



Invisible Children's Project

CARING FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

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What is trauma?

When a person feels threatened, the body responds with alarm to make sure that danger is avoided. When the body senses danger, chemicals are released into the bloodstream that make the heart beat faster, blood pressure increase, and breathing quicken. The person also may be very aware of the things that are happening around him. These bodily responses prepare the person to escape from danger or fight if necessary.

Trauma occurs when an individual feels that his/her life is threatened. The extent to which a child feels traumatized depends on many different factors. However, we know that natural disasters, domestic violence, fights/murders in neighborhoods, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, car accidents and medical procedures can be traumatic events that may affect the child's future. Being abused or exposed to frightening situations may influence the way the child thinks about the world, acts, and gets along with other people. Also we know from brain scans of traumatized children that changes occur in the brain when children experience trauma.

How does trauma affect the child's brain?

The brain's job is to take in information, organize information, and act on information to help the child survive. We know that the brain grows very quickly before the child is born and during the first three years of life. The brain forms connections based on experiences after the child is born. These connections are like telephone wires and connect cells in the brain with each other. Information goes back and forth through these connections. Research tells us that the number of connections, and how well information is able to travel back and forth on these connections, is influenced by how a child is cared for and by the child's experiences. These connections are very important in determining how well your child learns, your child's attention span, and how your child gets along with other people.

Even more important, we know that there are prime times when certain parts of the brain are growing and developing. When a child is traumatized or not cared for during these special times, parts of the brain may not develop as they should. For example, if a child is rarely spoken to or read to, she may have problems learning language later in life.

As a child grows and learns, special parts of the brain develop that help the child to use words instead of hitting, kicking, screaming, and biting. However, when a child is repeatedly in danger, it is hard for the brain to develop the proper connections for using language instead of acting out feelings and emotions. If a child learns that she always must be watchful to stay safe, this keeps her from exploring and learning about the world. We also know that it is important for a child to be held gently and lovingly touched so the brain can develop connections that allow her to feel safe and connected to other people.

How does trauma affect a child's behavior?

Children that are traumatized repeatedly or severely, see their world as being unsafe. Instead of looking around and learning from the world, a child will look for cues that suggest she is in danger. When a child is traumatized he stores information in the brain about unsafe situations that he may need to protect himself from in the future. Thus, a child will pay attention to certain cues (sights, sounds, smells, kinds of touch, people, facial expressions) that she believes will predict danger. He will come to think that certain sounds, objects, or people are unsafe and will either begin running, fighting or freezing as a way to be safe.

For example, if a child was sexually abused in the bathroom, a child may refuse to go into the bathroom or want a safe adult to stay with her. Or if a child was beaten severely, the child may start to run away anytime he sees an angry face. Because it is hard to know what cues were present when a child was traumatized, caregivers may notice that a child's behavior can be very unpredictable at times.

Trauma affects the way the brain organizes itself, especially when a child is traumatized early in life. Sometimes the child may have very intense feelings that are shown through hitting, kicking, screaming, biting, or running. Sometimes you might be very surprised by the quick change in feelings the child shows. Many traumatized children feel guilty because they think they caused the trauma or abuse, and think that every problem is their fault. Because they could not control the abuse, children may try to control every situation or constantly say "no" to any request.

In addition, a traumatized child may be aggressive to others or animals, have problems with sleeping and nightmares, wet or soil his/her pants, trust people even when it is not safe or have difficulty trusting others, have difficulty calming down, refuse to eat or eat constantly, destroy toys or hurt oneself, frequently masturbate or try to have sex with peers, stare blankly when spoken to, and/or be extremely active.

What can parents/caregivers do to help a traumatized child?

First, it is important to understand that trauma affects the way the child views the world and the way the brain interprets information. In addition, traumatized children often lack skills and need nurturing, limits, and education to be successful. Just loving a child will not make the trauma go away.

- 1. Be understanding when your child talks about the traumatic event.** Listen with patience and understanding. Help the child express emotions associated with the trauma. Often trauma-related thoughts do not disappear with time. If your child constantly talks about the trauma, set aside a specific time to talk about the traumatic experience. This will help your child learn a way to contain traumatic thoughts. If the child repeatedly plays out the trauma, guide the child to play in ways that empower and create a sense of safety for him.
- 2. Provide a predictable environment.** Make sure the child knows the daily routine. Talk to your child about what you will be doing next. Always strive to discuss any changes in the daily routine with the child before they happen.
- 3. Give the child choices when appropriate.** Children who are traumatized feel very powerless over their lives. When appropriate offer your child several choices. Too many choices are overwhelming for a child. It may be appropriate for a child to choose clothes for school, toys to sleep with, how to wear her hair, and so forth. Also, avoid power struggles. Children who are traumatized are experts at engaging adults in power struggles. Find ways to offer choices, distract, or help the child see other perspectives. If your child is having difficulty following directions, offer the consequence as a choice. For example, "you have to stop stepping on your toys or your toys will go to time-out."
- 4. Teach empathy and help your child identify and label feelings.** Talk to your child about feelings. Help her recognize how your face looks when you have certain feelings. Help the child learn empathy - that other children have emotions when they are hurt. Teach gentleness through soft touch and naming emotions.
- 5. Identify key behaviors to change. Reward any effort toward new behaviors.** If not dangerous, ignore unacceptable behaviors. Be consistent and give frequent verbal rewards. Positive reinforcement works much better than negative consequences such as taking away toys and/or privileges.
- 6. Let your child know exactly what is acceptable.** Make sure your child understands what you want and what the consequence is for noncompliance. For example, it is more helpful to tell your child, "you need to walk" rather than saying, "don't run." Verbally and/or nonverbally let your child know when he is doing what is expected.
- 7. Help the child learn ways to calm down.** Frequently children that are traumatized are agitated and anxious. Teach your child deep breathing and/or visualization of being calm. Provide experiences that are calming such as brushing hair, bathing, singing, swinging, rocking, massaging, or drawing.

8. **Be nurturing and comforting. Be aware that your child may have had experiences with his body that felt unsafe.** Let the child initiate physical contact. Abused children have body memories of trauma and may become upset when touched or approached in certain ways. Avoid telling the child to kiss or hug any person. This needs to be the child's choice.
9. **When children sexually act out, set clear limits.** Avoid placing the child in any situation that encourages the child to sexually act out. Avoid bathing the child with other children or having the child share a bed with others. You may need alarms on doors so you know when the child is out of bed. Closely supervise the child. Be clear with the child that sex is for grown-ups.
10. **Protect your child from being retraumatized.** If your child becomes upset by certain people, movies, situations, or interactions, help your child find something else to do. Help the child talk about what scares him and what upsets him.
11. **Be aware that traumatized children may dissociate or space out.** If the child is not doing what you ask, and you become more and more demanding, the child will retreat further and further inside and become frozen. A child in this state is unable to follow adult requests. Help your child be present by letting her know she is safe. Recognize experiences that trigger memories of the trauma and be supportive of the child.
12. **Be prepared for intense emotions with little or no warning.** Help your child learn ways to manage intense emotions. Give yourself and the child time to calm down. Talk with your child about ways to make her anger small. Help your child breathe deeply and relax. Be creative and use humor whenever possible.
13. **Help your child see the world as a safe place where adults can protect children from hurt and harm.** Help the child play and enjoy himself. Do fun activities together. Help the child see another side of life that is not painful and frightening.

Behaviors Exhibited by Children that Have Been Traumatized

There are many reasons why children exhibit certain behaviors. If you suspect that your child may be traumatized, seek the advice of a counselor or mental health professional.

- **Infancy/Toddler - Kindergarten**
 - ◆ Difficulty staying asleep/going to sleep
 - ◆ Night terrors
 - ◆ Frightening dreams
 - ◆ Difficulty separating from people they are attached to
 - ◆ Avoidance of places and situations similar to traumatic event
 - ◆ Acting younger than their age or forgetting skills they have mastered
 - ◆ Frequently crying or upset by normal situations
 - ◆ Irritability
 - ◆ Anger
 - ◆ Easily startled
 - ◆ Repeatedly playing out and/or talking about an upsetting thing that happened
 - ◆ Withdrawal from people
 - ◆ Wetting/soiling pants after being potty-trained
 - ◆ Excessive masturbation
 - ◆ Refusal to eat/excessive eating
 - ◆ Anxious/Difficulty calming down
- **School-Age Children**
 - ◆ Any of the behaviors listed above and:
 - ◆ Decline in school performance
 - ◆ Repeatedly talking about the trauma
 - ◆ Ongoing sadness
 - ◆ Physical complaints that have no medical basis
 - ◆ Difficulty getting along with peers

- ◆ Aggression/Extreme anger
 - ◆ Refusal to engage in usual childhood activities
 - ◆ Difficulty concentrating
 - ◆ Frequently frightened
 - ◆ Dissociation/spacing out
- **Adolescents**
 - ◆ Any of the behaviors listed above and:
 - ◆ Self-criticism and negative feelings about self
 - ◆ Acting out behaviors/engaging in risky behaviors – frequent unprotected sex, drugs, alcohol, driving irresponsibly
 - ◆ Decline in grades
 - ◆ Defiance
 - ◆ Seems to have become older too fast
 - ◆ Preoccupied with self
 - ◆ Avoiding school, parents, friends

Goals for Therapy When a Child Is Traumatized

If you know your child has been traumatized it is best to seek help from a professional that specializes in how to help children that have been traumatized.

- The goals for therapy include:
 - ◆ Helping your child gain a sense of mastery and safety
 - ◆ Helping your child express feelings in a safe manner
 - ◆ Helping your child experience relief from any symptoms of trauma
 - ◆ Helping your child understand that he is not responsible for the trauma
 - ◆ Helping your child create hope about the future and enjoyment of life
 - ◆ Helping your child develop a sense of trust in oneself and others
 - ◆ Helping your child learn ways to stay present and not dissociating
 - ◆ Helping your child relate to others with empathy and understanding

In summary, parents and caregivers are important in their children's recovery from trauma. Parent and caregivers also need support and encouragement. Recovery from trauma involves seeing your child as a healer and survivor.