



Helping Children Deal with Trauma

With patience and support, children CAN heal from trauma.

Defining Trauma

Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes physical or emotional harm. It can occur as a result of a natural disaster (such as an earthquake or flood), violence, or abuse. Seeing violence happen, even if you are not the victim, may also cause trauma.

Children and Trauma

Trauma can have a lasting effect on children's brain development. If not addressed, it can lead to trouble with school, relationships, or drugs and alcohol. What you might be seeing in children's reactions to traumatic events vary with age, culture, and personality.

Some children show the following signs of trauma:

- Startling easily and having difficulty calming down
- Behaviors common to younger children (e.g., thumb sucking, bed wetting, fear of the dark, clinging to caregivers)
- Tantrums, aggression, or fighting
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn, wanting to be left alone
- Wanting to talk about the traumatic event all the time, or denying that it happened
- Changes in eating or sleeping (sleeping all the time, not sleeping, nightmares)
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches

Goals for Treatment

Generally, the goals for treatment include consideration of the entire family, as parents and caregivers are an important factor in a child's recovery. Children need a supportive environment in which they can heal. It is important to provide parents and caregivers with an emotional outlet for their feelings and reactions to the event, as well as skills to respond optimally to support their children. The focus for the child includes reducing negative emotional and behavioral responses to the trauma. This includes efforts to help the child believe that they are not to blame for what has occurred.

How to Help

Try the following to help your child heal from trauma:

- Help your child feel safe. Stay calm and keep a regular routine for meals, play time, and bedtime. Prepare children in advance for any changes or new experiences.
- Encourage (don't force) children to talk about their feelings. Tell children it is normal to have many feelings after a trauma. Listen to their stories, take their reactions seriously, correct any misinformation about the traumatic event, and reassure them that what happened was not their fault.
- Provide extra attention, comfort, and encouragement. Spending time together as a family may help children feel safe. Younger children may want extra hugs or cuddling. Follow their lead and be patient if they seem needy.
- Teach children to relax. Encourage them to practice slow breathing, listen to calming music, or say positive things ("That was scary, but I'm safe now").
- Be aware of your own response to trauma. Parents' history of trauma and feelings about their child's experience can influence how they cope. Seek support if you need it.

- Remember that everyone heals differently from trauma. Respecting each child's own course of recovery is important.
- Find help when needed. If your child's problems last more than a few weeks, or if they get worse rather than better, ask for help. Find a mental health professional who knows proven strategies to help children cope from trauma.

Sources:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. Provide nonoffending parents with skills to respond optimally to and support their children. August, 2012. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/trauma.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau. Tip sheets: Helping your child heal from trauma. English

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/Helping%20Your%20Child%20Heal%20From%20Trauma.pdf>

Spanish

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/La%20trata%20de%20personas%20c%C3%B3mo%20proteger%20a%20nuestros%20j%C3%B3venes.pdf>