

The Impact of Trauma on Children at Different Ages

What a Traumatic Situation is Like for a Young Child

- Important relationships are key to a young child's feelings of safety. They are totally dependent on a protective shield provided by adults. They become really upset when they hear cries of distress from a parent.
- Under stress, fear, or pain they instinctively try to get close to a familiar person. Powerful emotions motivate this proximity seeking.
- In the absence of a familiar person they can feel unresolved distress.
- They can cry for help or desperately wish for someone to intervene.
- They are overwhelmed by their intense physical and emotional reactions.
- They can feel totally helpless and passive.
- The single most important issue for a young child's FELT safety is their preferred person.

What a Traumatic Situation is Like for a School-Age Child

- They have more ability to judge the seriousness of a threat and think about protective actions.
- They usually do not see themselves as able to counter a serious danger directly, but may imagine actions they wish they could take (like comic strip heroes)
- When there is violence against family members they can feel like failures for not having done something helpful.
- They may feel ashamed or guilty.
- They get scared of the intensity or speeding up of their emotions and physical reactions ("My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to break").

What a Traumatic Situation is Like for an Adolescent

- They are more actively judging and addressing dangers on their own, but this is still a developing skill and lots of things can go wrong along the way.
- During traumatic situations they make decisions about how to intervene.
- They can feel guilty, sometimes thinking their actions made things worse.
- They are learning to handle intense physical and emotional reactions in order to take action in the face of danger.