

Signs of possible trauma in children and adolescents

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Psychological trauma

Infants, children and adolescents can have experiences which overwhelm them and possibly damage their emotional and psychological health and their general development. These may include single events or experiences such as:

- » a natural disaster
- » accident
- » violent incidents

Repeated incidents such as:

- » domestic violence or neglect
- » serious illness or difficult medical interventions
- » the death of a loved person and other important losses
- » a 'whole of life' context such as war
- » a series of unrelated occurrences
- » a build up of stress over time.

The most damaging of traumas is that of child abuse, particularly physical or sexual abuse, where the child may live in fear and/or uncertainty. The problems they face may be terrible "secrets", not able to be spoken of and potentially very damaging to their development.

Depending on the nature of the experience, the impact on the child, any pre-existing vulnerabilities and the quality and timeliness of the support they receive, the effects may settle quickly without any negative outcomes. On the other hand, for some children the reactions may last for weeks, months or

even longer. They may also demonstrate a delayed reaction to the experience.

It is important to remember that with appropriate support and understanding most children recover from challenging experiences - often wiser, more thoughtful and with a deeper understanding of themselves and other people.

Recovery can however be challenging for the child or adolescent and concerning for parents and carers, requiring much patience and understanding.

Are there different levels of impact?

Yes. These may be described as:

- » stress which is a demand on the child that is within their capacity to cope and recover from without damage
- » distress describes a level of impact which has the potential to cause psychological damage if prolonged or severe
- » trauma describes a psychological injury which may vary from mild to very severe
- » loss can sometimes overwhelm a child psychologically and interfere with the meeting of basic needs, including attachments and security when a loved one is lost or dies, resulting in psychological trauma. The reaction to loss involves sadness and grief. It may also result when a loss occurs in sudden, violent and unexpected ways.

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A traumatic experience will impact on an infant, child or adolescent in a very individual way and to differing degrees of severity. It will also be influenced by their level of development and the resources available to support them. It is not a 'one size fits all' response.

What is it that may be damaged?

- » sense of safety and trust in relationships, the physical environment and the social environment. This can cause the child to become hyper-alert, wary, distant and disconnected, fearful, cynical or over protective.
- » neuro-biological system which may lead to important changes in brain development and functioning
- » intellectual functions such as understanding new information, memory and concentration which will affect progress at school as well as general learning
- » social skills and relationships may become derailed
- » physical and mental health may be undermined

Reactions which may appear over time:

In the immediate impact period the child may be:

- » stunned
- » shocked
- » frightened
- » not able to make sense of their world
- » physically upset, or
- » have regressed behaviour and ability to look after themselves.

In the short term (weeks) regressed and /or disorganised behaviours and confusion are often seen. Some examples may include:

- » separation problems such as clinging and 'hanging around'
- » loss of confidence and initiative
- » changes in thinking and learning
- » emotional and behavioural changes like being: quiet, withdrawn, noisy, boisterous, irritable, moody or too good
- » repetitions in play and talk
- » nightmares
- » fearful (general and incident specific)

For some infants, children and adolescents the short term reactions may persist into the medium term (months) or appear for the first time along with signs of ongoing distress such as poor physical health, emotional instability and changes. These may include the emergence of issues such as:

- » anxiety
- » trauma syndromes, and
- » depression:
- » behavioural and personality changes such as anger, social isolation and/ or inappropriate friendships
- » reduced school performance, and
- » not advancing developmentally

Pre-existing issues for the child or in their family may complicate their recovery.

For a range of reasons short and medium term effects may continue to the long term (years) for a small number of children and may become entrenched. This may cause:

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- » relationship, emotional and mental health problems
- » developmental delays and deviations which can impact on school performance, sense of self and understanding of other people and the wider world
- » also, the demands of the recovery journey on their family and community may cause additional problems for the child resulting in further challenges and consequences.

Very occasionally a child may appear to have recovered from their experience without any concerning reactions. However, they may show a delayed response later on. It is easy to miss the connection with the original experience.

In some rare cases, there may be a re-emergence of reactions many years after the traumatic event. This may be because:

- » the child has moved to a new stage of development with new and demanding challenges
- » they have another similar experience or one which reminds them in some way of their earlier experience.

It is important to be mindful of children who have pre-existing trauma experiences or vulnerabilities or other current issues to deal with. The increasing impact of many traumas over time is described as complex trauma.

It is important to be aware that infants, children and adolescents can be upset or re-traumatised by circumstances around them such as:

- » exposure to media reports and imagery
- » adult conversations and behaviours
- » bullying amongst peers
- » stressful child-parent relationships and
- » exposure to disaster reminders and others challenging experiences.

The journey of recovery

Everyone recovers from the impact of challenging experiences in their own way and in their own time. For some it may take weeks, for others months and sometimes years. It is not a straightforward process but has its ups and downs.

Infant, children and adolescent's recovery is influenced by:

- » the nature, exposure, intensity and duration of their experience
- » whether they were alone or with someone who they felt was able to look after them
- » their age and developmental skills
- » their pre-existing and post incident resiliencies and vulnerabilities
- » maintenance of strong and 'tuned in' primary attachment relationships, usually parents but also extended family, teachers and other people who are important to the child
- » timely and appropriate support services and activities

How parents and carers can help children recover

Parents and carers can help children recover by:

- » ensuring the child feels safe
- » assisting the child to regain trust in people and their wider world
- » re-establishing and maintaining the child's familiar environments, activities and routines (small and large) as much as possible as soon as possible
- » being understanding, patient and flexible while gently but firmly maintaining standards and limits as appropriate to the stage of recovery and the child's age
- » helping the child understand what happened and

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why, by giving facts according to age and need, and answering questions

- » allowing the child to play and talk about their experiences, thoughts and feelings even when it is difficult for the adult
- » encouraging the child to help with their own and the family's recovery activities
- » reassuring the child their reactions are normal in these circumstances and they will recover
- » helping them to understand the reactions of others and that they too will recover in time

When to seek help

Seek and accept support and guidance immediately from a qualified and experienced infant, child, or adolescent specialist or your family doctor if:

- » the immediate impact reactions do not settle in a week or two or become worse
- » new reactions or concerns appear at any stage, including those described above
- » you are finding it difficult to manage your child or to manage your own reactions
- » the situation in the family is stressed

Remember:

- » you know and understand your child better than anyone else and may become aware of possible difficulties before other people.
- » parents are the most important people in a child's life. Your health and wellbeing will have a key influence on your child's recovery, so make sure you are also looking after your own health and wellbeing.

Many of the signs of psychological trauma are common to other physical and emotional health issues. Therefore it is always important to talk to a qualified and experienced specialist, or your family doctor.

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For more information visit:

[Trauma and Grief Network](#)

www.tgn.anu.edu.au