social workers, pediatric nurses, child community leaders, and other child-focused professionals. The first step when kids experience something so traumatic is to help the child talk about it and process it, and provide them with coping tools and skills.

### **TFP:** Where can people get access to this book when it's published?

**Dr. Maker:** The first step will be providing this book for free to shelters, schools, ERs, trauma centers, Head Start, and community mental health centers. I am



running an Indiegogo Generosity Community fund raising campaign<sup>5</sup> to help me print and distribute 1000 copies of the book for free. The second step is going to be on Amazon and my book website, *Aspiring Families*<sup>6</sup>. So, let's say an incident happens in Kentucky, anybody at that school or community can go online and buy the book on Amazon or *Aspiring Families* for the children, the school, the library, and their community. We are going to provide it at minimum cost, and are trying to keep it as cheap as possible. However, if we raise enough money on the Indiegogo Generosity campaign, then we will use that money to print extra books and continue to give the books away for free. This may be very helpful for communities, shelters, schools, and libraries that may not be able to afford the books.

It is also important for us to remember that there are thousands of child refugees and survivors across the world who have been overwhelmed with trauma and violent deaths. If we ever raise enough money through the Indiegogo Generosity campaign, I hope that we can also begin to distribute the book to organizations that work internationally with traumatized children, as in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

### **TFP:** I noticed there were a lot of questions in the book posed by the child to adults and adults respond in different ways to explain death—what is the reason for that style of the book?

**Dr. Maker:** I kept the language simple for young kids, and used questions that may be typically asked by a child witness of trauma, specifically a gun shooting. I also wanted children to know that it is safe to ask questions, and to talk about this horrifying experience with adults. In the story, the adults acknowledge and validate this terrifying experience for the child. I think it's important for kids to hear the truth, but not in overwhelming ways. Little kids, 3 year olds, see a dead spider on the street or a dead insect, and are told, "It's dead". They may also

hear the words "dead, died, guns, shootings, terrorism, attack", etc., chronically on the news. So kids are exposed to death and dying, but we needed a story, a tool, to help process this very large and overwhelming experience with young ones. In the story, *Where Did My Friend Go?*, I utilize the adults to explain this to children in simple but real ways, while comforting the kids. So I think the words, questions, and responses I have created are important and effective ways to address the trauma and the death, to be factual about it, but to not overwhelm the child in the process.

### **TFP:** This book encourages parents and adults to help kids feel better and safe and I wonder if you could say more about the importance of that for the book?

**Dr. Maker:** When children have witnessed or survived the kind of trauma associated with gun shootings and death, I think one of the most profound anxieties would be, *Is it going to happen to me? Am I safe? Could this happen at my school? In my neighborhood?* I live in San Diego, in a beautiful and safe family environment. Last year, there was a gun threat at an excellent and safe high school, which borders on our elementary school. Both schools were shut down in a gun lockdown. My young child came home terrified, and for weeks continued to worry about it, as did many of his elementary school peers and the teenagers at the high school. I can't even imagine the level of fear that children who are living in chronically violent neighborhoods in Chicago, Detroit, L.A., etc., are struggling with on a daily basis, obviously aware that death can and will happen anytime, anywhere. Although we cannot guarantee or promise any child absolutes nor encourage fantastical thinking, I do think you have to take that extra step to reassure young children: *"We are doing our best. We are making an effort to keep you safe."* That's the message to the kid. We can't make false promises, or that it's never going to happen again because that would be a lie. But to say, *"We're doing our best to try to keep you safe", "We're*

<sup>4</sup><http://www.npr.org/2016/07/07/485049343/minn-man-shot-by-police-while-inside-a-car-with-a-woman-and-child-a>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.generosity.com/community-fundraising/helping-kids-cope-with-gun-violence-and-death>

<sup>6</sup><http://aspiringfamilies.com/>

working as a team”, “The grownups are going to take care of you”, feels genuine and can be helpful for young children.

### **TFP:** What was the reason you chose to use images of real children and adults instead of cartoon characters?

**Dr. Maker:** I chose to use photographs of children for the images because I think to use animated characters felt disrespectful to these kids, as it might be ‘fluffing the issue’. That is my instinctive response. But I also think seeing real faces, real children that kids can relate to and empathize with is very powerful. For traumatized kids to know they are not alone in this process, that there are other kids like them who are thinking and feeling the same things, and worrying about the same things, allows them to connect with the book, the content, and the images emotionally. So when you are reading a book with a young child, half the time the child isn’t necessarily looking at or hearing the content; they are looking and identifying with the images. If you’re reading to a traumatized young child, I wanted to have visual images that encourage the child to connect and identify with. It just feels more real.

### **TFP:** Is there anything that you would like to add?

**Dr. Maker:** I think the most important piece is that *Where Did My Friend Go?* is only a first step mental health intervention for child witnesses and survivors of gun violence. We, as psychologists, need to think of other ways to reach out and provide services to the hundreds of kids witnessing and surviving shootings on a daily basis. I see this book as leading to training on working with kids and gun violence for mental health professionals, police officers, ER staff, teachers, community leaders, etc., to

provide more outreach and community mental health services for traumatized young children. As we know, violence begets violence; so I think the bigger issue is what are we doing to help these kids?

### **TFP:** So, it starts the conversation about what else we can do to follow up and continue it.

**Dr. Maker:** Yes, I am hoping that many people will contribute to this mission by donating to the Indiegogo Generosity Community project, so that we can successfully deliver free copies of *Where Did My Friend Go?* to the kids who need it the most. My hope is that people also come together as a community to share this project with friends, neighbors, colleagues, schools, and organizations to continue to raise funds and visibility for this cause. The book can be purchased and donated to a local school, Head Start, shelter, and library. **It takes a village to help kids thrive.**

#### **CHILDREN’S BOOK SPONSORSHIP**

Dr. Maker is seeking sponsors in order to publish, print, and distribute 1,000 copies of *Where Did My Friend Go?* to Head Start, Teach for America, and appropriate schools, shelters, emergency rooms, and trauma centers in selected cities (Chicago, New Orleans, L.A., Detroit, etc.) across the United States.

Learn more about how to support the distribution of this book to children who need it: visit [www.aspiringfamilies.com](http://www.aspiringfamilies.com) and [www.drmaker.net](http://www.drmaker.net) for further information about my credentials and books.