

# Breaking through to traumatized children

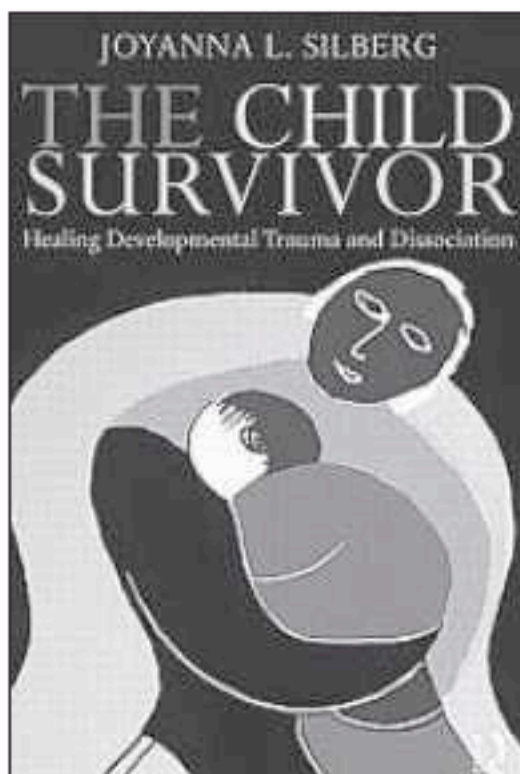
## **“THE CHILD SURVIVOR: Healing Developmental Trauma and Dissociation,”**

by Joyanna L. Silberg.  
Routledge. 288 pages. \$39.95.

By ANNE GRANT  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Family court judges, mental health professionals, social workers, clergy, teachers, parents and foster parents can finally get some traction to help children who have been traumatized by abuse and neglect. Dr. Joyanna L. Silberg, psychologist at the Sheppard Pratt Health System in Maryland, has written a breakthrough book for those trying to make sense of children who dissociate and do upsetting things without remembering or understanding the reason for their behavior.

Silberg assumes that children adapt and cope out of necessity. “Everything the child is doing, whether it is cutting, lying, hitting, stealing, or fighting, is based on good and important reasons,” she writes, and children have the ability to change their behaviors in order to reach their goals.



A superb writer, she avoids scholarly jargon while describing mysteries as an adventure: Why does a teenager abruptly fall asleep in the midst of a counseling session? What part of a young mind holds the secret information that explains a sudden outburst?

The beauty of Silberg’s therapy is that it relies on a respectful partnership between the therapist and client, even a little child, as they discover those clues together — a process that educates both of them. In fact,

“EDUCATE” is the acronym the author uses to remind readers of the interventions she has devised to escape the cycle and bring healing. Her practical checklists make this book a valuable reference tool.

I first felt the need for this kind of approach as a pastor and counselor when I realized that traditional talk-therapy could re-traumatize adult survivors. When I began working with families caught up in custody court and child protective services, the problem grew more acute, for these systems zeroed in on a family’s most vulnerable pressure points with such adversarial gusto that the entire family wound up feeling tortured and bullied by court-ordered psychological “evaluations,” a breathtakingly cruel escalation of trauma. Silberg’s approach may finally help judges understand the harm they are doing in that secondary cycle of legal abuse.

Anne Grant (ParentingProject@verizon.net), a retired pastor, researches the use of psychologists by Family Court and Department of Children, Youth and Families.