



Traumatic Experiences: First Steps to Hope (Parts 1 & 2)

Being There: Helping Families Through Traumatic Experiences

One of the most important things for anyone to have after experiencing trauma is the support of a caring adult. You play an integral role in helping young children and families cope with and move forward from traumatic experiences.

Terms to Remember

Trauma: An event or experience that overwhelms a person's ability to cope that creates strong, sudden feelings. There are usually elements of shock, surprise, hurt, or fear.

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE): These are a collection of experiences included in the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study, a landmark study on childhood trauma occurring before the age of 18. The study found that the more ACEs that young children experience, the greater their risk for greater negative health outcomes.

Fight, Flight, Freeze: These are a child's typical responses to stress. They might display aggression or act out; they might pull away and become withdrawn or quiet; or, they might have difficulty responding to adults and other children.

Traumatic Experiences Include:

The following are some examples of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Keep in mind that a traumatic experience is defined by a person's inability to cope with a situation, so there may be additional situations and events that are not listed, but are still considered traumatic to children and families.

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Witnessing a fight
- Domestic violence
- Community violence
- Death of a loved one
- Substance abuse
- Incarceration
- Natural disasters





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Signs of Stress:

Children cope with traumatic stress in many different ways. Trauma affects children based on their age and developmental level.

Effects of Traumatic Stress on Infants:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Trouble maintaining schedules
- Loss of interest in eating
- Extreme emotional expression
- Startling easily
- Lack of curiosity

Effects of Traumatic Stress on Preschoolers:

- Developmental regression
- Lack of trust in others
- Difficulty following directions
- Spotty memory
- Strong need for control
- Aggressive behavior
- Anxiety
- Hyper-vigilance
- In need of constant reassurance

As a provider, you can help children and families by...

Building relationships with families

Observing changes in children's behaviors and emotions

Providing reassurance that they are not alone

Encouraging connections to the appropriate mental and physical health providers