

Introduction: Children and Trauma

This brief educational handout provides an overview and definition of traumatic stress in childhood and the resulting impact on children.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Many different things may be called “traumatic.” *Trauma* refers to experiences that are overwhelming and may leave a person feeling helpless, vulnerable, or very frightened.

Trauma may include specific types of events, such as being in an accident or experiencing a natural disaster like a hurricane or an earthquake. Trauma may also include *ongoing stressors*, such as physical or sexual abuse.

For children, trauma is often about more than physical harm. For instance, separation from a caregiver, emotional neglect, and lack of a stable home (such as living in many different foster homes) are often very traumatic.

HOW DOES TRAUMA IMPACT CHILDREN?

Children who have experienced ongoing trauma may have many different reactions. Children may:

Develop an expectation that bad things will happen to them.

When children have many bad things happen, they may come to expect them. They may overestimate times when they are in danger, or be fearful or withdrawn even in situations that feel safe to other people.

Have a hard time forming relationships with other people.

Trauma often involves children being hurt by others and/or not being protected by others. When early relationships are not consistently safe, children may develop a sense of mistrust in relationships.

Have difficulty managing or regulating feelings and behavior.

Traumatic stress is overwhelming, and children are flooded by strong emotions and high levels of arousal. Children may feel like they are unable to rely on others to help them with these feelings—for instance, they may believe no one is safe; they may worry that other people will think they are bad; and so on.

Without tools, children may try to overcontrol or shut down their emotional experience; may try to manage feelings and arousal through behaviors (such as being silly or getting in fights); or may rely on more dangerous overt methods (such as substance abuse or self-injury).

Have difficulty developing a positive sense of themselves.

Children who experience trauma may feel damaged, powerless, ashamed, and/or unlovable. It is often easier for children to blame themselves for bad things happening, than to blame others. Over time, children may develop a belief that there is something wrong with them.