

A Caregiver's Guide to Children and Trauma

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.
-Henry David Thoreau

Trauma is something many children experience before the age of 16.ⁱ Trauma can be a short-term response while others experience ongoing difficulties after a traumatic event. Professional treatment is available and encouraged for children who have experienced or are experiencing traumatic situations or events. The following guide discusses what trauma is and how it is experienced in children; what you can expect from treatment and therapy; and what you can do to assist in your child's healing process.

What is Trauma?

Trauma is the result of a stressful event or ongoing situation that have affected one's sense of safety, making them feel vulnerable in their daily life. It often includes a sense of helplessness and makes you feel constantly insecure and frightened.ⁱⁱ

These events in children can include: ⁱⁱⁱ

- Sexual or physical abuse or witnessing domestic violence
- Community and school violence
- Medical trauma
- Acts of terrorism or experiences of war
- Natural or human-made disasters
- Witnessing suicides or homicides or accidents

Reactions to these events can vary by child depending on how often they experienced it, ethnicity/cultural factors, if they have experienced trauma previously, his or her developmental level, and preexisting family and child problems, etc. Reactions in children may include: ^{iv v}

- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Anger, irritability or mood swings
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Developing new fears, such as separation from certain people
- Difficulty concentrating and decline in schoolwork
- Self-esteem issues or feeling that the event was their fault
- Acting as if they are returning to a previous or younger stage in life (i.e. regression)
- Feelings of helplessness or insecurity
- Avoiding particular situations or withdrawing from others

What does the future hold?

There is help for children who have or are currently experiencing trauma. A child will benefit from early intervention and consistent treatment to understand the situation(s) and develop coping strategies. Treatment attendance is very important because active participation in effective treatment will help return to a functional and health livelihood.^{vi}

Treatments for Children Who Are Experiencing Trauma

Clinicians and psychiatrists can assist the healing process; however, your child must face some unbearable feelings or memories that they have been trying to avoid. Often treatment is done individually with the child and individually with the parent or caregiver. Techniques for recovering from trauma include: ^{vi}

- Teaching you and your child what trauma is and how it affects different people.
- Reviewing the actual traumatic event with a therapist in a safe environment.
- Talking about the way your child thinks about him or herself and how that makes him or her feel. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist may be able to help change or modify thoughts of guilt or self-blame and help your child feel differently.
- Having the child write down the actual event(s) (i.e. creating a narrative).
- Looking at the activities your child is involved in and working on ways for your child to participate in them while enjoying him or herself.
- Talking about whom your child feels close to and the different relationships in his or her life and talk about how these relationships can ease your child's depression.
- Relaxation techniques.
- Teaching personal safety skills.
- Taking care of personal health, including good diet and exercise.

Be sure to speak to your child's clinician or psychiatrist to receive more detailed information on the type of therapy he/she is using with your child and/or family.

How Can You Help?

Caregivers often want to know how they can help their child during the healing process. The following are some tips that other caregivers have found helpful. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your family but it may be helpful to give a few of these a try. ^{vii} ^{viii}

- **Education.** Be sure that you and your child know what trauma is and what particular event has caused trauma in your child's life. Know what the treatment process is going to look like and that you are both comfortable and open with the clinician to guarantee the best care possible for your child.
- **Creating support systems.** Make sure everyone who lives in your home is informed on what is going on in order to create a strong family support for your child. Find people that you trust and can confide in to help you with transportation to appointments, taking care of other family members and for emotional support as well.
- **Stay involved with school.** Your child spends a lot of their time at school so set up support systems there with the teachers, school nurses, social workers, etc. Inform school staff as necessary so they can help keep him/her safe and supported when you are not around.
- **Take care of yourself.** Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services and seek professional help if you think it would be helpful. You are your child's source of support and comfort so feeling your best will help your child to feel his or her best!
- **Create a calm and positive environment at home.** Make sure that your home is a safe place for your child and the rest of your family. Have meals together, take walks as a family and spend more positive time together. Help your child to socialize, relax and participate in things that they enjoy doing.
- **Don't place blame.** Blaming yourself, your child or anyone else will not help the situation. Be supportive in any way possible and don't feel guilty about what your child is going through. Don't judge their reaction to the event compared to how you or someone else has handled it.
- **Don't pressure.** Never pressure your child to discuss the event with you or anyone else. Clinicians have a certain way of speaking to the child in order for them to successfully heal after the event.
- **Be patient and understanding.** Recovering from traumatic events takes time. Don't rush your child and be supportive of their treatment.
- **Develop routines and structures.** Changes in routine are inevitable if your child begins treatment of any kind. Do your best to stay organized with appointments, medication, work, and social plans with friends and family.
- **Reduce stress.** You may laugh at this one, but it is true. The less stress you have in your life, the better off everyone will be. Continue doing things you love and be sure to stay healthy (exercise and eat healthy foods).

- **Sleep.** Nighttime can be a difficult time for children. Spend extra time with them at night, reading, talking or playing games. If possible, give them a stuffed animal or blanket to sleep with. *Some children, adolescents or teens may start wetting the bed again. Be patient and understanding.
- **Be proud of yourself.** This is a difficult time. You are already on the right path just by staying informed and involved in your child's life!

ⁱ Children and Trauma. (2008). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Emotional and Psychological Trauma: Symptoms, Treatment and Recovery. (July 2013). *Helpguide.org: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/emotional_psychological_trauma.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Children and Trauma. (2008). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx>

^{iv} Children and Trauma. (2008). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx>

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^{vi} Children and Trauma. (2008). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx>

^{vii} Taking Care of You: Self-Care for Family Caregivers. *Family Caregiver Alliance*. Retrieved on October 3, 2013 from http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=847

^{viii} Emotional and Psychological Trauma: Symptoms, Treatment and Recovery. (July 2013). *Helpguide.org: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource*. Retrieved on October 18, 2013 from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/emotional_psychological_trauma.htm