

# Treating Emotional Trauma in Children



Just like adults, children can experience stressful events in life. Thankfully, they usually bounce back. But a traumatic event can have a longer impact on your child. If you think your child might have trauma, there are ways to help.

## What is childhood trauma?

Trauma is when you have emotions in response to something that hurt, or threatened to hurt, you or someone close to you. It can be one event or many events over time. A traumatic response in a child can change their sleep schedule or behavior. A child with emotional trauma also might become violent or lose interest in things they once enjoyed. Trauma sometimes has physical symptoms, such as wetting the bed or stomach aches.

## What causes emotional trauma in children?

Some examples of things that might traumatize a child are:

- Experiencing emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or seeing it happen to a loved one
- Not having stable housing or enough food
- Natural disasters
- Bullying
- Violence in the community or at school
- Refugee and war experiences
- Separation from family

## Supporting a child with trauma

Trauma can get in the way of your child's well-being and make it hard for them to feel safe. However, many children can process and overcome these experiences with the right help. As a caring adult in their life, you can provide support and guidance. Try the following:

- Explain that the event is real and has affected them. This validates what they've been through.
- Explain that they aren't the reason the event happened. Children often blame themselves for events, even ones completely out of their control. Remind them that they don't need to feel guilty about the event or any feelings or thoughts they have afterward.
- Remind them that they're safe. You can list the ways they're safe at school and at home. Mention that they are with caring adults. Talk about any security measures that are in place.
- Be patient. There's no timetable for healing. Some children process events quickly. Others take longer. Reassure your child that healing will take time, and that they don't need to feel bad about how long it might take.
- Tell other adults in your child's life about what they're going through. They can help you monitor your child and alert you to any changes.
- Remember to celebrate the small victories with your child. Recognize any changes in their behavior or their ability to talk about the traumatic event.

Don't forget about taking care of yourself during this time. Here are a few reminders:

- Don't take your child's difficulties personally. Their struggles are a result of a trauma they experienced. They're not because you failed as a caregiver.
- Make time for things that boost your physical, emotional, and spiritual health.
- If you have experienced trauma, focus on your own healing, too. This could mean getting support from friends, family, or healthcare professionals.

## When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call your healthcare provider right away if your child:

- Feels extreme depression, fear, anxiety, or anger toward themselves or others
- Hears voices others don't hear
- Sees things others don't see
- Can't sleep or eat for 3 days in a row
- If the symptoms last longer than 1 month

Your child's healthcare provider can help you develop a treatment plan to support them. The provider might recommend care from counselors, therapists, social workers, or other healthcare professionals.

## When to seek emergency help

If your child has suicidal thoughts or plans, call or text 988 or 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) right away. You will be connected to trained counselors who are part of the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#). An online chat option is also available. This service is free and available 24/7.

## Therapy treatments

Therapy can be a helpful way for your child to process trauma. Therapy may be needed for some time. Here are a few kinds your healthcare provider might recommend:

### Child-parent psychotherapy

The goals are to help your child trust what they feel in their body and encourage them to talk about their feelings. It also helps them see a difference between reliving the trauma and remembering it. It teaches them to place the trauma in perspective, too. In these sessions, the provider might use strategies such as play, physical contact, language, and modeling. The provider will also interpret your child's feelings and actions. All these methods provide emotional support to help your child understand their feelings and actions.

### Parent-child interaction therapy

This type of therapy can help make the child's behavior more stable and strengthen your relationship with them. This therapy can also lower your own stress levels. It helps you develop your skills in real-time, play-based situations with your child. You'll learn how to use positive attention skills and to discipline in a steady manner that fits the situation. By working on your relationship, this therapy can help support your child with their trauma response.

### Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy

This treatment looks at the impact of traumatic stress. It can teach your child about how trauma works. This therapy also helps them learn about coping skills and how to identify their feelings. During sessions, the provider will help your child see the links between their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This treatment also

encourages them to use words to describe the trauma. In addition, it gives strategies on how to manage responses to any reminders of the trauma. Most sessions are divided in half. The therapist will see you and your child alone during each half. Some sessions will include you both.

## **What to keep in mind**

Trauma can feel complex and scary. But there are many tools to help. Alongside other caring adults and healthcare providers, your child can learn ways to understand their feelings and deal with difficult events.

© 2000-2027 The StayWell Company, LLC. All rights reserved. This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your healthcare professional's instructions  
This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your Healthcare professional's instructions. Copyright Krames LLC.