

## What is Trauma?

Trauma is a sudden unexpected, overwhelming and intense emotional experience that is very disturbing. People who experience trauma usually feel intense fear, terror and helplessness.

Trauma can be either acute or chronic. An acute trauma occurs only once; It's an "out of the blue" event, such as a car accident, natural disaster or sudden personal loss. Chronic trauma occurs repeatedly over an extended period of time, such as being a victim or witness of domestic violence or sexual abuse.

## What effects does trauma have on children?

Children who have been traumatized typically have problems in three major areas of functioning:

- They show disturbances in their sense of self;
- They have limited ability to regulate the intensity of their feelings, the expression of emotions and impulse control; and
- They demonstrate a variety of insecurities in relationships that affect attachment and ability to establish and sustain close relationship.

## Trauma and the underdeveloped sense of self

A positive sense of self develops in children when they have parent(s) or caregivers who care for their individuality and dignity, and who give their children the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings without fear. It is important for parents to demonstrate respect, appreciation for others, and proper ways to handle anger and conflict, which give children a huge boost in their self-esteem. For parents caught during and in the aftermath of a trauma, often this is not possible. They are struggling with their own management of feelings and they often become emotionally unavailable but don't realize it.

Witnessing a trauma (such as domestic violence) or

being a victim of a trauma often leads to the development of post-traumatic symptoms. Children who experience these symptoms suffer from a cluster of symptoms, one of which is hyper-arousal which is a chronic condition of intense anxiety and alertness that comes from fear. These children develop "fear responses" that emerge automatically from their nervous systems whenever they feel threatened. Because of these changes in their bodies, these children often have difficulty regulating their emotions. They have very intense feelings, which can be frightening to them and they are often very impulsive because of this overactive state. Children may also develop avoidance behaviors, which can cause further detachment from family, friends and emotions.

For many traumatized children, their sense of security is deeply affected. They often blame themselves and suffer from shame and guilt. They miss important developmental stages due to emotional impairments that don't allow them to learn about intimacy, play and competition. It is important that traumatized children have consistent, nurturing emotional support, social support and coping skills. That's why families need to be involved in the healing process as well.

Traumatized children may also behave in a very sexualized manner. For school-aged children, high-risk signs may include: acting in a withdrawn manner at home and at school, irritability, touching others in inappropriate ways without asking, having unusual knowledge about sexual events or violence, exhibiting regressive behaviors (usually baby talk or seeking constant affection). Girls may tend to act more passively with peers and boys may become more aggressive.

Teenagers struggling with trauma history may become very promiscuous with peers or adults, place themselves in self-injurious situations such as engaging in neglectful or abusive dating relationships (in order to re-enact the chaos experienced with early caretakers). Teenagers may display poor self-esteem and a lack of interest in activities, be highly impatient, engage in self-injurious behaviors such as self-mutilation. They are at a higher risk to binge drink and/or use drugs.

## What are some characteristics of children who have been traumatized?

### Age 0-5

- Developmental delays, especially with language and motor skills
- Lowered ability to trust others
- Attachment problems
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty making and keeping friends
- Aggression towards others
- Verbal abuse of others
- Lack of bladder and/or bowel control

### Age 6-12

- Academic problems and poor grades
- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor social skills
- Fear and anger
- Secrecy
- Self-blame
- Somatic symptoms
- Aggression
- Lying and Stealing
- Behavioral problems

### Age 13+

- Poor school performance
- Poor judgment
- Poor problem solving skills
- Problematic moral development
- Weak sense of identity
- Trouble with relationships
- Anger and anxiety
- Bedwetting and somatic symptoms
- Eating disorders Poor impulse control skills
- Self-destructive acts such as self-injury
- Risk taking
- Substance abuse
- Delinquent behavior
- Runaway episodes

## How can children who suffer from trauma be treated?

For children who have been exposed to trauma, the first priority is to establish a feeling of safety. Children have a right to give in a safe and stable environment. Once children feel safe, then they can begin the work of coming to terms with their experiences. Therapy sessions focus on working with the child and the family. Helping each party identify their emotions, what the trauma means for them, especially discussing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Some goals of therapy are to teach children to establish a secure connection with others, to feel better about themselves and to improve their ability to make good life choices.

Through therapy children are empowered and regain a sense of integrity and dignity. Children learn to ask others for emotional support and caregivers learn to listen as well as to develop coping skills to help the healing process.

## What is play therapy?

Play is a child's natural way to express how they feel. Many children do not have adequate words to express internal emotions and through play they show how they feel. The term "play therapy" means that in a therapeutic setting, a variety of different materials and techniques are used to assist children to confront or express ambivalent or hidden feelings about a variety of subjects. With a therapist, play therapy teaches children to master their feelings, learn how to resolve conflict and become more skilled at problem solving.

A child therapist is a special combination of teacher, confidante and friend. A child's relationship with their therapist is unique – during and hour session with a child, the therapist focuses exclusively on that child and emotions they need to explore. The focus is not on placing conditions on the child's behavior but on establishing an environment in which the child experiences sufficient safety and support to explore his/her inner world, a world that is often frightening and

overwhelming. In the outer world this type of relationship is not usual. Adults in day to day life situations have priorities and expectations that demand an outer focus that often leaves a child with unresolved emotional material. Since this seems to be normal part of every day life, special strategies must be used in the therapeutic setting to support traumatized children toward greater health.

## What we can do for you...

Children's Bureau cares about families. The Children's Bureau provides a comprehensive outpatient Mental Health Program serving children and their families with individual, family and group therapies. The program also offers in-home family support designed to improve parenting, problem solving and self-advocacy skills. In partnership with schools and school-based Healthy Start Programs, Children's Bureau provides child therapy at school sites, case management and parent education. In addition, Children's Bureau provides out of home care programs that include foster care, adoption and port-permanency services.



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# *The Effects of Trauma on Children and Families*



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