



By Benita Levin

The Trauma of Being Held at Gunpoint

Steps to help children who were there

After being held up at gunpoint with her children, Benita Levin asks how children survive traumatic ordeals.

It has to be every parent's worst nightmare. Being held at gunpoint in front of your two children. It certainly was mine. It took just a few minutes one evening, outside our home. Two armed men. Two cars. An unknown number of people inside those vehicles.

The next few moments were surreal. One gun in front of my face. At some point, one of the weapons was waved in the direction of my children. Clichéd as it sounds, some form of survival instinct did kick in

during those blurred few moments, and I somehow managed to get the children to safety.

The men fled with my keys. They took a phone, wallet and watch from a friend who had been visiting our home at the time. No shots were fired. No-one was hurt. Not physically, anyway.

"We were so lucky... it could have been much worse," I told myself countless times that night. It was also the standard response from the few people we did tell.

The trauma of those few minutes is something that will take time to process. The exact sequence of events is still not clear. It was as though the 'volume button' was turned down for a few moments, as I focused only on the weapon pointed in my direction. As if zoning in on the gun would help prevent it from being fired at my children?

It was the children's questions later that night that were really chilling.

"How did you feel mommy when the man came toward you with a gun?" Not exactly a discussion I'd ever imagined having with my 10-year old son. I told him that I knew I had to stay calm and that the men "only wanted things". I assured him I knew they'd leave as soon as they'd taken those "items". That is, after all, what happened.

Later that evening, it was his turn to do the assuring. He told his 8-year old sister, "You don't have to worry - the men were definitely using toy guns." A child taking on the guardian role, trying to convince his younger sibling we weren't really in danger. Goosebumps.

But the real jolt came the following day, when she agreed, "They must have been toy guns because what adult would use a real gun on a child."

The pure beauty of innocence. Unwavering trust in humanity. Shattered in a matter of minutes.

By newsroom standards, this was what we clinically call a 'non-story'. After working for more than 20 years in the radio news industry in South Africa, I've been privy to the details of countless crime stories, both local and international. Some leave a lasting imprint on your mind and in your heart. Your instinct and experience 'tell' you when an incident is news worthy. This was simply not one of those stories.

Police echoed that sentiment later that evening. They stayed seated in their police van, asking if there was a crime scene and if any shots had been fired. Not much for them to follow up on really. There were far more pressing cases to investigate.

So the non-story, non-crime-scene incident has left me with many questions. On paper, our response was correct.

A South African security expert has given the following advice to any person – young or old – who might be held up, after clarifying that each situation is obviously different:

- Stay calm;
- Minimise the risk to the safety of your loved ones;
- Minimise the risk to your safety;
- Don't escalate or antagonise attackers; and
- Listen to their demands.

A tick to all those broad boxes. The children were moved to a secure place. The items were handed over without any argument. Luckily, no-one screamed. No-one fought. The men left.



Again. No-one was hurt, physically. It's made me wonder though about the long-term emotional toll. How many thousands of other children are tossing and turning at night, reliving similar incidents? How many of these young survivors are hearing adult acquaintances comment about how "lucky" they are, because it "could have been much worse"? How many are able to go to a psychologist or a trauma counsellor?

As a life coach, I spend much of my time encouraging people to talk about their experiences and their feelings. There is no doubt it's empowering and liberating to speak to someone you trust. But when a child has literally looked down the barrel of a gun, talking is just part of the recovery process. Some people relive the trauma from day one. Others might experience nightmares or flashback weeks later.

South African clinical psychologist Khosi Jiyane explains why: "Because everyone reacts according to

