

# Helping Traumatized Children

## A Brief Overview for Caregivers

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### Introduction

Each year in the United States approximately five million children experience some form of traumatic experience. More than two million of these are victims of physical or sexual abuse. Millions more are living in the terrorizing atmosphere of domestic violence. Natural disasters, car accidents, life-threatening medical conditions, painful procedures, exposure to community violence – all can have traumatic impact on the child. By the time a child reaches the age of eighteen, the probability that any child will have been touched directly by interpersonal or community violence is approximately one in four. Traumatic experiences can have a devastating impact on the child, altering their physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. In turn, the impact on the child has profound implications for their family, community and, ultimately, us all.

Traumatic events in childhood increase risk for a host of social (e.g., teenage pregnancy, adolescent drug abuse, school failure, victimization, anti-social behavior), neuropsychiatric (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociative disorders, conduct disorders) and physical health problems (e.g., heart disease, asthma). The deterioration of public education, urban violence and the alarming social disintegration seen in some of our communities can be linked to the escalating cycles of abuse and neglect of our children.

For most children, thankfully, a traumatic event is a new experience. And like all new experiences, the unknown will add to the confusing and frightening circumstances surrounding this overwhelming experience. The trauma may significantly challenge the child's sense of the world. A flood, tornado, car accident, shooting or abuse by a caregiver - all challenge the child's beliefs about the stability and safety of their world. Very young children may not understand what happened and will be confused or even frightened by the reactions of their siblings or caregivers.

The acute post-traumatic period is characterized by an attempt by the child to reorganize, reevaluate and restore their pre-traumatic world. Many of the emotional, behavioral and cognitive signs and symptoms of the acute post-traumatic period are due to these efforts. Unfortunately, children often do not have the same capacity to understanding or explaining most traumatic experiences. Young children may make many false assumptions about the event – “the tornado came because God was mad.” As with most situations, children seek answers and comfort from adults around them, yet we often feel helpless in this role. Indeed, most traumatic experiences challenge the most mature and experienced adult. While adults do not

have all the answers, they can help children better understand the traumatic event and the ways we respond following trauma.

This booklet addresses some of the key issues related to the child's complex set of reactions that often follow traumatic events. While focused on caregivers, this information may be helpful to caseworkers, teachers, other family and other adults working and living with traumatized children.

This simple guide is intended to inform and provide general principles -- it is not intended to be comprehensive or to exclude other observations or approaches to helping traumatized children. The more we understand these children and the impact of traumatic experiences, the more compassionate and wise we can be as we try to help these children.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### *Should I talk about the traumatic event?*

Do not be afraid to talk about the traumatic event. Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' If a child senses that her caregivers are upset about the event, she will not bring it up. In the long run, this only makes the child's recovery more difficult. A good rule of thumb is to let the child guide when you talk about it. If the child doesn't ask about or mention it, don't bring it up on your own, but when the child brings it up or seems to be thinking about it (see below), don't avoid discussion.

Listen to the child, answer questions, and provide comfort and support. We often have no adequate explanations about senseless death or traumatic events. It is just fine to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get confused and upset by it, too. In the end, listening and comforting a child without avoiding or over-reacting will have long-lasting positive effects on the child's ability to cope with trauma.

### *How should I talk about the event?*

Use age-appropriate language and explanations. The timing and language used are important. Immediately following the trauma, the child will not be very capable of processing complex or abstract information (see Table). As the child gets further away from the event, she will be able to focus longer, digest more and make more sense of what has happened. Sometimes young children act as if they have not 'heard' anything you have said. It takes many individual many moments of sad clarity or the reality of the trauma to actually sink in for young children. Between these moments of harsh reality, children use a variety of coping techniques – some of which can be confusing or upsetting for adults.

During this long process, the child continues to 're-experience' the traumatic event. In play, drawing and words, the child may repeat, re-enact and re-live some elements of the traumatic loss. Surviving adults will hear children ask the same questions again and again. They may be asked to describe 'what happened' again and again. The child may develop profound 'empathic'

concerns for others experiencing trauma, including cartoon characters and animals. “Is Mickey Mouse scared?” Or as they put their stuffed animals under the bed, they may explain “They have to go hide because the bad guy is coming with a gun.”

The child will experience and process the very same material differently at different times following the trauma. In the long run, the opportunity to process and re-process many times will facilitate healthy coping. This re-processing may take place throughout the development of a given child. Even years after the original trauma, a child may ‘revisit’ the loss and struggle to understand it from their current developmental perspective. An intensity of emotional feelings will often be seen on various anniversary dates following the trauma (e.g., one week, one month and one year). Children may develop unusual fears of specific days – “Bad things happen on Fridays.”

One of the most important elements in this process is that children of different ages have different styles of adapting and different abilities to understand abstract concepts often associated with trauma such as death, hate or the randomness of a tornado’s path or a drunk driver hitting *their* car.

### *Should I talk to others about the traumatic event?*

Yes. Inform adults and children in the child's world what has happened. Let teachers, counselors, parents of the child's friends and, if appropriate, the child's peers know some of the pain that this child is living with. Sometimes this can allow the people in the child's life to give them the small amount of tolerance, understanding or nurturing that will smooth the way. People can often be intolerant or insensitive when dealing with the traumatized child “*Isn't it about time they got over this?*” When you see that this is occurring don't be shy about taking this person aside and educating them about the long-lasting effects of traumatic events and the long process of recovery.

### *How long do these reactions last?*

An acute post-traumatic change in feeling, thinking and behaving is normal – persistence or extreme symptoms are not. Many clinicians working with traumatized have noted that the persistence of symptoms beyond three months is associated with increased risk for problems. If symptoms of re-experiencing, avoidance, fearfulness, sleep problems, nightmares, sadness or poor school or social functioning persist beyond three months, they need to be addressed. If they persist for six months or if the symptoms interfere with any aspect of functioning, you should have the child see a professional. If the child is in therapy, communicate this with the therapist. Find out if school performance has been affected. Watch for changes in patterns of play and loss of interest in activities. Be observant. Be patient. Be tolerant. Be sympathetic. These children have been terrified and hurt.

In many cases, some form of post-traumatic symptom can last for many years. Indeed, more than thirty percent of children living through traumatic stress develop some form of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is a chronic disorder requiring the attention of mental health professionals.

### *Do children understand events accurately?*

Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Unfortunately these assumptions may include some sense that they were at fault for the event -- including the death of a loved one. Adults often assume that causality is clear -- dying in a car accident, being shot in a drive-by shooting, dying in a fire. The child may very easily distort an event and make the wrong conclusions about causality. *Mom died in the car accident because she was coming to get me at school. The other driver was mad at her. My brother is dead because he was helping me with my homework. The person that shot my brother was shooting at me and hit my brother because he was in my room. The tornado was God's way of punishing my family.* In many of these distorted explanations, children assume some degree of responsibility for the traumatic event. This can lead to very destructive and inappropriate feelings of guilt.

Be clear. Explore the child's evolving sense of causality. Correct and clarify as you see false reasoning develop. Over time, the ability of the child to cope is related to the ability of the child to understand. While some elements of trauma seem beyond understanding, this can be explained to a child -- some things we don't know. Don't let the child develop a sense that there is a secret about the event -- this can be very destructive. Let the child know that adults cannot and will not understand some things either.

### *Do all children have problems after traumatic events?*

The majority of children experiencing trauma will have some change in their behaviors and their emotional functioning. In addition to the symptoms listed above, these children will often be more irritable, tired and regressed. Fortunately, however, for the majority of these children these symptoms are short-lived. Some children may exhibit no easily observable changes in their thinking, feeling or behaving. In general, the more threatened a child felt, the closer they were to injury or death, the more the event disrupted or traumatized their family or community, the more likely there will be symptoms. In some cases, children's symptoms do not show up for many weeks or even months after the traumatic event, confusing many caregivers. Indeed, in these cases, caregivers or teachers may not even make a connection between the symptoms and the traumatic event.

## Special Considerations for Traumatized Infants

### **1. Can infants recall a traumatic experience later in life?**

The key word in this question is "recall." Unfortunately, for most, the concept of memory is limited to the storage and recall of cognitive, narrative memory. In this conceptualization, a preverbal infant would not be capable of "remembering" and "recalling" any event.

Furthermore, we are all familiar with the developmental amnesia that occurs at approximately age three. In this normal developmental phase, there appears to be a reorganization of cognitive and memory functions such that narrative memory for events prior to age three or four are difficult to access later in life. These two points have led to the pervasive, inaccurate and destructive view that infants do not recall traumatic experience, including sexual abuse. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The human brain has multiple ways to "recall" experience. Indeed, the brain is designed to store and recall information of all sorts – motor, vestibular, emotional, social and cognitive. When you walk, play the piano, feel your heart race in an empty parking lot at night, feel calmed by the touch of a loved one or create a "first impression" after meeting someone for first time, you are using memory. All incoming sensory information creates neuronal patterns of activity that are compared against previously experienced and stored patterns. New patterns can create new memories.

Yet the majority of these stored memory templates are based upon experiences that took place in early childhood – the time in life when these patterns of neuronal activity were first experienced and stored. And the majority of our 'memories' are non-cognitive and pre-verbal. It is the experiences of early childhood that create the foundational organization of neural systems that will be used for a lifetime. This is why, contrary to popular perception, infants and young children are more vulnerable to traumatic stress – including sexual abuse. If the original experiences of the infant with primary caregiving adults involve fear, unpredictability, pain and abnormal genital sensations, neural organization in many key areas will be altered.

For example, abnormal associations may be created between genital touch and fear, thereby laying the foundation for future problems in psychosexual development. Depending upon the specific nature of the abuse, the duration, the frequency and the time during development, a host of problems can result. In many ways, the long-term adverse effects of sexual abuse in infancy are the result of memories – physiological state memories, motor-vestibular memories and emotional memories, which in later years can be triggered by a host of cues that are pervasive. Incestuous abuse in infancy is most destructive in this regard. It will result in the association of fear, pain and unpredictability into the very core of future human functioning – the primary relational templates. If these original 'templates' for all future relationships are corrupted by sexual exploitation and abuse, the child will have a lifetime of difficulties with intimacy, trust, touch and bonding – indeed the core elements of healthy development and functioning throughout the lifecycle will be altered.

Furthermore, if the child is maltreated or abused during early childhood, they may not have any cognitive "memory" and be completely unaware that the source of their fears, difficulties with intimacy and relationships has its roots in this betrayal in infancy. This can lead to problems with self-esteem and, will make any therapeutic efforts more difficult.

## **2. Can trauma during infancy arrest cognitive, emotional or behavioral development?**

The abuse of an infant is often accompanied by extreme disruptions of normal caregiving behaviors and by extreme and prolonged stress responses. Altered caregiving and a prolonged stress response will alter the development of the infant. The major mediators of emotional, cognitive and social environment and, therefore, learning during infancy are the primary caregivers. Development in all domains can be disrupted if these primary relationships are compromised. As mentioned above, it is almost inevitable that emotional, behavioral and cognitive development will be arrested by early traumatic experience.

## **3. Are there physiological changes in the brain resulting from a traumatic event?**

As mentioned above, the brain is designed to change in response to experience. Indeed, all experience changes the brain. With traumatic experiences, the changes are in those parts of the brain involved in the stress and fear responses. Many studies with adults and, now with children, have demonstrated a host of neurophysiological changes that are related to traumatic stress. While many more well-controlled studies are needed, it is likely that certain brainstem catecholamine systems (e.g., locus coeruleus noradrenergic), limbic areas (e.g., amygdala), neuroendocrine (e.g., hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis) and cortical systems involved in regulating stress and arousal may all be altered in traumatized children.

## **4. Do infants display problems similar to older children who are traumatized or abused?**

The long-term problems that result from maltreatment will vary as a function of several key factors: what is the nature of the abuse, the duration, frequency, intensity, time during development and the presence of attenuating factors such as other caring, attentive caregivers in the child's life. In general, however, with all traumatic experiences, the earlier in life, the less "specific" and more pervasive the resulting problems appear to be. For example, when traumatized as an adult, there is a specific increase in sympathetic nervous system reactivity when exposed to cues associated with the traumatic event. With young children, following traumatic stress, there appears to be a generalized increase in autonomic nervous system reactivity in addition to the cue-specific reactivity.

Due to the sequential and functionally interdependent nature of development, traumatic disruption of the organization and functioning of neural system can result in a cascade of related disrupted development and dysfunction. Examples of this include the motor and language delays in traumatized children under age six. The "causes" of these delays are likely due to the primary, trauma-induced alterations in other domains (e.g., the stress response systems, thereby influencing physiological reactivity, hypervigilance, concentration), which, in turn, impair the young child's willingness to explore, capacity to process new information and ability to focus long enough on new information to learn.

## KEY POINTS: *HELPING TRAUMATIZED INFANTS*

- ♥ Anything that can decrease the intensity and duration of the acute fear response (alarm or dissociative) will decrease the probability of that the infant or young child will have long term emotional, behavioral, social or cognitive problems. The longer an infant stays in a fear state, the more likely it will be that she will have problems.
- ♥ In general, structure, predictability and nurturing are key elements to a successful early intervention with a traumatized infant.
- ♥ The primary source of these key elements is the primary caregiver. Therefore, it is critical to help the caregivers understand as much about post-traumatic responses as possible. Further it is crucial to be sensitive to the needs of the caregiver.
- ♥ If the primary caregivers are impacted by the same trauma, it is imperative that they get treatment that compliments the work with the child. Indeed, the best intervention for infants and young children is treating the primary caregiving adults. As they become less anxious, fearful and impaired, the more available they are to the infant and toddler.
- ♥ Early assessment and intervention can be prophylactic -- helping prevent a prolonged acute neurophysiologic, neuroendocrine and neuropsychological trauma response. If an infant or young child has been in a traumatic event, or if the primary caregiver of young children has been traumatized, early aggressive intervention can be crucial.
- ♥ Contrary to popular belief, even infants and very young children experiencing traumatic events can be affected. Indeed, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the younger a child, the more pervasive are the post-traumatic problems. These are a few simple points to keep in mind. The infant's world is defined by his or her caregivers. If the caregivers are pre-occupied, depressed, anxious, exhausted or absent due to post-traumatic symptoms, this will adversely impact the infant and toddler.



## Resources

There are many other places to learn more about helping traumatized children. A few places to start are listed below.

### ***The ChildTrauma Academy***

The ChildTrauma Academy, a not-for-profit organization based in Houston, TX, is a unique collaborative of individuals and organizations working to improve the lives of highrisk children through direct service, research and education. These efforts are in partnership with the public and private systems that are mandated to protect, heal and educate children. The work of the Academy has been supported, in part, by grants from Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, the Children's Justice Act, the Court Improvement Act and through innovative partnerships with academic and corporate partners such as Linkletter Films, Powered, Inc., Scholastic, Inc., and Digital Consulting and Software Services.

*The ChildTrauma Academy*  
5161 San Felipe, Suite 320  
ChildTrauma Academy  
Houston, TX 77056  
jlrccta@aol.com  
www.ChildTrauma.org

### ***Prevent Child Abuse, America***

Prevent Child Abuse (formerly the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse) is nationally recognized as one of the most innovative leaders in child abuse prevention. It has a nationwide network of chapters and their local affiliates in hundreds of communities. Through our media campaigns, people are finding ways they can help prevent abuse. PCA seeks to equip professionals with the latest, proven prevention approaches through training and technical assistance. To find out more about your local affiliate and the national program activities contact:

*Prevent Child Abuse America*  
200 S. Michigan Avenue, 17th Floor  
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2404  
(800) CHILDREN  
Tel: (312) 663-3520  
Fax: (312) 939-8962  
www.preventchildabuse.org  
mailbox@preventchildabuse.org

### ***American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC)***

APSAC's mission is to ensure that everyone affected by child maltreatment receives the best possible professional response. This organization has many useful scholarly and clinical materials focused primarily at the professional audience. Caregivers working with abused or maltreated children may find this a useful resource, nonetheless. For more information contact:

APSAC  
407 South Dearborn Street Suite 1300  
Chicago, IL 60605  
[www.APSAC.org](http://www.APSAC.org)

### ***David Baldwin's Trauma Information Pages***

Dr. Baldwin has done a remarkable job, collecting, sorting and commenting on this information. If you have access to the Web, start here. You won't be disappointed. These Trauma Pages focus primarily on emotional trauma and traumatic stress, including PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder), whether following individual traumatic experience(s) or a large-scale disaster. New information is added to this site about once a month. The purpose of this award winning site is to provide information for clinicians and researchers in the traumatic-stress field. Baldwin's interests include both clinical and research aspects of trauma responses and their resolution.

Supportive resources supplement the more academic or research information of interest to clinicians, researchers, and students.

*David Baldwin's Trauma Information Pages*  
<http://www.trauma-pages.com>

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[http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/Printcare\\_03\\_v2.pdf](http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/Printcare_03_v2.pdf)

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