

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA - HOW PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN HELP

Information included in Epic well-child visit after visit summary

Violence and other scary events can impact children and teens in a negative way. This may be called a *traumatic event*, or *trauma*. When trauma happens, it may lead to problems that change how your child feels or acts. Trauma may include:

- Seeing violence in your home, school or neighborhood
- Car accidents
- Medical procedures
- Bullying
- War/refugee trauma or violence
- Death of a loved one
- Hitting, kicking, slapping, pushing (physical abuse)
- Neglect
- Sexual assault/sexual abuse

Stress occurs when kids are exposed to something scary and have a hard time dealing with what happened. While some kids “bounce back”, others may have a difficult time. Changes to look for may include:

Young Child/Baby	School-Age Children	Teenager/Adolescent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't understand what happened • Thinks the event is their fault • Talks less or not at all after the event • Anxious, nervous or sad • Has a hard time playing with other kids their age • Doesn't respond as well with you or other caregivers • Trouble sleeping or eating • Angry, aggressive • Yelling, fussy • Can't do things they were able to do in the past (like potty training) • Feeling helpless • General fear • Difficulties talking about the event with words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinks it is their fault • Can't pay attention • Doing poorly in school • Interested in violence • Poor memory • Is not getting along with children • Bad/sad view of the world • Worried about their safety • Fear/anxiety • Feeling bad about themselves • Feelings of shame • Nightmares • Aggressiveness or carelessness • Physical pain with no cause • Acting out • Can't do things they were able to do in the past (regression) • Overly protective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defensive • Short attention span • Doing poorly in school • Feelings of aggression • Thinks about revenge • Poor memory • Unhealthy dating relationships • Risky behavior (using alcohol or drugs, early sexual activity) • Not connected to family or friends • Less empathy for others • Feeling helpless • Feelings of shame • Sadness or anxiety • Thinking about hurting themselves or someone else • Self-harming behavior • Running away or skipping school

Talking to your children after trauma

Parents and other trusted adults may feel lost when trying to talk to children and teens about scary events. It is natural to feel this way. It may help to:

- Talk about safety. Children need to know that you know an event happened and how you are going to help them feel safe.
- Share age-appropriate information. Children need information to make sense of what happened. They don't need a lot of details, keep the message short, and in words your child can understand.

- Keep a routine. Children need extra love and care after trauma. Stick to regular meal times and bed times to help them heal and feel safe again.
- Let kids express their feelings when they are ready. Children can process their feelings through art, play or other creative activities. Asking simple questions while they are playing or drawing shows that you care and understand that a scary event happened. You could ask “what were you feeling?”, or “do you think about what happened?” to check-in with them.
- Work together to fix problems. Guide and support children as they learn to manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a healthy way. Model and coach the behaviors and skills you want your child to learn by showing them how to share, be kind, and use words to let you know about their feelings.
- Make simple, caring statements of comfort. Children need to understand their emotions to feel supported, safe and cared for. “I love you” or “I am here to listen if you want to talk about what happened” can help a child try to make sense of a traumatic event. Do your best not to down-play their feelings by saying “don’t think about it” or “I know just what you are feeling.” Saying things like this can make it harder for your child to talk about the event.

When to seek help for your child

It may be time to seek help when:

Your child has

- Trouble going to school or is unable to pay attention at school and, grades slipping
- Arguments with friends, or no desire to be with friends
- Oversleeping or not able to sleep, nightmares
- Lost skills or abilities they once had and/or they aren’t gaining new skills. For example, if your child was toilet trained and is now having accidents.
- Behaviors that are risky such as running away, physical fighting, or using drugs or alcohol. In young children, this might look like extreme tantrums or frequent aggression towards self or others.

Or when your child

- Seems sad, hopeless or withdraws from activities they used to love
- Seems unable to enjoy daily activities due to feelings of fear or anxiety or they have fears of things they were not afraid of before
- Begins talking about death or dying or is trying to hurt themselves

Support for parents & caregivers

Please talk with us, or any member of your child’s health care team, about any questions or concerns that you have. We can provide direct access to supports who can help families heal and thrive after stressful events.

- **Childhelp Hotline: 1-800-422-4453**
All parents and caregivers need support sometimes. Childhelp is dedicated to preventing child abuse. The hotline is confidential and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The hotline provides help in 170 languages. Their crisis counselors are trained to help when you are feeling frustrated or angry at your child.
- **Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-866-834-4357**
Domestic violence and intimate partner violence happens to so many people and their families. The hotline is confidential and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Their motto is “Love should not hurt.”