

Understanding trauma: An infant and toddler perspective

Birth to 2 years

Traumatic events

A traumatic event is an unexpected event or accident such as car accidents, falls, animal attacks, burns, or sporting accidents. This event often leads to a physical injury.

- Physical injuries may be minor and temporary, or severe and long-term.
- Traumatic events may also cause emotional and mental reactions for young children.

Common reactions

It is common for even a young child to feel nervous, upset, confused, unsure, or angry after experiencing a traumatic event. Other common reactions and behaviors include:

Fear

Child is afraid to do something related to the trauma. For example, nervous about getting into the car after a car accident, or afraid to be alone.

Feelings

Child has trouble separating from parents, or is more clingy than normal.

Behavior

Child has changes in their behavior or mood. They may become more irritable, scared, or fussy than usual. They may have temporary loss of newly learned skills.

Child may withdraw, and may not talk or play as much as usual.

Regressing

Child begins acting younger than their age:

- Uses fewer words than before.
- Starts wetting pants after being toilet trained.
- Crawls instead of walks.

First take care of you

It is very important to become aware of your own feelings and reactions to the traumatic event before helping your child.

Keep in mind that different people respond to trauma in different ways, especially young children. You will need to be calm, patient, positive, reassuring, and understanding.

Helping child after a traumatic event

You are safe

- Reassure your child that they are safe.
- Be calm. Speak in a soft voice. Use simple, comforting words or sounds to provide comfort.

Create a calm environment

- Give your child their favorite toy or blanket for comfort.
- Infants and toddlers can become overwhelmed with loud noises or extra visual stimulation.
- Limit music, electronics, and other loud or noises. Avoid toys with bright flashing lights.

Rules and routines

- Keep rules, routines, and schedules the same as before the trauma.
- Make sure your child is eating healthy and regularly and getting enough sleep.
- Provide regular time for your child to spend with all caregivers.

Family and friends

Schedule time with family and friends. After experiencing trauma, your child needs extra support from trusted family and friends.

And don't forget your child's brothers and sisters. They need your support and reassurance, too. Siblings are often scared,

upset, and confused about the trauma, even if they were not directly involved.

Where and when to get help

Your child may need extra help if they are:

- Still very clingy and/or withdrawn a few weeks after the trauma.
- Still fussy or extremely irritable a few weeks after the trauma.

Please reach out to your doctor or call a mental health counselor if you are concerned about your child's behaviors or emotions.

Child Life helps children cope

Child life specialists help infants and toddlers cope with traumatic events by using play and age-appropriate words. This helps infants and toddlers better understand what is happening.

Child life specialists are available in all Dodson Specialty Clinics. There is no charge for child life services. If you would like to see a child life specialist or would like help coping with this traumatic event visit:

Email Traumasupport@cookchildrens.org

Or visit: www.cookchildrens.org/medical-center/fort-worth/family-support/child-life/

or scan the code below with your phone



You can also ask to speak to a child life specialist at your next clinic appointment.

Other Resources

Books:

- Worries are Not Forever by Elizabeth Verdick
- Mindfulness (Baby's Big World) by Alex Fabrizio

Online:

- Sesame Street: Traumatic Experiences:
<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/>
- After the Injury:
<https://www.aftertheinjury.org> Tip Sheets-
<https://www.aftertheinjury.org/tools-parents-help-their-children-and-themselves-recover-injury>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
<https://www.nctsn.org>

For Caregivers:

<https://www.nctsn.org/audiences/families-and-caregivers>

For children:

<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/what-do-i-say-talking-about-what-happened.pdf>

These instructions are only general guidelines. Your healthcare provider may give you special instructions. If you have questions or concerns, please call your healthcare provider.