

Helping Young Children and Families Cope with Trauma



**Harris Center for Infant Mental Health
Violence Intervention Program & Safe Start
Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center
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When young children are exposed to a traumatic event, they depend on adults, especially their parents, to protect them and to make sense of the world for them. However, loss of trust in adults and new fears are common after traumatic events. Parents need to be able to listen to their children and hear their concerns. They also need to help them feel safe. If parents are traumatized, it is important for them to find support for themselves and to reach out to others for support for their children.

Reactions to trauma are difficult to predict. They may occur immediately after the event or days and even weeks later. They may remind young children (or adults) about earlier traumas and can make the reactions more severe. Children's reactions to the traumatic event will be affected strongly by those of their parents.

Children's reactions to trauma vary at different ages. Some of the common reactions of children are listed on the next page. If any of the behaviors or symptoms do not lessen or go away over time, it is important to seek professional help. Early intervention can be very helpful for traumatized children and allow them to get back on a normal developmental path. Without intervention, the symptoms are likely to worsen.



Possible outcomes, for children under five years of age who hear about or witness a traumatic event or who have suffered a significant loss as a result of an event:

Behavior changes:

- Fear of being separated from parent
- More clinging and dependent behaviors
- More aggressive behaviors
- More withdrawn behaviors showing little emotion
- More crying, whimpering, screaming, tantrums
- Aimless motion, disorganized behaviors, and or/freezing
- Unable to comfort self
- Difficulty falling asleep, night waking
- Less ability to tolerate frustration
- May reenact scene in play

Returning to behaviors shown at earlier ages

- Problems with toileting (bedwetting, soiling)
- Thumb sucking
- Fear of the dark
- Loss of language skills and acquired language
- Memory problems
- More immature behaviors

Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress

- Re-experiencing and acting out the traumatic event
- Numbing of emotions and responsiveness (dazed expressions, showing little emotion)
- Avoidance (avoiding situations or reminders of the event)
- Anxiety and hypervigilance (jumpy, scared)
- New fears unrelated to the event and being afraid of things that have recently been mastered
- Limited exploration of the environment
- Interference with normal developmental tasks



How can Parents and Other Adults Help Traumatized Children

- Indicate you are available to listen to the child
- Use a calm tone of voice
- Get on the child's level - stoop or sit on the floor
- Reassure children that they will be safe



Even if it is difficult for the adult who also may be traumatized, it is important for the child to be able to feel safe. Toddlers tend to think that the world revolves around them. So they might be afraid that something they thought or did caused bad things to happen.

- Don't minimize the child's feelings, as in "Stop being a baby, don't cry."
- Follow the child's lead:
 - If the child wants to talk, listen
 - If the child wants to be held or picked up, do so
 - If the child is clingy, be patient
 - Allow children to show their fears; give support
 - Help children identify their feelings



How can Parents and Other Traumatized Adults Help Themselves

It is very important that adults help themselves when they are traumatized and engage in self care. If they are also parents, getting support and assistance will be particularly important as they will be better able to listen to their children and give them the understanding and support that they need to heal.

What can adults do:

- Return to day to day structure as soon as possible
- Spend time with others
- Seek out support from friends and colleagues
- Keep a journal
- Participate in activities that may distract you or feel good to you
- Try to be patient with others who are also under stress
- Give yourself permission to feel moody, nervous, or blue
- Try not to make any major life changes during a stressful time
- Make as many daily decisions as possible to have a feeling of control over your life
- Try to rest and eat balanced and regular meals



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