



FAMILY TIPS

Children Who Experience Trauma

What is trauma?

Trauma is a negative mental or emotional reaction to a distressing event. This could be something like getting into a car accident, or witnessing extreme violence.

Everyone responds differently to distressing events. Your child could be deeply affected or carry on like nothing happened. Children can even be impacted by a traumatic experience they don't consciously remember.

What makes trauma "traumatizing"?

When your child experiences stress, their stress response system is activated and their body goes on alert to defend against possible threats. This response can be the result of one major event, but is more often the result of ongoing levels of stress. This is called toxic stress.

Over time, toxic stress begins to affect the brain in developing areas, such as the reasoning and learning centers of the brain. Because the more emotional part of the brain is constantly getting a workout, the reasoning and learning parts of the brain are neglected and will weaken. This results in the brain talking to other parts of the brain less. Just like when you stop practicing a sport or a skill like playing the piano, the muscles you use weaken, and it takes your memory more time to recall how to play that sport or your favorite song.

What are signs and symptoms?

Children who experience trauma may be hard to identify. Your child may seem fine day to day, but something could trigger them unexpectedly. Signs and symptoms that may appear include:

- Easily startled
- Explosive outbursts or aggression
- Avoiding certain people or situations
- Withdrawing from people, especially adults
- Inflexibility and needing to have things a certain way
- Difficulty forming new relationships, especially with adults
- Hiding
- Assuming negative intent (i.e., a look from another child could be interpreted as a threat)
- Appearing oppositional or defiant
- Frequently daydreaming
- Zoning out or mind going blank
- Creating a fantasy world
- Rocking back and forth or displaying other repetitive motions



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How can I help my child?

Use the 3 R's – Regulate, Relate, Reason

When your child is showing signs of trauma, remember this three-step model created by Dr. Bruce Perry.

- Regulate – Use calming strategies (see examples below) to help your child return to a mood consistent with how they usually behave
- Relate – Connect with your child and let them know their feelings are valid.
- Reason – Help your child problem solve, identify triggers, and provide consequences as necessary

Create a safe environment

- Develop a safe relationship with your child. Communicate your love, commitment and that they are safe. Avoid things that might threaten the relationship like yelling, unexpected severe consequences or threats to not support or be around your child.
- Choose an area in your house where your child can go when they are upset.
- Set clear expectations and create a daily schedule to reduce uncertainties.
- Be caring and show concern – support your child's emotions and try not to question them.

Calming strategies

- Take deep breaths with your child.
- Change the environment – turn off lights, go to a quiet room or play calming music.
- Allow your child to go for a walk or take a break from the thing that is causing them stress
- Have your child take part in a fun activity like coloring, Play-Doh, reading or a game.
- Participate in rhythmic activities such as bouncing a ball or dancing
- Use weighted blankets, backpacks or tight hugs to support your child through touch
- Use grounding exercises (name three things you see, two things you hear, one thing you feel)

Nationwide Children's Hospital has school-based therapists in your school. If you have a student who can benefit from these services, contact the school counselor or school social worker, or call Nationwide Children's Behavioral Health Intake Department at (614) 355-8080.

Learn more at [NationwideChildrens.org/Care-Connection](https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/Care-Connection).



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Consequences

- Save consequences for a time when your child is calm.
- Clearly explain reasoning for the consequence
- Clearly explain how they can avoid the consequence next time.
- Communicate your love and commitment to your child, letting them know that the consequences are not because you are angry with them.
- Use consequences sparingly. A child who is reacting to trauma might not have control over his/her reactions, and consequences can make them feel more like a victim.

Common pitfalls

Make sure YOU are in a healthy frame of mind.

- Avoid responding to aggression with aggression. Giving several strong commands one after another while your child is escalated can overwhelm them and make them escalate more.
- Discipline can often be a strong motivation for children to change behavior. However, when your child is escalated, starting with threats of discipline can be ineffective and can create more anxiety because your child is not in the proper brain state to process cause and effect.
- Children who are escalated may have a hypersensitive threat response. Keep a safe distance, have a non-threatening posture and try not to touch your child when they are escalated.