

Helping Children Deal With Trauma

Children can be exposed to a range of traumatic experiences, for example: physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence, community violence, school violence, traumatic grief, medical trauma, refugee trauma, natural or man-made disaster, and terrorism.

What A Traumatic Situation Is Like for a Young Child?

Think of what it is like for young children to be in traumatic situations. They can feel totally helpless and passive. They can cry for help or desperately wish for someone to intervene. They can feel deeply threatened by separation from parents or caretakers. Young children rely on a “protective shield” provided by adults and older siblings to judge the seriousness of danger and to ensure their safety and welfare. They often don’t recognize a traumatic danger until it happens, for example, in a near drowning, attack by a dog, or accidental scalding. They can be the target of physical and sexual abuse by the very people they rely on for their own protection and safety. Young children can witness violence within the family or be left helpless after a parent or caretaker is injured, as might occur in a serious automobile accident. They have the most difficulty with their intense physical and emotional reactions. They become really upset when they hear cries of distress from a parent or caretaker.

What a Traumatic Situation is Like for School-age Children

School-age children start to face additional dangers, with more ability to judge the seriousness of a threat and to think about protective actions. They usually do not see themselves as able to counter a serious danger directly, but they imagine actions they wish they could take, like those of their comic strip heroes. So, in traumatic situations when there is violence against family members, they can feel like failures for not having done something helpful. They may also feel very ashamed or guilty. They may be without their parents when something traumatic happens, either on their own or with friends at school or in the neighborhood. Sexual molestation occurs at the highest rate among this age group. School-age children get scared of the speeding up of their emotions and physical reactions, adding new fears to the danger from outside. For example, an 8 year-old child described, “My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to break.”

What a Traumatic Situation is Like for an Adolescent

With the help of their friends, adolescents begin a shift toward more actively judging and addressing dangers on their own. This is a developing skill, and lots of things can go wrong along the way. With independence, adolescents can be in more situations that can turn from danger to trauma. They can be drivers or passengers in horrible car accidents, be victims of rape, dating violence and criminal assault, be present during school or community violence, and experience the loss of friends under traumatic circumstances. During traumatic situations, adolescents make decisions about whether and how to intervene, and about using violence to counter violence. They can feel guilty, sometimes thinking their actions made matters worse. Adolescents are learning to handle intense physical and emotional reactions in order to take action in the face of danger. They are also learning more about human motivation and intent and struggle over issues of irresponsibility, malevolence, and human accountability.

How Can Parents and Caregivers Help?

Parents can be very important in helping children and adolescents to recover from their trauma-related experiences and losses. Because children and adolescents go through many normal changes as they mature into young adults, it is not always easy to tell when they are bothered by posttraumatic, grief, or depressive reactions. A first step in being helpful is to learn as much as you can about child traumatic stress.

It is also not always easy to know what type of support children and adolescents need, or how to offer it. Here are some suggestions about ways to support your children, including open communication, emotional support, and practical support.

- Try to keep in mind what your children have experienced. Let your child know that you appreciate the seriousness of what they went through, and that you know that their reactions to their traumatic experiences and losses can continue for a long time. At the same time, try to reassure them that things will improve over time.

- Encourage your children to talk about ways in which they are still bothered by their experiences, losses and current difficulties. This will help you better understand their feelings and behavior.
- In speaking to your child, try to understand how they are feeling without being critical. For example, don't say things like, "Stop complaining," or "You should be over it by now."
- It is important to be patient and tolerant, especially when they talk repetitively about the trauma.
- Let them know how much you would like to be of help whenever they are reminded of their experiences or losses. Get familiar with the many ways your child may be reminded. It is helpful to be open about how you are still affected by reminders. As a family, you can then offer each other emotional support, through physical comfort, understanding and reassurance.
- Know that your children and adolescents notice and can be bothered by occasions when your mood changes suddenly or you act differently in response to a reminder. Let them know that you are reacting to a reminder and that it is not their fault.
- If your child feels guilty for the death or injury of others, reassure them that it was not their fault.
- Understand that anger is part of a child or adolescent's reaction to their post-trauma distress. Try to be tolerant and encourage them to talk about what is bothering them, rather than reprimanding them or telling them to be quiet. However, indicate that abusive language and violence is not allowed.

Being Responsive to Children's Grief

- Allow your child to talk about a lost loved one, even though this may be upsetting to you. Don't try to stop them from feeling sad, as this is a normal part of grieving. If you think that their sadness is excessive, then seek psychological counseling.
- Try to help your children remember good things about a lost friend or family member. Tell them positive things and stories that you remember about the person.
- When your children ask, don't be afraid to tell them that you are feeling sad when you are thinking about the loss of a loved one. On the other hand, try not to overwhelm your children with the responsibility of feeling like they have to take care of you
- Be open and tolerant of your child's protests over the unfairness of the loss and its impact on their lives. This will often diminish over time.

When to Seek Professional Help

The process of recovering from traumatic experiences and significant losses can take months or years, and for some children and adolescents their daily lives can be disrupted by intrusive memories of the trauma, grief reactions, and symptoms of depression. As a general rule of thumb, if a child's responses (e.g. nightmares, recurrent thoughts or fears) have been getting worse instead of better over time, consider seeking a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional.

Other signs that you should consider seeking help for a child or adolescent from a mental health professional include:

- Withdrawal from friends or family, lack of participation in family activities
- School refusal for a period of weeks or months, or marked deterioration in ability to concentrate leading to diminished grades
- Preoccupation with fear, grief, or guilt to the exclusion of talking or thinking about anything else
- Fear of leaving the house or doing usual activities
- Dropping out of sports or other social activities
- Isolation from peers

Source: The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. For more information, contact: NCCTS - University of California, Los Angeles, 11150 W. Olympic Blvd., Suite 770, Los Angeles, CA 90064. Phone: (310) 235-2633; Fax: (310) 235-2612; www.nctsnet.org.

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