

What is Trauma?

Caring for children experiencing trauma and stress

What is trauma?



Trauma is a situation of perceived injury/death to the self or others where the response is overwhelming to the individual and includes fear, helplessness and/or horror.

Too much
for
Too long
with
Too little support

What is stress?

Stress is strain that results from experiencing something challenging or threatening. Stress also refers to the body's physiological response to sensing a threat. There are 3 levels of stress that have different effects on the body:

- **Positive Stress** - moderate, short-lived and promotes development (e.g. giving a presentation)
- **Tolerable Stress** - intense but time-limited periods, managed with social support (e.g. death of a loved one)
- **Chronic/Toxic Stress** - strong, frequent and uncontrollable (e.g. abuse, neglect)



How are stress and trauma different?

Traumatic experiences are always stressful, but stressful situations are not always traumatic. However, chronic or toxic stress can be traumatic.

How do stress and trauma affect development?

- **Stress is a normal part of life.** When children experience stress or sense threat, their bodies release hormones to help them fight, flee, or freeze as a part of a typical protective response.
- When children experience chronic stress, their biological stress system stays 'on' causing them to remain in a **heightened state of awareness** of potential threats.
- Research indicates chronic stress early in life can have long-lasting negative effects on social, emotional, biological, and cognitive functioning, and on health and well-being later in life.
- Stressful or traumatic experiences may **override and overwhelm thinking and planning**, and instead the body defaults to more automatic survival-based responses.
- **Younger children are more vulnerable to toxic stress.** They are often unable to predict, prepare for, or prevent impending danger. They also have fewer coping strategies and must rely on adults for protection.

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How can adults help?

We don't need to know what the stress or trauma is to be helpful. We just need to know what it looks like in children's behaviors.

Changing Our Thinking

Traditional Perspective

- What is WRONG with them?
- This child is oppositional, defiant and manipulative.
- This child is using their behaviors to try to control everyone around them.

Trauma - Informed Perspective

- What HAPPENED to them?
- This child is in a highly stressed state of fear.
- These behaviors are the child's attempt to reduce fear and feel more in control.



Children experiencing trauma or toxic stress are not trying to be malicious.

When they feel overwhelmed, they are trying to regain control as a basic survival instinct.

What strategies can adults use?

Comfort
Connect
Collaborate



- **Connection before correction.**
- Establish respectful and trusting relationships with the child's family.
- Help children know what to expect with **structured and predictable environments.**
- Model and encourage positive social interactions.
- Recognize that when children act disruptive, they are showing you they feel out of control.
- **Incorporate family's culture** into your work with the child.
- Actively teach and **model healthy coping strategies.**
- Help children (and families) name their emotions.
- Recognize and help address family's stress.