

# Understanding trauma: A pre-schooler's perspective

3 to 5 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 a preschool-age 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.

- Nervous about getting into the car after a car accident.
- Afraid to be alone.

### Feelings

- Child feels guilty or responsible for the trauma, accident, or injury.
- Child has trouble separating from parents.
- Child seems more clingy than normal.

### Behavior

Child has changes in their behavior or mood.

- Keeps telling the story about the trauma, accident, or injury over and over.
- Acts or plays out the traumatic event.
- Has temporary loss of newly learned skills.
- Acts younger than their age, for example starts bed-wetting.

### Physical

- Child feels physically sick with headaches or stomach-aches.
- Has trouble sleeping or nightmares.

### Triggers

Certain places, situations, sights, sounds, or smells will trigger a memory of the trauma.

## 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.

### Listen

Do not push your child to talk about the event. They will talk about it when they are ready.

- Listen to what your child is thinking and feeling.
- Reassure your child that these feelings and worries are very important.
- Sometimes it's easier for a younger child to draw out these feelings on paper.

### Pretend play

Let your child play "pretend" about the trauma. Play is how children learn and sort out what has happened to them.

Listen as they tell their story about the trauma. At the end of the story ask, "Who came to help

you?" and "When did you know you were safe?"

For younger children you can ask, "Who is helping the toys?" or "How can the toys feel safe?"

### Rules and routines

Keep rules, routines, and schedules the same as before the trauma. Make sure your child is:

- Eating healthy and regularly.
- Getting enough sleep.
- Going to school (as much as the injury allows)

### 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.
- Not doing things they use to enjoy.
- Often feeling depressed.
- Not wanting to go to school.

- Having difficulty in school.

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 help children cope

Child life specialists help children cope with traumatic events by using play and age-appropriate words. This helps children 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:

Email [Traumasupport@cookchildrens.org](mailto:Traumasupport@cookchildrens.org)

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

- A Terrible Thing Happened  
(Recommended for ages 4-8)
- Once I Was Very Very Scared  
(Recommended for ages 4-8)

#### 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.