

## Understanding Childhood Trauma and Traumatic Stress

“There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.” — Laurell K. Hamilton, *Mistral's Kiss*.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, an initiative of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), two thirds of children under the age of 16 have experienced at least one traumatic event. Untreated traumatic stress in childhood can impact not only the child’s development, but also their health and well-being in adulthood.

Trauma can be experienced as a single event or can persist over periods of time. When a traumatic event occurs, there is a perceived threat to one’s safety. One is likely to feel frightened, helpless or feel that their life is in danger. Witnessing an event that threatens the life or well being of a loved one can also be traumatic, especially for children who rely on that person for security. Not only can traumatic experiences cause strong emotional responses, but they can also trigger physiological reactions. These reactions may include heart pounding, increased blood pressure, upset stomach or even vomiting or loss of bladder control. This physiological reaction is called the “flight or fight” response, which is the body’s way of preparing us to respond to stimuli in the environment. The flight or fight response is something we all experience at one time or another. A traumatic experience, however, is an extremely stressful situation that the person does not have the tools to bounce back from easily. Two people can experience the same event, but respond very differently. An event that is traumatic for one person, may not be for another.



Examples of potentially traumatic events include:

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Parental substance abuse
- Refugee and war experiences
- Loss related to natural disasters
- Accidents – like car accidents or a plane crash
- Bullying

A child that has experienced multiple traumatic events may develop traumatic stress that can impact their future behavior and well-being. They may struggle with emotional regulation and have symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, they may have difficulty forming attachments and developing relationships. It may be difficult for them to focus in school and to reach their academic potential. Children with traumatic stress may have nightmares, struggle to eat or have ongoing physical symptoms, like headaches. They are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors like substance abuse and sexual promiscuity and are at an increased risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system. Without treatment, children with traumatic stress can develop life-long health issues, like heart disease and diabetes (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network).

There are a variety of factors that impact how a child responds to a potentially traumatic event. Genetics and cultural factors can be a risk or protective factor for a child. For example, racism can potentially cause traumatic stress. A child who previously experienced a traumatic event is at a greater risk for traumatic stress. The way care givers respond to the needs of the child during a traumatic event can influence the response of the child. The proximity of the event is another factor. A child may experience trauma by viewing images of a school shooting on TV or by talking to a loved one who experienced the event first hand. There is little that can be done to prevent a traumatic event from occurring, but there are ways to help children recover.

One way to help a child with traumatic stress is to create a space that makes them feel safe and reassure them that they are safe. Teachers may reduce noise in the classroom by using a calming chime to get the attention of the class instead of clapping or shouting. Being up front and honest about event details and taking the child's concerns seriously can help the child cope with the traumatic event. Help the child understand that they are not responsible for the traumatic event that they experienced. Encourage parents to seek professional help for the child. A therapist can help the child process their feelings and develop healthy coping strategies. Family therapy may also be beneficial for parents to understand their child's needs and practice coping strategies at home.

References:

[https://www.ecmhc.org/tutorials/trauma/mod2\\_4.html](https://www.ecmhc.org/tutorials/trauma/mod2_4.html)

<https://www.nctsn.org/>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>