



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

How Can Trauma Affect My Young Child?

Because they are so young and pure, we'd like to think that babies and toddlers are not affected by stress or trauma, or that they can just bounce back on their own. Unfortunately, even very young children can become "stressed out" or traumatized when their developing sense of trust is jeopardized by events such as repeated exposure to violence, being in a serious car accident, or losing a trusted caregiver. Very young children can also be affected by stress even if they have not experienced it directly. They are quite vulnerable to traumatic events their caregivers experience. Since caregivers are such an important part of babies' lives, the way their caregivers cope with traumatic experiences affects how the babies cope, too.

How Are Babies and Toddlers Affected?

We know that very young children are affected by traumatic events through their own experience or via the distress of their caregivers. Each child may respond differently. You might see greater emotional distress; that is, your baby may get upset more easily, cling to adults more, have separation problems, or throw more temper tantrums. You might see your toddler acting more like a baby than she used to, for example, she may want you to feed her although she used to insist on feeding herself. You might also think that your child has "regressed" or lost the ability to do things he knew how to do, such as talk or use the toilet. Or, she may be "on alert" more often, whine or complain of feeling sick or being in pain, or eat less. Some children show more than one of these behaviors.

The single most common reaction to trauma is some form of re-experiencing the event. The child "relives" the experience through dreams and thoughts that may seem like pictures in his or her mind. It is common for very young children to recreate what happened in their play. Young children do not have flashbacks, but reminders of the trauma will arouse their upset feelings. Reminders are usually sensory, something the child sees, hears, or smells.

It's hard to predict how your child might respond to a traumatic event. Some respond immediately and briefly, while others have extended or delayed reactions. Children's responses depend upon their age and ability to understand what happened, as well as the ways their caregivers respond to traumatic events. Children's responses may be stronger if they have had previous emotional or developmental problems, past exposure to other stressful or traumatic events, difficult family circumstances, or haven't received help from caregivers when needed.

Children cope best with trauma when they have strong, positive relationships with parents and caregivers, family stability, and more age-appropriate problem-solving skills.

How Can I Help My Child to Handle Trauma?

Very young children who have experienced trauma need to regain a sense of trust in the world and a sense of hope. A safe and protecting environment, with warm, supportive adults (ideally the baby's home and primary caregivers), is vital for helping to treat traumatized children.



Parents and caregivers can:

- Increase the child's sense of security. Adults need to convey to children a sense that they are available to provide comfort. What used to work to calm or soothe your child may not work after the stress or trauma. Very young children may need longer periods of holding and cuddling, repeated positive statements and encouragement, and other means of soothing. Some may need more comforting at bedtime and before separations from parents. Security objects such as stuffed toys and special blankets may become extremely important.
- Increase the child's sense of control. Once a child feels secure, it's important to increase his or her sense of control. Since trauma always involves a loss of control, very young children need to be given opportunities to have control over their lives in ways they can handle. For example, it's a good idea to offer choices for certain everyday events such as what toys to play with, or whether to leave the bedroom door open or closed at night. At the same time, you'll want to sensitively guide the kinds of choices they have to make. As much as children want and need a sense of control, they also want and need to know that their caregivers are in control, too.
- Maintain a routine and prepare the child for changes. More than others, traumatized children need to be prepared for changes so they do not feel that things are out-of-control again. Maintaining a routine and a sense of predictability will help.
- Assist the child as he or she copes with the trauma. When your child shows distress, express concern so your child knows that adults understand how he or she feels. Tell the child that it's ok to be sad, scared, mad, and help your to express feelings with words. Use distraction and help your child focus on positive and enjoyable things. Allow the child to "play out" the trauma unless it is dangerous to others. This is the child's way of working through feelings, and the play will eventually go away.
- Take care of yourself. The ability of very young children to recover from trauma depends a lot on whether their parents were also affected by the trauma and how their parents are coping with it.

When parents are taking care of themselves and healing from their own traumatic experiences, they are better able to focus on building a strong, supportive relationship with their child.

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For More Information

For further information on helping young children deal with trauma contact your pediatrician or your Early Childhood Family Education program in your school district. Or call 1-800-KIDS-709. You may also find the children's books listed below useful in helping your child heal from trauma:

- Brown, M.W. (1942). The runaway bunny. N.Y.: Harper and Row.
- Holmes, M. (2000). A terrible thing happened. Washington, DC: Magination Press.
- Lobby, T. (1990). Jessica and the wolf. N.Y.: Magination Press.
- McDonald, M. (1990). Sam's worries. N.Y.: Hyperion Paperbacks.

Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

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The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.