



Learning About Trauma For Parents and Caregivers

What Is Trauma?

Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm. The harm can be physical or emotional, real or perceived, and it can threaten the child or someone close to him or her. Trauma can be the result of a single event, or it can result from exposure to multiple events over time.

Potentially traumatic events may include:

- Abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional)
- Neglect
- Effects of poverty (such as homelessness or not having enough to eat)
- Being separated from loved ones, Loss of a loved one, Divorce or Separation
- Refugee trauma
- Domestic or community violence
- War, Terrorism
- Natural disasters or accidents
- Unpredictable parental behavior due to addiction or mental illness



The Impact of Untreated Trauma

Children are very resilient and in many cases a child may be able to recover from a potentially traumatic experience with no lasting harm. However, for some children trauma can have an impact on normal development and have long-lasting effects. The effects of trauma can vary depending on the child and type of traumatic events experienced. It is important for parents to have an understanding of trauma as the right kind of help can reduce or eliminate many of the negative symptoms. Some factors that can determine the impact of traumatic events can include:

Age- Younger children are more vulnerable. Even if a child is unable to talk they are able to retain “sense memories if traumatic events that can affect their well-being into adulthood.”

Frequency- Experiencing the same type of traumatic event multiple times or multiple types of traumatic events is more harmful than a single event.

Relationships- Children with positive relationships and attachment with healthy caregivers are more likely to recover.

Coping Skills- If children are taught and can practice healthy coping strategies around well-being this will help them to overcome the trauma.

Perception- How much danger the child thinks he or she is in, or the amount of fear the child feels at the time is a significant factor.

Sensitivity- Every child is different-some are naturally more sensitive than others.

Helping Your Child

There is always hope and with research saying that the brain is not fully developed until your mid-20's, there are many things that can be done to help re-train the brain and heal trauma. With the help of supportive, caring adults, children can and do recover. **If you are concerned about you child contact your family doctor as well as a mental health professional.** Here are some ways you can support a child who has experienced trauma:

- **Identify trauma triggers.** Something you are doing or saying that is harmless may be triggering your child without you even being aware of it. Watch for patterns of behaviour or reactions that do not “fit” the situation. Think about what distracts your child, makes them anxious or results in a tantrum or outburst. Behind every behaviour is a story.
- **Be emotionally and physically available.** Provide attention, comfort, and encouragement in ways you child will accept. Follow their lead and be patient if children seem needy.
- **Respond don't react.** Your reactions may trigger a child who is already feeling overwhelmed. When your child is upset, do what you can to keep calm: Lower your voice, acknowledge your child's feelings, and be reassuring and honest.
- **Don't judge.** Allow the child to feel their feelings without judgments. Help them to identify the feeling, where they are experiencing the feeling in their body and acceptable ways of expressing those feelings. Praise them for their efforts!
- **Listen.** Don't avoid difficult topics or uncomfortable conversations, but don't force children to talk before they are ready. Take their reactions seriously, and reassure them that **what happened was not their fault.**
- **Help and teach your child ways to relax.** Encourage your child to practice slow breathing, listen to calming music say positive things (“I am safe,” “I am loved.”)
- **Be consistency and predictable.** These two things help promote emotional safety. This feeling would have been taken away during a traumatic event. Prepare your child in advance for changes or new experiences.
- **Encourage self-esteem.** Positive experiences can help a child recover from trauma and increase resilience. Examples include mastering a new skill, feelings a sense of belonging, setting and achieving goals and being of service to others.

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