

Trauma Sensitive Approaches for Home & School

Video 1 Fact Sheet: Understanding Trauma

What is Trauma?

Trauma refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological reactions to stress. It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that are physically and/or emotionally harmful or potentially harmful and result in lasting adverse effects on an individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. *1

What is Traumatic Stress?

Child traumatic stress includes reactions resulting from exposure to one or more traumas over the life course. These reactions persist and affect a child's daily life even after the events have ended. The stress experience may overwhelm a child's ability to cope with daily demands. Responses and symptoms vary but may be more evident when the child is reminded in some way of the traumatic event(s). *2

Causes/Kinds of Trauma

- Natural disasters
- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Domestic violence
- School violence
- Neglect and deprivation
- Traumatic grief
- Accidents
- Medical injury, illness, or procedures
- Loss of a parent/caregiver
- Exposure to community violence or terrorism

Types of Trauma

Acute, Chronic, Complex, Systemic, System Induced

Signs of Trauma

- Reactions to trauma can include a variety of responses, signs, or symptoms, including: *3
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Unexplained irritability or anger
- School avoidance
- Fixation on certain events
- Problems focusing on projects, schoolwork, and conversations
- Regression or loss of skills
- Too much or too little sleep; nightmares
- High levels of worry, trouble with change, or a high level of feeling unsafe
- Angry outbursts, high levels of emotions, or poor focus

- Disruptive, disrespectful, sullen, withdrawn, avoidant, or anxious behaviors
- Physical symptoms, such as aches and pains
- Problems relating to others or forming attachments
- Older children may abuse drugs or alcohol and behave in risky ways

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The initial ACE study, by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente, identified an association between 10 experiences of childhood maltreatment and later problems with adult health and well-being. The study uses the ACE score, a total count of the number of adverse childhood experiences reported by respondents, to assess the total amount of stress during childhood. The greater the number of ACEs, the greater the risk for the following problems later in life including alcoholism, depression, multiple sexual partners, suicide attempts, smoking and liver disease among other negative health related issues. Ultimately, this study showed the direct link between childhood trauma and poor health outcomes in adulthood.

ACEs are important because they trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response, which can lead to negative internalizing emotions and externalizing behaviors. The 10 ACEs defined by the study are:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Losing a parent to divorce, separation, or other reason
- Witness a mother abused
- A family member who is:
 - Depressed or diagnosed with another mental illness
 - Addicted to alcohol or another substance
 - In prison

Trauma's Impact on School

When children who experience trauma and traumatic stress operate in a fight, flight, or freeze mode, they may have trouble meeting the demands of school. Teachers and other school staff may see big, acting-out behaviors. Some children may 'fly under the radar' and use avoidant behaviors. Each child's response to trauma is unique. Educators should look behind the behaviors to determine the student's needs.

Instead of asking "What's wrong with you?", a more constructive question is "What's happened to you?"

*1 Cite: US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

*2 Cite: National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Note: Traumatic stress is a common term for reactive anxiety and depression, although it is not a medical term and is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

*3 Note: Signs of trauma may mimic characteristics of depression or anxiety. Clinical evaluation may be necessary to determine if other diagnosable mental health conditions exist.

Videos are available at www.FormedFamiliesForward.org.