

This tip sheet introduces the types of trauma that young children may experience, the common ways that young children express traumatic responses, and the protective factors that can help children recover from trauma.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Children and adults experience different kinds of stressful events every day. Some stress is *positive*, like the rush of nerves we feel before an exam that leads us to study. Some stressors, like getting a shot at the doctor while a parent holds our hand, are still *tolerable*. We are able to cope with these stressful events using automatic and learned strategies, like our “fight, flight, or freeze” response or seeking out social support. However, some stressful experiences are difficult to quickly “bounce back” from. These experiences can produce *toxic stress*.

How do we know if a stressor is going to be tolerable or toxic? Some events might be *stressful* for one person, but *traumatic* for another. This is because we’re not all in the same boat! Two families might face the same stressful event but have very different resources available to them. Resources that help people manage stress can include supportive relationships, meaningful cultural and spiritual connections, and financial means. Some families have many resources that help them to endure stressful events, while others have fewer. This means that two children could experience the same event in very different ways.

Trauma has been defined as “the emotional, psychological, and physiological residue left over from heightened levels of toxic stress” (Zero to Three, 2016). This means that **trauma affects our emotions, thoughts, brains, and bodies**. Responses to trauma can last long after the danger has passed because our brains are trying to protect us from any future harm.



Stressful events may be thought of as a storm. Each of us experiences the storm differently, depending upon the number of resources and protective factors we each have. In the illustration, this is represented by the three different boats. What is stressful for one person may be traumatic for another.

CAN INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN BE “TRAUMATIZED”?

Some adults think that young children are protected against trauma. They may think this because we don’t remember what happened to us as infants or young children, or because young children cannot always verbalize what they are experiencing (Zeanah & Zeanah, 2009). Unfortunately, this could not be further from the truth. **Research has shown that early life trauma can have lasting effects on the way children learn and grow.** Young children who experience trauma are more likely to have mental health problems (Cicchetti & Toth, 2016) and to show delays in their thinking, language, and learning (Toth & Manly, 2019).

TYPES OF TRAUMA YOUNG CHILDREN EXPERIENCE

Young children can experience the same types of trauma that older children and adults can, but some traumas are more likely to occur in the early years (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Grossman, 2000; U.S. DHHS, 2022) because young children are particularly vulnerable and dependent on their caregivers (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2010).

Common traumatic experiences among infants and young children include:

- Child abuse or maltreatment
- Witnessing intense arguments or fighting between family members
- Lengthy separations from important adults, perhaps due to foster care, incarceration, or illness
- Accidents and injuries that result in hospitalization
- Major unexpected events, like natural disasters or the COVID-19 pandemic
- Witnessing or learning about a caregiver's experience of trauma

More than one in four children suffer at least one major stressor by age three (Keating & Heinemeier, 2022). What's more, children who experience one trauma are even more likely to experience trauma again in the future.

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED BY TRAUMA

We know that early trauma can have lifelong effects. Why? Infants' and young children's brains are still developing, which makes them vulnerable. This means that early traumas affect the way that children's brains and bodies grow.

Trauma can have invisible effects on children. For example, children who experience trauma in the first years of life have different physiological responses to everyday stress (Doom & Gunnar, 2013), perhaps because their brains are trying to protect them against danger like they experienced before.

Every child expresses trauma differently, but common signs include those outlined in the following table (Adapted from DC:0-5; Zero to Three, 2018).

Common symptoms and behaviors associated with trauma

Infants and Toddlers (0-2 years old)

- Slow development of language
- Slow development of motor skills
- Increased crying or fussiness
- Difficulty being consoled
- Greater fear when separated from caregivers
- Seeming "worried" or "on alert"
- Difficulty with falling or staying asleep

Young Children (3-6 years old)

- Quickly escalating tantrums or aggression
- Acting out in busy environments
- Imitating traumatic events in play or social situations
- Difficulty focusing or learning
- "Zoning out" or not noticing what is going on around them
- Unexplained stomachaches and headaches
- Having trouble building relationships with adults and peers
- Frequent nightmares

Introducing It: Understanding and Recognizing the Effect of Trauma on Young Children

Center for Early Education
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PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Some children have access to protective factors that help them recover from stressful or traumatic experiences. Protective factors are parts of the child's world that help them regulate their emotions, prevent trauma, and recover from toxic stress or trauma. Some of the most important protective factors include close relationships with caregivers and family members, positive caregiver mental health, and safety and stability in the child's environment. Many of these protective factors can be increased to decrease stress and promote positive developmental processes for all children!

DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic,

Please visit our website: ceed.umn.edu

Visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network: nctsn.org

Check out our tip sheets on stress behaviors in young children: z.umn.edu/stressbehaviors

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DEFINING IT

Trauma

The emotional, psychological, and physiological residue left over from heightened levels of toxic stress

Protective factors

Parts of a child's world that help them regulate their emotions, prevent trauma, and recover from toxic stress or trauma