



Child Trauma

Children are among the most vulnerable after traumatic events or disasters. Traumatic stress occurs when a child (0-18 years) feels intensely threatened by an event they experience or witness. Young people often need time and emotional support to feel secure again after experiencing trauma or a disaster. Their reactions are influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and caregivers respond. These individuals provide comfort and stability, and play a vital role by maintaining normal routines or establishing new ones after a crisis. With proper caregiving and access to trauma-informed services, many children recover and thrive.

View SAMHSA's infographic on [Understanding Child Trauma](#).

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Types of Child Trauma

- Abuse or assault (psychological, physical, or sexual)
- Domestic, school, or community violence
- National disasters or terrorism
- Loss of property or displacement due to disaster
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- Refugee or war experiences
- Military family-related stress (e.g., parental deployment)

- Serious accidents or life-threatening illness
- Neglect

Fast Facts

- Over two-thirds of children report experiencing at least one traumatic event by age 16.
- At least 1 in 7 children experience abuse or neglect annually in the U.S.
- Each day, 14 youth die from homicide, and more than 1,300 are treated for violence-related injuries.

Signs of Child Traumatic Stress

- **Preschool Children:** Fear of separation, nightmares, crying or screaming a lot, poor appetite.
- **Elementary School Children:** Anxiety, guilt, shame, lack of concentration, difficulty sleeping, withdrawal or disinterest, aggression.
- **Middle and High School Children:** Depression, self-harm, substance use, withdrawal or disinterest, risky behavior, aggression.

Impact of Child Traumatic Stress

- Learning difficulties and lower academic performance
- Increased use of health and mental health services
- Higher involvement in juvenile justice systems
- Long-term health issues (e.g., heart disease, diabetes)

Key Points on Recovery

- Not all children develop traumatic stress after an event, and with support, many recover and thrive.
- Supportive caregiving systems, access to trauma-informed services, and effective treatments are crucial for recovery.

Understanding the Body's Alarm System

- Everyone has a natural alarm system that activates in response to perceived danger, preparing the body to fight or flee.
- For children, this alarm may cause feelings of fear, anger, irritability, or withdrawal.
- Recognize what activates the alarm and how their body reacts.

- Determine if there is real danger and seek help from a trusted adult.
- Practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing.

Tips for Caregivers

Not all children experience child traumatic stress after experiencing a traumatic event, but those who do can recover. With proper support, many children are able to adapt to and overcome such experiences.

As a family member or other caring adult, you can play an important role. Remember to:

- Assure the child that he or she is safe. Talk about the measures you are taking to get the child help and keep him or her safe at home and school.
- Explain to the child that he or she is not responsible for what happened. Children often blame themselves for events, even those events that are completely out of their control.
- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Try to be supportive and reassure the child that he or she does not need to feel guilty or bad about any feelings or thoughts.

Treatment for Child Traumatic Stress

Some children may not recover from trauma on their own, even with family support. In these cases, a mental health professional trained in evidence-based trauma treatment can help children and families heal. Treatments like trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy are proven effective, and there are many promising approaches to address child trauma. The best treatment depends on the type, timing, and severity of the trauma.

Families and caregivers can ask a pediatrician, family doctor, school counselor, or clergy member for a referral to a mental health professional and explore treatment options.

To learn more, visit [Effective Treatments for Youth Trauma](#) .

Resources

SAMHSA

NCTSN

Other Federal Agencies

Other Organizations

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<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/child-trauma>