

Story of Issa and Huda

A six-year-old boy named Issa* played with building blocks on the floor in his family's two-room home in Gaza City. He carefully stacked the blocks as high as he could to form a tall structure.

In the dark room, which functions as a bedroom at night and a family room by day, he got up from the floor, stepped back and ran toward what he had just built. With all his might he kicked it down and burst into tears.

Hearing the young boy crying, his mother Huda rushed into the room to check on him. Through the crying and attempts to catch his breath, Issa said: **"Al-Thafer Tower is down. They are all dead."**

Over two years ago, during the latest Israeli war, residents of Gaza endured 50 days of intense violence and bloodshed. On top of the physical ruin and the massive loss of life, the war left behind tremendous emotional wounds. Many Palestinians in Gaza remember one day in particular: August 23, 2014.

That was the day that marked the complete destruction of Al-Thafer Residential Tower #4, a 12-story reinforced concrete structure in Al-Rimal neighborhood in Gaza City. In less than 30 seconds the whole apartment building came crumbling down, burying its inhabitants in mounds of rubble and steel. It's difficult to imagine that anyone came out alive.

For children such events can have a devastating impact that can stay with them into adulthood. Fortunately for Issa and his mother, and many like them, Palestinian mental health practitioners have been working with parents and teachers at Gaza kindergartens as part of UPA's Healing Through Feeling program. The program aims to create a trauma-informed system of care for children by educating teachers and parents about the effects of ongoing trauma and providing them with tools and techniques to address them.

"I'm so delighted with the work that United Palestinian Appeal does, not only with its unique and very progressive efforts in the Gaza Strip," said Dr. Antonio Puente, the president of the **American Psychological Association**. "The engagement of science and community, as well as mental health professionals, should go a long ways to understanding and beginning to heal the trauma that the residents of Gaza have experienced."

Through the program Huda has been attending educational sessions about trauma that focus on how to address its symptoms in her child. What she told UPA staff at a recent session fills me with hope:

"In the past this emotional episode would have been frustrating for me. The crowded space, the crying children, the other household responsibilities and all the other social and economic challenges of daily life would have made me yell at my son for this disruptive behavior. **Today I just hug him and comfort him. As a result, Issa's behavior and mood have improved.**"

For Issa and Huda, generous donors like you ensured that trained Palestinian mental health practitioners were able to teach Issa's caregivers about the effects of trauma and how to overcome them. That act of compassion is the reason why Issa has what every child deserves—an opportunity to grow in a safe environment and reach his full potential.

* We have changed the names of the individuals in this story and have excluded their photos to protect their identity and respect their privacy. Parents and teachers who participate in the educational sessions organized by the Healing Through Feeling program have a basic expectation of privacy that allows them to share personal stories about the impact of ongoing trauma with UPA mental health practitioners and with one another.