

## Trauma: How it Affects Young Children

- *Self-soothing behaviours* – In rare cases, some children may bang their heads, chew on their hands or feet, or other behaviours to try to soothe themselves.
- *Overall trouble handling their emotions.*

### What can I do to help my child?

If your child is showing signs of having been traumatized, start by talking to your family doctor. Your doctor can help you connect with services to help you.

Young children are best helped when they have a consistent parent who is able to see their stress and respond in a way that meets their need for comfort and safety.

### What can I do at home?

- Focus on the parent-child relationship. Do things that help your child feel that you will be there to help if they feel sad, hurt, frightened, or upset.
- Have a regular routine. Talk to your child before there are going to be any changes in routine, even small ones.
- Change your expectations to match your child's emotional, rather than his actual age. Most traumatized children regress emotionally (start acting younger than they were before).
- Help your child to use supportive, self-soothing behaviour, like using a cuddly or a blanket.

- When your child is showing strong emotions you need to support him in learning words to talk about his feelings and ways he can deal with these strong feelings, such as a physical activity or squishing play dough.
- When playing, let your child safely express traumatizing, or maybe even violent, themes.
  - Support your child by getting on the floor and giving your child your full attention.
  - Be sure to follow your child's lead during these play times. It may be uncomfortable for you, but it helps your child to express his emotions in this way.
  - You may need to get outside support on how you can best help your child.
- Try to avoid stressful situations as much as possible. When this is not possible, prepare your child in ahead, think of things that he can do to help overcome his fears. You can even practice what he can do to manage his fears.

Some websites you may find helpful are:

- [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)
- [www.cecw-cepb.ca](http://www.cecw-cepb.ca) - information sheet on Emotional Trauma in Infancy

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

---

*This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.*

## What is trauma?

We usually think of a frightening event as being traumatic. However, feeling ongoing, unmanageable distress is also traumatizing. This type of trauma is more often the case for infants.

- Infants may be stressed because something is happening to them or it may be something in their environment that upsets or frightens them.
- Parents might not easily recognize the kinds of events that can traumatize the young child.
- Different things are upsetting or frightening for infants.
  - Being around shouting or family violence, for example, can be much more upsetting and damaging to infants and young children than was understood before.
  - Any event where the child feels stressed and does not get comfort from their caregiver can be traumatic.
  - Sudden or frequent changes in caregivers can upset a young child.

## How is my child affected by exposure to trauma?

The long-term impact will depend on:

- how long the traumatic event(s) lasts
- whether the child feels safe
- how many other worries in the child's life

- if the parent is also suffering from the effects of a traumatic incident, this can affect the child's recovery

An important thing to remember about children who are traumatized is that they can be in a constant, low-level state of stress or fear. When we are stressed our cortisol level rises. A cortisol level that stays high over a long time can damage infants' brain development.

The effect on brain development can change the way children think, feel, and behave. Children often exposed to trauma and for a long time, can have ongoing problems with their:

- development
- behaviour
- emotions
- learning

## What kinds of behaviours might I see in a traumatized child?

### *Infants*

Traumatized infants might show some of the following:

- *Failure to thrive* – Even very young infants can become sad. This can cause problems with eating and sleeping, which then causes poor weight gain.
- *Poor emotional relationship with parents* – The infant can have trouble forming a close bond with parents.
- *Overly fearful or anxious response to new situations or stressful events* – The infant may be hard to soothe.

- *Delays in development and learning* – When infants are worried or afraid, they are less likely to explore their surroundings, making it harder for them to develop normally.
- *Freezing or staring into the distance* – Something might remind the infants of the traumatic event(s) or a new stress happens and they will become quite still.

### *Toddlers or Pre-schoolers*

Toddlers coping with trauma can show some of the behaviours below:

- compulsive or repetitive play
- play that shows they are thinking about the traumatic event(s)
- not able to focus attention. This can be mistaken for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- confused response to stress (the child might approach and then avoid his caregiver, or seem excited, and then seem frightened)
- the toddler might appear to be overly alert to, or frightened by, the interactions of those around him
- distress at reminders of trauma. These reminders could be otherwise ordinary events or items such as the bath or bed, or a smell, depending on the type of trauma.