

How Preschoolers React to Trauma and How to Help

(3 years old to 6 years old)

These common reactions to traumatic events are based on typically developing 3-6 yr. olds. The term traumatic event is being used to describe an overwhelmingly frightening situation that has affected the child.

Common Reactions/Behaviors after Experiencing or Exposure to a Traumatic Event:

- Tells the story over and over
- Acts out what happened
- Stops doing things they've just learned or acts younger than age (wets pants, has a hard time reading or writing)
- Has trouble sleeping or has nightmares
- Has behavior or mood changes (gets clingy, aggressive, sad, withdrawn)
- Doesn't want to be alone or away from parents
- Feels physically sick (headaches, stomachaches)
- Feels guilty and thinks his/her thoughts or actions caused the trauma

How to Help Your Child:

- Listen to the child re-telling the story. At the end of the story, ask them who came to help and when the child knew he/she was safe. This ensures that they are not emotionally left in the scariest part of the story, but instead ends the story at a safe place.
- Let the child play "pretend" about the trauma. Help the child end the play in a safe way by asking "how can the toys feel safe" or by asking "who is helping the toys now".
- Encourage play and let the child express his/her feelings
- Have people who the child knows provide comfort
- Keep the routine and rules the same as before the trauma
- Respect their fears
- Give lots of time to process and heal
- Tell the child that his/her feelings are important and real
- Assure them that he/she is safe
- Help the child to think of ways to feel safe
- Create a bedtime routine
- Talk with the school staff about how to help your child
- Be aware that lots of things (situations, places, and sights/sounds/smells) might remind the child of the trauma. Make a plan to help them cope with the reminders.
- Don't watch or listen to news stories about the trauma when the child is present/nearby
- Be aware of your own reactions and take care of yourself as well

If you are worried about your child's behavior or emotions please contact a mental health counselor for support

Resources:

Books for children:

Holmes, Margaret M. *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Magination Press, 2000.
(Recommended for ages 4-8)

Online:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Information for caregivers: <http://www.nctsnet.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers>
Information for children: http://www.nctsnet.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/What_Do_I_Say.pdf

After the Injury

Information for caregivers:

<http://www.aftertheinjury.org/tools-parents-help-their-children-and-themselves-recover-injury>

http://www.aftertheinjury.org/sites/ati/files/aftertheinjury_helpingmyselfcope.pdf

Information for children: http://www.aftertheinjury.org/sites/ati/files/afterinjury_tipsforkids.pdf

References

Publishing:

Monahon, C. (1997) *Children and trauma: A guide for parents and professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Online:

After the Injury <http://www.aftertheinjury.org/quick-tips>

National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network <http://www.nctsnet.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers>

National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC) <https://www.starr.org/training/tlc/resources>