

# Young People and Trauma



Children who have experienced traumatic events need to feel safe and loved. All parents want to provide this kind of nurturing home for their children. However, when parents do not have an understanding of the effects of trauma, they may misinterpret their child's behavior and end up feeling frustrated or resentful. Their attempts to address troubling behavior may be ineffective or, in some cases, even harmful. By increasing their understanding of trauma, parents can help support their child's healing, their relationship with him or her, and their family as a whole.

## What Is Trauma?

Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm. The harm can be physical or emotional, real or perceived, and it can threaten the child or someone close to him or her. Trauma can be the result of a single event, or it can result from exposure to multiple events over time.

Potentially traumatic events may include:

- Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event (e.g., abuse, neglect, separation from a loved one, natural disaster) that threatens or causes physical or emotional harm, either real or perceived.
- Symptoms of trauma vary by age and stage of development. Young children may become clingy or have tantrums; school-aged children may become quiet or have trouble in school; and teens may sleep more than normal or engage in risky behaviors.
- Childhood trauma can have serious and lasting effects; however, with the help of supportive, caring adults, children can and do recover.
- Abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional)
- Neglect
- Effects of poverty (such as homelessness or not having enough to eat)
- Being separated from loved ones
- Bullying
- Witnessing harm to a loved one or pet (e.g., domestic or community violence)
- Natural disasters or accidents
- Unpredictable parental behavior due to addiction or mental illness

## What Is The Impact Of Untreated Trauma?

Children are resilient. Some stress in their lives (e.g., leaving caregivers for a day at school, riding a bike for the first time, feeling nervous before a game or performance) helps their brains to grow and new skills to develop. However, by definition, trauma occurs when a stressful experience (such as being abused, neglected, or bullied) overwhelms the child's natural ability to cope. These events cause a "fight, flight, or freeze" response, resulting in changes in the body—such as faster heart rate and higher blood pressure—as well as changes in how the brain perceives and responds to the world.

In many cases, a child's body and brain recover quickly from a potentially traumatic experience with no lasting harm. However, for other children, trauma interferes with normal development and can have long-lasting effects. The effects of trauma vary depending on the child and type of traumatic events experienced. Some of the ways that trauma impacts children include:

- Chronic illness
- Low self-esteem
- Trust issues
- Aggression, fighting, running away
- Difficulty learning, concentrating
- Feeling unsafe
- Depression, anxiety
- Substance misuse
- Impaired memory
- Inability to regulate emotions
- Lack of impulse control
- Suicide



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[www.ctclearinghouse.org](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org)

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## What Are The Symptoms Of Trauma?

Symptoms of trauma vary by age and stage of development. For many children who have experienced trauma, their development lags behind their age in calendar years. It may be normal for a child to exhibit behaviors that are more common in younger children.

### Young Children, Ages 0-5:

- Irritability, fussiness
- Startling easily or being difficult to calm
- Frequent tantrums
- Clinginess
- Repeating traumatic events over and over in dramatic play or conversation

### School-Age Children, Ages 6-12:

- Difficulty paying attention
- Being quiet or withdrawn
- Frequent tears or sadness
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches with no apparent cause
- Changes in school performance
- Getting into trouble at school or at home

### Teens, Ages 13-18:

- Talking about the trauma constantly or denying that it happened
- Refusal to follow rules, talking back, fighting
- Being tired all the time, sleeping much more than peers
- Risky behavior
- Using drugs or alcohol, running away from home, or getting in trouble with the law

## How To Help A Child

Although childhood trauma can have serious, lasting effects, there is hope. With the help of supportive, caring adults, children can and do recover. Consider the following tips:

- **Identify trauma triggers.** Something a parent does or says, or something harmless in a child's home, may trigger a child without the parent or child realizing it. It is important for parents to watch for patterns of behavior and reactions that do not seem to "fit" the situation. What distracts a child, makes him or her anxious, or results in a tantrum or outburst? Parents can help a child avoid situations that trigger traumatic memories, at least until more healing has occurred.
- **Respond, don't react.** A parent's reactions may trigger a child or youth who is already feeling overwhelmed. (Some children are even uncomfortable being looked at directly for too long.) When a child is upset, parents can keep a child calm by lowering their voice, acknowledging the child's feelings, and being reassuring and honest.
- **Don't take behavior personally.** Parents should allow a child to feel his or her feelings without judgment. They can help a child find words and other acceptable ways of expressing feelings, and offer praise when these are used.
- **Listen.** Parents should not avoid difficult topics or uncomfortable conversations. (But they should not force children to talk before they are ready.) Parents can let children know that it's normal to have many feelings after a traumatic experience. Parents should take their reactions seriously, correct any misinformation about the traumatic event, and reassure them that what happened was not their fault.
- **Help the child learn to relax.** Parents can encourage a child to practice slow breathing, listen to calming music, or say positive things ("I am safe now.").
- **Encourage self-esteem.** Positive experiences can help children recover from trauma and increase resilience.

If a child's symptoms last more than a few weeks, or if they are getting worse rather than better, it is time to ask for help. Mental health counseling or therapy by a professional trained to recognize and treat trauma in children can help address the root cause of a child's behavior and promote healing.

## Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental  
Health and Addiction Services  
<http://portal.ct.gov/DMHAS>

CT Department of Children and  
Families

<https://portal.ct.gov/DCF>

United Way 2-1-1

[www.211ct.org](http://www.211ct.org)

2.1.1 or 1.800.203.1234

## National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental  
Health Services Administration  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

The National Child Traumatic  
Stress Network  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

