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Resources for Parents and Caregivers

Welcome

Welcome, parents and caregivers to your section of the **NCTSN** ^[1] website!

You can play an important role in helping your children and teenagers recover from traumatic events. We have designed these pages for birth parents, adoptive parents, resource/foster parents, grandparents, caregivers, and all others who care for children and teens.

We are using the words "child" or "children" to include adolescents. Although teens may not think of themselves as children, parents and caregivers most often refer those of any age (toddler, school-age, teen, youth, adult) in our care as children. No matter how old they get, they are always our children!

"It's all in your heart, what you want, and what you can do. You can overcome anything."

- Quote from a mother of three

The more you learn about how traumatic events affect children, the more you will understand the reasons for your kids' behaviors, and emotions, and the better prepared you will be to help them cope. When you let your children know that you and other caring adults are working to keep them safe, that you are there to support them, and that there are people who can help them with what they are feeling, most children who have traumatic stress can recover and go on to live healthy and productive lives. To learn more and access resources on families and trauma, [click here](#) ^[2].



What You Will Find in These Sections

- Definitions of trauma, traumatic events, and traumatic stress
- Answers to commonly asked questions about child traumatic stress
- Signs and symptoms of child traumatic stress
- Suggestions for ways to cope with child traumatic stress
- Advice on how and where to find help
- Information on evidence-based treatments (scientifically proven practices) that can assist families in helping children recover from child traumatic stress
- Links to resources to help children and families better understand what they are feeling when they (or someone close to them) has experienced a traumatic event
- Support to help children cope with their traumatic experiences

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Trauma and Traumatic Events

What Is Trauma?

People often use the word "trauma" to refer to a traumatic event. A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event that can happen to anyone. Not all dangerous or scary events are traumatic events, however.

What Is a Traumatic Event?

A *traumatic event* is a scary, dangerous, or violent event. An event can be traumatic when we face or witness an immediate threat to ourselves or to a loved one, often followed by serious injury or harm. We feel terror, helplessness, or horror at what we are experiencing and at our inability to stop it or protect ourselves or others from it.



Often people feel bad after a trauma. Even though we try hard to keep children safe, dangerous events still happen. This danger can come from outside of the family (such as a natural disaster, car accident, school shooting, or community violence) or from within the family, such as a serious injury, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one.

What Is Child Traumatic Stress?

When a child has had one or more traumatic events, and has reactions that continue and affect his or her daily life long after the events have ended, we call it Child Traumatic Stress. Children may react by becoming very upset for long periods, depressed, or anxious. They may show changes in the way they behave, or in their eating and sleeping habits; have aches and pains; have difficulties at school, problems relating to others, or not want to be with others or take part in activities. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.

Understanding Trauma

Parents want to protect their children from scary, dangerous, or violent events, but it is not always possible for them to protect their children from danger. After one or more traumatic events, many children do not just forget and move on. Those who develop reactions that continue and affect their daily lives—even after the traumatic events have ended—suffer from child traumatic stress.

Child traumatic stress happens when children experience traumatic events or situations that upset and overwhelm their ability to cope. When signs and symptoms interfere with daily life, a child is experiencing traumatic stress.

Not all children who experience a traumatic event will develop symptoms of child traumatic stress. Children's reactions can vary depending on their age, developmental level, trauma history, and other factors.

What makes it likely that my child will develop child traumatic stress after a traumatic event?

Risk factors for developing child traumatic stress include:

Severity of the Event

How serious was the event? How badly were your children or someone they love physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were your children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die?

Amount of Destruction Seen/Distance from Trauma Event

Were your children actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did your child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened?

Caregivers Reactions

Did you believe that your child was telling the truth? Did you take your child's reactions seriously? Did you respond to your child's needs? Did you do your best to protect your child and make him or her feel safe? How did you cope with the event?

Exposure to More than One Traumatic Event in the Past

In general, children exposed to one traumatic event are less likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions.

Children, Family and Community

The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and/or resources that help lessen or eliminate risk and protect them against long-term harm. One of these protective factors can be the child's cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, culture also can increase a child's risk for traumatic stress symptoms. To learn more and access resources on families and trauma, [click here](#) [2].

Signs of Traumatic Stress

What are the signs that a child may be experiencing child traumatic stress?

The signs of traumatic stress are different in each child. And young children react differently than older children.

Preschool Children

- Feel helpless and uncertain
- Fear of being separated from their parent/caregiver
- Cry and/or scream a lot
- Eat poorly and lose weight
- Return to bedwetting
- Return to using baby talk
- Develop new fears
- Have nightmares
- Recreate the trauma through play

Elementary School Children

- Become anxious and fearful
- Worry about their own or others' safety
- Become clingy with a teacher or parent
- Feel guilt or shame
- Tell others about the traumatic event again and again
- Become upset if they get a small bump or bruise
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Experience numbness
- Have fears that the event will happen again

Parents Can Help

Parents Can Help

Children can and do recover from traumatic events. As parents, you play an important role in helping your children and your family cope with the stress reactions that can follow these events. Try to maintain a balanced perspective. On one hand, do take your child's reactions seriously. Don't say that "It wasn't so bad." Don't think "If we don't make a big deal, she will forget all about it." On the other hand, don't decide that the trauma was so bad that your child will never recover. Instead, try to maintain a hopeful belief that your child will heal and that your family will recover from the event as well.

"I was so focused on my own worries, that I almost didn't notice how upset my son was. But once I did, finding activities to help calm him ended up calming me as well."

- Quote from a single mother

Family members may each react differently to a traumatic event that a child has experienced. Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that each of your family members may have a different reaction to a traumatic event. Reactions will differ, depending not only on the family member's age, developmental level, and own trauma history, but also on his or her relationship with the child and personal exposure to the event. For example, one may have shared the child's experience, another may have witnessed it, still another may have heard about it after the fact. While all family members may be upset, only some will have posttraumatic stress reactions themselves; each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience.

While your world may feel changed forever after a traumatic event, you, your children and family members, and your community are more resilient than you might imagine. You do have a great ability to heal and return to feeling "normal" again. To learn more and access resources on families and trauma, [click here](#) ^[7].



What can my family do to recover?

You can help your family recover by doing the following:

- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Try not to push your child to "just get over it." Instead, reassure him or her that they do not need to feel guilty or bad about any feelings or thoughts.
- Explain to your child that he or she is not responsible for what happened. Children often blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control.
- Assure your child that he or she is safe. Talk about the measures you are taking to keep him or her safe at home and about what measures his/her school is taking to ensure his or her safety at school.
- Maintain regular home (mealtime, bedtime) and school routines to support the process of recovery. Make sure your child continues to go to school and stays in school.
- Learn about the common reactions that children have to traumatic events.
- Take time to think about your own experience of your child's traumatic event and any past traumatic events you may have experienced. Your own trauma history and your feelings about your child's trauma event will influence how you react.
- Consult a qualified mental health professional if your child's distress continues for several weeks. Ask your child's primary care physician or school for a referral to a mental health provider who has experience with child traumatic stress.

When family members care for and support each other, they can often overcome the fears and stress of trauma. Some families grow stronger after a traumatic event and are even able to help others in need. Of the many ways to cope and heal from traumatic stress, many families count on these:

- Community support
- Spiritual beliefs
- Friends and other families

Even with the support of family members and others, some children do not heal. When distress continues for several weeks, a mental health professional trained in trauma care can help the whole family cope with the effects of traumatic events. Finding the right professional, however, can be confusing. The NCTSN's webpages "Finding Help" and "About this Web Site" can guide you to where to begin, whom to call, and what questions to ask. Please note that the NCTSN cannot respond to questions about your specific family situation, diagnose or treat your family members, refer you to professional resources in your area, or provide clinical opinions.

There is no correct timetable for recovery. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Some families get better with time and the support of others. As a general rule, if your child's reactions (nightmares, recurrent thoughts, fears) have been getting worse instead of better, or your family is having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting your children's needs, you should seek a referral for a qualified mental health professional (psychologist, clinical social worker, psychiatrist) with experience in assessing and treating child traumatic stress or posttraumatic stress disorder. Going without help can have long-lasting negative consequences. Fortunately, however, entering treatment can have concrete, beneficial results that will help your child and your family feel better, grow stronger, and recover.

Trauma Treatment

Recovery



When Should I Ask for Help from a Mental Health Provider?

There is no correct timetable for recovery. Some children/teens will recover quickly. Other children recover more slowly. Some families get better with time and the support of others. For families having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting their children's needs, trauma treatment from a mental health provider (i.e., psychotherapists such as psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists) is available to help your family seek safety, grow stronger, and recover. Not getting help can have long-lasting consequences but, fortunately, entering treatment can have concrete beneficial results.

"You can't change the past, but you can do something with the present and prepare for the future. This is what really kept me going."

- Quote from a mother of two

Getting Help

What kind of mental health provider do we need?

Many families first discuss their concerns with a family physician, school counselor, or clergy member, who may refer them to a specialist such as a child or adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist. Ask your pediatrician, family physician, school counselor, or clergy member for a referral to a mental health professional. Today, many family practitioners work with a team of providers, including mental health providers, and can refer you to someone they know and trust. Ask close family members and friends for their recommendations, especially if their child or adolescent has had a good experience with psychotherapy.

When seeking help for your child, you will want to try to find a mental health provider who meets these requirements:

- Has experience in helping families overcome traumatic stress
- Offers services near your home or is easy for you to get to
- Uses evidence-based practices (EBP), that is, treatments proven to help all members of the family:
 - Feel safe
 - Learn about trauma and its effects
 - Cope with difficulties caused by the trauma
 - Recognize and build on the family and family members' strengths
 - Talk about ways to get the family back on track

How do I choose a therapist or counselor who's right for my family?

There are many types of mental health providers, including psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, and licensed counselors. Psychiatrists can prescribe medications because they are physicians. Mental health professionals who are not physicians can provide therapy and often work with psychiatrists and family physicians to ensure that their patients can receive any needed medications. Psychologists are skilled in evaluation and in various forms of intelligence, personality, and psychological testing. What's important is that you select a provider with appropriate training and qualifications. Once you have the name or names of several mental health professionals in your area, call and interview them over the phone to determine which is the best match for you and your family.

What can my family expect from therapy?

There are many approaches to outpatient psychotherapy, which may occur in individual, group, or family sessions. Treatment for your child may involve the following:


- Talking with your child or having him or her draw or play with toys in order to get a better understanding of what he or she is experiencing, feeling, or thinking
- Asking about your child's experience of the traumatic event, and other areas in his or her life, such as how the child is getting along with family, friends, teachers, and other students in school
- Assessing your child's strengths, skills, and talents, as well as problems
- Engaging with your child (while taking into account age and emotional maturity) to try to understand the traumatic experience, including the ways it has affected daily life
- Teaching a variety of evidence-based treatment techniques such as relaxation methods and problem-solving skills, and including, in some cases, interventions with the school and family or referral for medication

The goal of treatment is to help your child to address feelings of helplessness and worries over safety and to identify helpful thoughts and actions. Because trauma can interrupt a child's normal development, therapy helps in reducing the symptoms of child traumatic stress, as well as offering your child support and evidence to return to age-appropriate activities. Your child's therapist will probably ask for your

Resources

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All of the resources on this page are free and downloadable. You may prefer printed materials instead. When you see this icon , it indicates that a paper copy of that resource can be ordered and delivered anywhere in the United States. In some cases, color versions are available.

"There are moments when I start to feel it won't get any better, but then I just remember all the challenges that I have faced and overcome. That gives me hope."

- Quote from a father of two

General Resources

[Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event](#) ^[17] ^[18]

A traumatic event can be something that happens in nature (such as a flood or earthquake). It can be something one person does to another person (such as shooting or hitting someone). When very young children see such an event—or if someone hurts them—they may not be able to tell you how they feel. Teenagers may not *want* to tell you. Even months later, a child or teen may still be scared or sad. This page (1) explains how children of different ages may react to a traumatic event, and (2) gives parents and caregivers ways to help their children understand and get better.

[Early Childhood Trauma](#) ^[19](2010) (PDF)

Early childhood trauma usually means a trauma that happens to a baby or a child under age six. This page (1) explains some of the difficulties that can result from early childhood trauma, (2) describes symptoms to look for in your child, (3) lists ways to help protect your child, (4) provides ideas for helping your children and family get better faster, and (5) lists treatments for young children.

[Información en Español](#) ^[20]

La NCTSN ha creado los siguientes recursos que detallan como ayudar a los padres y a las personas al cuidado de los niños para que puedan entender y responder al Estrés Traumático Infantil.

[Physical Punishment: What Parents Should Know](#) ^[21] (2009) (PDF) ^[18]

Many parents believe that it is OK to punish their children by hitting them when they do things that are upsetting, wrong, or mean. This fact sheet gives parents (1) facts about how punishments can harm children and increase bad behavior, and (2) tips on effective ways to teach children to behave well.

[Parenting in a Challenging World](#) ^[22]

"What can my family do to heal after a child has experienced a traumatic event?" "Will my child recover?" "How have other people coped?" Parents and caregivers face questions and cares like these after a child has experienced a traumatic event. These interactive pages look at those and other concerns with the help of scenes from the documentary film, *Surviving September 11th: The Story of One New York Family*.

[Raising Well-Behaved Kids: What Parents Should Know](#) ^[23] (2009) (PDF) ^[18]

There is no one right way to bring up children who behave well. This fact sheet gives parents more effective ways to have well-behaved children, including how to (1) cool down in intense situations, (2) use great communication strategies (such as how to time your requests for best results), (3) increase cooperation with praise, and (4) set limits on problem behavior with consequences.

[Trauma and Your Family](#) ^[24] (2011) (PDF)

A *traumatic event* is a scary, dangerous, or violent event. Feeling bad after a trauma can happen to anyone following such an event.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/01/2017 - 06:22): <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers>

Links:

- [1] <http://nctsn.org/about-us/who-we-are>
- [2] <http://www.nctsn.org/content/families-and-trauma>
- [3] <http://www.nctsn.org/about-us/about-this-web-site>
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