

Understanding trauma: A school-age child's perspective

5 to 12 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 children to feel nervous, upset, confused, unsure, or angry after experiencing a traumatic event. Other common reactions and behaviors include:

Feelings

Child feels guilty or responsible for the trauma, accident, or injury.

- Has trouble separating from parents.
- Is more clingy than normal.

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.

Behaviors

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.
- Has trouble focusing at school or finishing tasks like homework.

Physical

- Child feels physically sick with headaches or stomachaches.
- Child has trouble sleeping or has nightmares.

Triggers

Certain places, situations, and 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 your child

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.
- Help your child think of things that make them feel safe.
- Share with your child, "It is ok to feel scared. Sometimes I feel scared too."

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.
- 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?"

- Allow all types of feelings. Reassure your child that these feelings and worries are very important and are ok.

Pretend play

- Let your child play "pretend" about the trauma. Play is how children learn and sort out what has happened to them.
- Sometimes it's easier for a younger child to draw out their feelings on paper.

Rules and routines

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

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

Family and friends

Schedule more 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 nervous a few weeks after the trauma.
- Not doing things they use to enjoy.
- 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 helping children cope

Child Life specialists help children cope with traumatic events by using play and age-appropriate words. This helps children have a better understanding about 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



Other resources

Books

- When Something Terrible Happens: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief (ages 6-12)
- A Terrible Thing Happened (ages 4-8)
- Once I was Very Very Scared (ages 4-8)
- Help your Dragon Cope with Trauma: A Cute Story to Help Kids Understand and Overcome Traumatic Events (ages 5-9)

Online

After the Injury: <https://www.aftertheinjury.org>

<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.