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TRAUMA

UNDERSTANDING AND CARING
FOR CHILDREN WHILE THEY HEAL



Trauma impacts a child's physical and mental well-being, relationships, and brain development. Children who have experienced trauma may demonstrate difficulty expressing themselves or withdraw from others because they are struggling with identifying and managing strong emotions. Children suffering from trauma need supportive families and caregivers who can provide a predictable, safe, and stable environment that allows children to feel protected, valued, respected, and nurtured so they can learn and heal.



Understanding trauma and its effects on children can help families and caregivers provide the support children need to learn how to cope and heal.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSA), "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." Potential traumatic events can include:

- Relative with substance abuse or mental illness
- Abandonment or threats of abandonment
- Family separation or divorce
- Abuse or domestic violence
- Community or school violence
- Extreme poverty
- Death of a loved one
- Motor vehicle accident
- Medical treatments or surgery
- Acts of terrorism or war experiences
- Military deployment
- Natural disasters

There are four types of trauma. The first is **Acute Trauma**, which is a single traumatic event like an earthquake or the loss of a family member. **Chronic Trauma** refers to ongoing or multiple traumatic events such as suffering an accident and undergoing several surgeries. **Complex Trauma** is usually caused by a trusted adult and may include several occurrences such as a child who is abused by a caregiver, then moved to another household and abused by that adult as well. **Historical Trauma** is passed down through generations and usually begins with a traumatic event that affected the whole community, such as slavery or genocide.



45%
of children in the
United States have
had at least one
Adverse Childhood
Experience.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The term ACEs refers to traumatic incidents children experience, and a person's ACEs score refers to the amount of traumatic incidents experienced by an individual. The first ACEs study was done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente. Doctors found that adults with a higher number of ACEs in their childhood experienced more health problems and diseases as adults, compared to adults with lower ACE scores. They also found that trauma is more common than most people think, and that it affects people of all cultures and economic backgrounds. Further research found that trauma impacts the development of the brain during pregnancy and early childhood. This disruption in brain development makes it difficult for children to identify emotions, manage behavior, solve problems, think logically, control impulses, and recall memories. Treating the trauma can alleviate the health and behavior symptoms that are impacting the child.

★ WHAT DOES TRAUMA DO?

During a traumatic event, the alert center of the brain activates a **fight** (kicking, hitting, biting, screaming, making threats), **flight** (hiding, running, withdrawing), or **freeze** (being unresponsive, appearing tired, daydreaming excessively) response. Afterwards, details from the experience can become triggers that cause the trauma to repeat. Children may indicate distress by:

- Acting fearful of things that were not a problem before
- Showing anxiety about being separated from loved ones
- Having nightmares and trouble sleeping
- Expressing intense and sudden sadness or anger
- Displaying limited interest in activities
- Lacking focus or exhibiting confusion
- Protecting personal space
- Suffering unexplained medical problems

★ HELPING CHILDREN HEAL

The good news is that the human brain has the ability to change through learning (brain plasticity). This means that trauma can be treated, and with the right support children and adults who have experienced ACEs can heal. A child's support system can include parent(s), guardian(s), resource family parent(s), extended family members, caregivers, and educators. Whether it is a home or a classroom, adults can support the healing process and prevent the reoccurrence of trauma by taking the following steps:

1. **Understand** the powerful influence trauma can have on a child and approach behavior issues with a calm and patient attitude. Search for the reason that is prompting the behavior to better understand the child's needs. Learn to identify the triggers or situations that cause stress and be prepared to give support.
2. **Create a safe space** by removing any reminders of trauma from the environment. Include items that help children feel welcome, comforted, and secure such as a special blanket, doll, stuffed animal, photo book, or familiar cultural item.
3. **Build a relationship** based on trust, acceptance, respect, and love. Reassure children that you are there to take care of them and keep them safe. Follow a schedule and behave in a consistent and predictable way to help children feel secure. Make eye contact and use a calm tone of voice when you are speaking with children because this helps them adjust their behavior to match yours. Draw attention to children's positive qualities and talents to help build their confidence and show them they are valued.
4. **Teach children about emotions, social skills, problem solving, and coping.** Children need help and practice in identifying emotions, expressing feelings in a healthy way, solving problems, managing their own behavior, and coping with difficult situations.

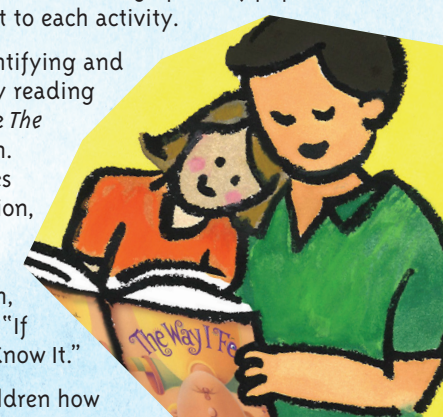


**Secure attachments
are critical for
children to build
their capacity
for resilience and
emotion regulation.**

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT HEALING

Visual Schedules Creating visual schedules helps children feel secure because they can see and anticipate what will happen each day. Glue pictures of activities such as eating, playing, and reading books on a large piece of paper and write the start time next to each activity.

Emotions Practice identifying and expressing emotions by reading books about feelings like *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain. Take turns making faces and guessing the emotion, drawing pictures of emotions, labeling feelings as they happen, and singing songs like "If You're Happy and You Know It."



Mindfulness Teach children how to use mindfulness to cope with stress and anxiety. Start by reading *Peaceful Piggy Meditation* by Kerry Lee MacLean. Invite children to sit in a quiet space, place their hands on their tummy, and breathe slowly in through their nose and out through their mouth. Ask them to focus on feeling their tummy moving in and out as they breathe.

Relaxation Station Place a plastic tub in the corner of the room. Place items for working out anger and frustration like playdough, silly putty, or squeeze toys in the tub. Add books like *Listening to My Body* by Gabi Garcia, items that encourage deep breathing like pinwheels or bubbles, and pillows, soft toys, or puppets. Invite children to spend some time in the relaxation station when they need a break.

Yoga In addition to the physical benefits of exercise, yoga also helps regulate breathing, teaches children to control their bodies, encourages them to focus on (be mindful of) the present moment, and builds confidence. Start with easy poses that can be found in the book *Zoo Zen: A Yoga Story for Kids* by Kristen Fischer.

TO LEARN MORE

BOOKS FOR ADULTS

TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS
Julie Nicholson, Linda Perez, and Julie Kurtz
TRAUMA THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES: AWAKENING THE ORDINARY MIRACLE OF HEALING
Peter A. Levine Ph.D. and Maggie Kline

ORGANIZATIONS

THE NATIONAL CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS NETWORK
www.nctsn.org
HARVARD UNIVERSITY CENTER ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

All of the quotes were taken from the book named as a resource above:

[Trauma Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators](#) by Julie Nicholson, Linda Perez, and Julie Kurtz