

A Psychological Guide for Families: Trauma in Children

Child & Family Psychological Health Service

Aims

This guide aims to:

- Give parents and carers an understanding of what trauma is and some of the common reactions you might see in children and young people who have experienced a trauma (examples of which are given below).
- Provide parents and carers with information around what changes they might notice if they have also experienced a trauma.
- Provide some suggestions and practical ideas about how parents and carers can help their child or young person, following a trauma.
- Recommend books and resources related to trauma that might be helpful both for parents and carers and children and young people.

Introduction

Children and young people, like adults, sometimes experience or witness an event which is very frightening, threatening or dangerous to them. These events might include:

- A major disaster
- War
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse or sexual assault
- Witnessing a death
- Witnessing violence
- A serious accident
- Other situations in which the child or young person felt very afraid or thought that their life or somebody else's life was in danger.

The trauma can be a one off event or a series of events which takes place over many months or possibly years.

After a trauma, it is normal for a child or young person to experience a range of unpleasant feelings, emotions, body sensations, or for parents or carers to notice a change in their child's or young person's behaviour.

Common reactions shown by children and young people

It is difficult to predict with absolute certainty how a child or young person will react to a trauma as all children and young people are different. Reactions to trauma will also depend on the nature of the trauma and your child or young person's understanding of what has happened to them.

Immediately following a frightening experience children or young people are likely to be distressed, fearful, frightened and in shock. Reactions will be different depending on the age and developmental stage of your child. You may notice some of the following changes:

Under Fives

Your child may experience a range of distressing thoughts and emotions as a result of the trauma. Due to their young age, they will be less able to communicate their emotions or feelings to others and less able than older children to use appropriate coping strategies.

Understanding of the event

Your child may have a limited understanding of what has happened to them. This can mean that they are more likely to forget the event. However, it can also mean that they are more likely to misinterpret what has happened which can increase their distress. For instance, your child may think that they are responsible for what has happened.

Play

Your child may show signs that they are 're-experiencing' or thinking about the traumatic event through their play. For instance, you may notice that your child draws images from the event, or acts out part of the event when playing. This is one way of making sense of what has happened.

Fears and Anxiety

You may notice that your child has fears and anxieties that do not seem to be directly related to the trauma (e.g. fears of monsters). Your child may also have fears about going to the toilet on their own, being alone etc.

Changes in emotions

Your child's expression of emotion may become more extreme in either direction following a traumatic event. For instance your child may appear withdrawn or show less expression of emotion and/or you may notice that your child has become more angry or aggressive in their play.

Sleeping

Your child may have fears of the dark, bad dreams, and wake during the night. You child may even want to sleep in your bed for a while, even if prior to the trauma they had slept well in their own bed.

Changes in Development

You may notice that your child loses some of the skills he or she may have previously gained such as talking, walking or toileting. He or she may seem to take a step backwards in their development.

Staying close to you

You may notice that your child wants to be close to you and gets upset if you leave. This is their way of seeking comfort and reassurance from you.

5-11 years

At school age, children are likely to have a better understanding about what has happened to them. However this can mean that they become more aware of the real threats in their world which can be very frightening.

Repeated or unwanted memories

Your child might experience repeated or unwanted distressing memories about the trauma. These memories can pop up at any time but especially when your child is quiet e.g. when they are trying to go to sleep or when your child is reminded of the event in some way.

These memories can cause physical reactions such as shaking and sweating. Your child may also experience 'flashbacks'. This is when a child reports that he or she is living or 're-experiencing' the event as if it was happening again.

Fears and worries

Your child may develop fears or worries to do with their experience. He or she may avoid situations and/or places that remind them of the trauma. Your child may also become more alert to danger and may become upset when they hear reports of other disasters or traumatic events. Your child may also become worried about things which are not to do with the trauma. Sometimes children stop doing the activities that they enjoyed prior to the event (such as socialising or playing sport), preferring to stay in the comfort of their own home.

Guilt and Blame

Your child may experience guilt following a trauma. They may feel guilty because they survived the trauma when others may have not. They may feel that they should have done more to help. They may worry about what they did themselves to survive. Your child may also blame themselves or others for what has happened.

Sense of a shortened future

The experience of a traumatic event may have shaken your child's belief that the world is a safe place and they may feel that their future is uncertain. This may change the priorities that have in life which may mean that they are more likely to act 'recklessly' following a trauma.

Difficulties with concentration or memory

You may find that your child has difficulties in concentrating on tasks, especially at school. Your child may also find it hard to learn new skills, or remember skills they already had.

Sleeping

You may notice that your child has difficulties with sleeping. He or she may have nightmares or may find it difficult falling to sleep.

Changes in behaviour

You may notice that your child might start testing the rules you have about bedtime, homework or chores. This might be because they are testing that the boundaries around them are still strong which helps them to feel safe. Your child may also have difficulties getting along with friends they previously got on well with.

12-18 years

Reactions of 12-18 year olds can range from those of a mature adult to those of a young child. Reactions which do not seem to fit with their age, could be a sign of the young person's vulnerability and a continued need for reassurance from the adults around them.

Repeated or unwanted memories

Your young person might experience repeated or unwanted distressing memories about the trauma. These memories can pop up at any time, especially when they are quiet or reminded of the event. These memories can cause physical reactions such as shaking and sweating.

Your young person may experience flashbacks. This is when a person finds that he or she is re-experiencing the event or parts of the event as if it was happening again.

Fears and worries

Your young person may develop fears and worries following a trauma. These could be to do with the traumatic event or seem to be unrelated to what has happened. You might notice that your young person avoids situations and or places which might cause them anxiety.

Guilt and Blame

As with younger children, your young person may blame themselves or feel guilty following a trauma. Your young person may think constantly about specific parts of the event, which may stop them coming to terms with what has happened to them. Alternatively your young person may have forgotten important parts of the event which may be stopping them from developing a fuller understanding of what has happened to them and why.

Changes in behaviours

You may notice that your young person may become involved in risky behaviours which seem out of character. Although sometimes this change is part of normal development, these behaviours can be a way of managing feelings of anxiety.

Risky behaviours may also be due to changes in priorities about life. Your young person may feel that they have to lead each day fully and not plan for the future. Alternatively you may notice that your young person has re-thought what is important to them in life.

Difficulties with concentration or memory

As with younger children, you may find that your young person has difficulties in concentrating, especially at school. Your young person may also find it hard to learn new skills, or remember skills they already had as their attention may be distracted by thoughts of the traumatic event which means it is less available for learning.

Changes in normal developmental tasks

You may notice that your young person experiences a change in their normal developmental tasks for their age. For example, they may either withdraw from dating, developing friendships or wanting independence, or may increase these behaviours. Changes in these tasks are often due to changes in the young persons beliefs about themselves and the world.

Changes in mood

You might notice that your young person is more irritable and angry. Some young people become low in mood following a trauma, and some may have suicidal thoughts or want to carry these thoughts out, although this reaction is fairly rare.

Other considerations

Family factors

It may be difficult to know if your child or young person is experiencing difficulties following a trauma because they may be reluctant to talk about what has happened. They may be concerned about upsetting you or are worried about feeling different from their peers. They may not be aware of how you and the rest of their family feel about what has happened and may think that you do not want to talk about it.

Your reaction to the trauma

Parents and carers own responses to the trauma can affect the way a child or young person copes. You may notice, (especially if you have also experienced or witnessed the traumatic event) having reactions to the trauma that are similar to your child or young person. Dealing with these reactions, might make it harder for you to help your child or young person with their distress, as you also need to look after yourself.

You might also find it difficult to talk to your child or young person about the trauma either because it is upsetting for you or because you are worried about upsetting your child or young person.

Bereavement

If someone close to your child or young person has died as a result of the trauma, your child or young person is likely to experience a range of grief reactions.

A bereavement following a trauma can be particularly difficult to accept, as the death will have been sudden and thus not allowing for any time to prepare for the death. You might find it helpful to read our leaflet on bereavement (please see Further Reading section for details of how to get hold of this leaflet).

What can you do to help?

It is important to recognise that the reactions you see in your child or young person immediately following a trauma are normal ways of reacting to extreme events. For most children and young people these symptoms will fade over time. However you might find the following ideas useful in helping your child or young person to adapt to life following a trauma.

Safety and security

The most important thing to do immediately following a trauma is to ensure that your child is safe and feels secure.

- It is important that your child's basic needs are met e.g. food, shelter and sleep.
- It is important that the environment that they and you are in is safe. This may mean that you need to seek advice from other people such as the police or social services.

Routines and boundaries

Re-establishing routines and boundaries is an important part of the recovery process.

- Re-establish routines as soon as possible and stick to these routines. In particular try to keep meal times and sleep routines as familiar as possible.
- Try to be patient with any changes in your child's behaviours. These changes are likely to improve over time as your child regains their confidence.
- Try to be consistent with your boundaries, discipline and expectations and be firm with unacceptable behaviours. After a child has been through a difficult event it can be tempting to relax your normal rules, however this can have the effect of making your child feel less safe and secure.

Reassurance

Give your child or young person love, support and reassurance but do not change drastically how you would normally treat him or her.

- Help your child or young person to understand what has happened and reassure them that their feelings and changes in behaviour are a normal reaction to what has happened.

- Admitting that you are also feeling sad, upset etc. may help your child or young person to know that their feelings are normal. However make it clear that you do not expect your child or young person to look after you.
- Provide repeated reassurance that they are not to blame and that they are safe.
- Initially you may need to spend more time with your child or young person until your child or young person feels more secure.

Talking

Talking about the trauma can be difficult; however it will help your child to understand what has happened, to feel reassured and to feel less alone with their worries.

- Give your child or young person opportunities to talk about the event if they want to. **However** forcing a child to talk when they do not want to is not helpful and can make things worse.
- Let your child or young person talk about their thoughts and feelings in their own time.
- Use games and drawings to help younger children to talk.
- Talking about the trauma as a family might help. It is common for family members to have different views about the event. Talking together can help to share these different views and can improve your child or young person's understanding about what has happened.

Friends and activities

- Encourage your child to spend time with their friends and to continue with activities they enjoy. This can help distract your child from worries about the trauma and may reduce feeling of stress and allow them to get back to normal life.

Support from others

- Talk to your child or young person about whether they would be happy for you to tell other people about what has happened. It is important that your child or young person feels in control of matters affecting them.
- Talking to others who are involved in your child or young person's life (e.g. teachers) can help to improve others understanding of what has happened, how your child has been affected and what they can do to help.
- Encourage your child or young person to talk to and spend time with supportive friends (especially with older children).

Looking after yourself

To ensure that you feel able to support your child following a trauma it is really important that you look after yourself too.

- Make sure that you eat regularly, get plenty of sleep, rest, relaxation and exercise. This can help to reduce feelings of stress.

- Maintain your social contacts. This can help you to feel supported.
- Talking with family and friends about your own reactions is helpful although can be difficult. It is important you choose to talk to someone who you know will listen to how you feel.
- If after about a month following the trauma you are still finding it difficult to cope, you might want to meet with your GP to discuss how you are feeling. Your GP may suggest that you might benefit from talking to someone else such as a counsellor, a psychologist or a nurse.

When to seek extra help

Although for many children and young people, the reactions described will reduce naturally over time, there are certain situations in which it would be appropriate for you to seek extra help for your child or young person. Consider seeking help if:

- Your child or young person's upset feelings and behaviours get worse or are not improving after a period of time (at least a month) and this is impacting on getting on with normal everyday life.
- Your child or young person is at risk of harm or there is a risk they might hurt themselves or other people.
- Your child or young person has experienced a trauma in the past and you are not sure whether current changes in your child or young person's behaviour is connected to the past trauma. A delayed reaction of some years to trauma is common and may be helped with advice given in this leaflet or may require extra help.
- Your child or young person would like other people involved.

Your child or young person's GP, school health nurse or health visitor (depending on the age of your child or young person) will be able to offer you help and support in deciding what to do next. Your GP, school health nurse or health visitor may suggest that your child or young person might find it helpful to receive extra support from someone else such as a psychologist, counsellor, nurse etc. When your child or young person's safety or other people's safety is at risk, it is really important that you seek help immediately.

Further reading

You may also find the following books, articles and information sheets useful.

Information for parents

Books

Brooks, B., Siegel, P.M. (1996). *The scared child. Helping kids overcome traumatic events.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Internet resources

For information on responses to trauma the Child Trauma Institute in the USA have produced two useful leaflets:

- Trauma Information for Parents - <http://www.childtrauma.com/chpinf.html>
- When It's too late to "be careful" - <http://www.childtrauma.com/chpart.html>

The Child and Family Psychology Service have produced a leaflet for parents on bereavement. Ask your child's GP, Health Visitor or School Health Nurse for a copy of this leaflet.

- Bereavement

For information on trauma and bereavement the Royal College of Psychiatry has a range of leaflets including:

- Traumatic stress in children: for parents and teachers - <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthandgrowingup/20traumaticstress,children.aspx>
- **Death in the family - helping children to cope: for parents and teachers** <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthandgrowingup/15deathinthefamily.aspx>

For information on the guidance that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued to the NHS on the treatment and care of people with post-traumatic stress disorder, this leaflet developed for the general public is useful:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): the treatment of PTSD in adults and children. Understanding NICE guidance – information for people with PTSD, their advocates and cares, and the public - <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG26/publicinfo/pdf/English>

Information for children

This leaflet is produced for older children by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. It is not specific to trauma but may have some useful ideas

- When bad things happen – <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/childrenandyoungpeople/whenbadthingshappen.aspx>

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet? _____

4. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

Adversity	
Anger	
Anxiety	
Behavioural Difficulties	
Bereavement	
Separation and Divorce	
Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	
Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

Do you have any other ideas for booklets? _____

Your name and address _____

Thank you for taking the time to give us your comments. Please return this slip to us directly or by giving it to the person who passed the booklet on to you.

Please return to Child and Family Psychology Service
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