

What is Child Trauma?

Denver Children's Advocacy Center



This information is excerpted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network – visit www.nctsn.org for more information on child trauma.

What Is Trauma?

People often use the word “trauma” to refer to a traumatic event. Not all dangerous or scary events are traumatic events, however.

What Is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event is a scary, dangerous, or violent event. An event can be traumatic when we face or witness an immediate threat to ourselves or to a loved one, often followed by serious injury or harm. We feel terror, helplessness, or horror at what we are experiencing, and at our inability to stop it or protect ourselves or others from it.

Often people feel bad after a trauma. Even though we try hard to keep children safe, dangerous events still happen. This danger can come from outside of the family (such as a natural disaster, car accident, school shooting, or community violence) or from within the family, such as a serious injury, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one.

What Is Child Traumatic Stress?

When a child has had one or more traumatic events, and has reactions that continue and affect his or her daily life long after the events have ended, we call it Child Traumatic Stress. Children may react by becoming very upset for long periods, depressed, or anxious. They may show changes in the way they behave, or in their eating and sleeping habits; have aches and pains; have difficulties at school, problems relating to others, or not want to be with others or take part in activities. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.

Fortunately, even when children experience a traumatic event, they don't always develop traumatic stress. Many factors contribute to symptoms including whether they have experienced trauma in the past (see section on Understanding Trauma for more information).

What Experiences Might Be Traumatic?

When children have been in situations where they feared for their lives, believed that they would be injured, witnessed violence, or tragically lost a loved one, they may show signs of child traumatic stress.

Not all children who experience a traumatic event will develop symptoms of child traumatic stress. Children's reactions can vary depending on their age, developmental level, trauma history, and other factors.

What makes it likely that my child will develop child traumatic stress after a traumatic event?

Risk factors for developing child traumatic stress include:

Severity of the Event

How serious was the event? How badly were your children or someone they love physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were your children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die?

Amount of Destruction Seen/Distance from Trauma Event

Were your children actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did your child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened?

Caregiver Reactions

Did you believe that your child was telling the truth? Did you take your child's reactions seriously? Did you respond to your child's needs? Did you do your best to protect your child and make him or her feel safe? How did you cope with the event?

Exposure to More than One Traumatic Event in the Past

In general, children exposed to one traumatic event are less likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions.

Children, Family and Community

The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and/or resources that help lessen or eliminate risk and protect them against long-term harm. One of these protective factors can be the child's cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, culture also can increase a child's risk for traumatic stress symptoms.