

How can I help my child if they're affected by trauma?

It is normal for a young person to feel or behave differently after a distressing or traumatic event or experience. As their parent, it's important to give them time to process and adjust to what's happened, while keeping an eye on how they're doing and seeking further help if it's needed.

Offer opportunities for them to talk to you

Let them speak as often and for as long as they need to. Helping your child to make sense of what's happened and how they're feeling can make an enormous difference.

Validate their feelings

Reflect back the words they use and don't be afraid of using big words such as terrified, horrified or furious. You might say "It's really understandable that you're feeling..." to let them know that you've got it and their feelings are okay.

Be their anchor

A traumatic experience often involves feeling unsafe, frightened or out of control. Providing structure, routine and reassurance that you can support them to manage things can help them re-establish a sense of safety.

Reassure them

Let them know you love them, you're there for them and you can help them find the right support if they need it.

If you're not sure what's going on, think together about what's making them feel this way

If something that's traumatic for your child is still happening, such as being bullied, it needs to be addressed so that it stops.

Think together about what helps them cope with difficult feelings

Knowing what works and trusting that they can help themselves when things are hard will help to build your child's belief in their ability to cope. Strategies could include exercise, drawing, listening to music, writing in a journal, talking to family or friends, watching a favourite film or reading a favourite book.

Spend quality time doing things your child enjoys

This might be drawing, making something, listening to music, playing sport, cooking or watching a favourite film. Doing these kinds of activities can give your child a break and help them to feel safe and relaxed, even if just for a little while.

Talk to us

If we know what the situation is we are in a better place to offer support and understand behaviours that we are seeing in your child.

Seek professional support if you're worried

Some young people who have experienced trauma will need professional and specialist help to feel better. If you're worried that your child is

struggling, seek professional advice or ask us to help to try and point you in the direction of where to get help.

Knowing what works and trusting that they can help themselves when things are hard will help to build your child's belief in their ability to cope.

Useful resources

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/trauma/>

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/child-trauma.pdf>

<https://www.annafreud.org/early-years/early-years-in-mind/common-difficulties/trauma/>

<https://uktraumacouncil.org/>

What trauma might look like in your child



We will always seek to work alongside parents to ensure the best outcomes for our pupils and families. If you have any concerns or questions at any time, please contact us

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What is trauma?

'Trauma' is used to describe both one-off events and things that are experienced over months or years, for example within a children's family or peer relationships. A traumatic experience often involves a threat to a child's physical or emotional safety, and a sense of being trapped, powerless or unsupported in the face of a perceived danger or in the time afterwards.

Children struggle with trauma when they have experienced or witnessed things such as:

- a violent or frightening event such as an assault or car accident
- domestic violence or abuse
- feeling unsafe
- being bullied
- losing a family member or friend or a sudden death in the family
- going through a physical illness or time in hospital
- being exposed to frightening or inappropriate online content

Ultimately, whether or not an event or experience is traumatic for a child depends on how it makes them feel as an individual. One child can find an event traumatic while another does not. The way we react to and experience what happens to us is shaped by all kinds of factors – from our personality to our life history, the support available to us, our relationships, our community and our culture.

What are the signs my child is affected by trauma?

Everyone responds to trauma differently

Every child and young person will respond differently to trauma. This means it can be difficult for you to spot the signs, or to see the links between a previous traumatic experience and your child's current feelings and behaviour. Sometimes your child may not be aware of the links themselves.

Your child may show they are struggling immediately after a traumatic experience. But feelings, thoughts and behaviours may also emerge over time. There may be times when things feel intensely difficult, and then they might feel better for a while.

While there is no exhaustive list, these are some things you may see your child doing or experiencing following a trauma:

- having memories, thoughts or flashbacks that seem to come suddenly from nowhere (often called 'intrusive' thoughts) acting out or having angry or aggressive outbursts
- finding it difficult to calm down when they are distressed
- withdrawing from friends, family, school and activities they usually enjoy
- repeating certain behaviours or seeming agitated
- avoiding thinking about, talking about or being in situations which are related to a particular experience
- seeming sensitive or vigilant about anything that could be threatening
- seeming zoned-out or disconnected from themselves, their feelings and what's going on around them
- having trouble remembering things
- not feeling able to sleep or having nightmares
- eating significantly more or less
- self-harming

How are they feeling?

These responses are often a young person's way of trying to manage and express difficult feelings. They may feel that some of these behaviours help them to survive or cope, make sense of what's happened, or have a sense of safety and control.

Underneath these kinds of behaviours, a young person who has experienced trauma may be feeling:

- anxious
- angry
- frightened
- unsafe
- numb
- low or depressed
- isolated
- guilty
- Ashamed
- Feeling bad about themselves

