

# Understanding Childhood Trauma

## WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE?

For a child, a trauma can be any scary, potentially dangerous, or deeply sad experience or loss. This can also include witnessing something bad, sad or scary happening to a loved one, but not the child themselves. It's important to know that what is traumatic to one child, may not necessarily create the same reaction in another child.

## STATISTICS:

More than two thirds of children report at least 1 traumatic event by age 16.<sup>1</sup>

At least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse and/or neglect in the past year.<sup>2</sup>

Each day, more than 1,300 youth are treated in emergency departments for violence-related injuries.<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT EVENTS COULD BE TRAUMATIC FOR KIDS AND TEENS?

- The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one.
- Prolonged bullying.
- Witnessing community violence.
- The substance use disorder of a caregiver.
- Serious or life-threatening accidents or illness.
- Natural disasters that threaten someone's home or life.
- Abuse (physical, sexual, psychological abuse or neglect).
- Physical or sexual assault.
- Separation from a caregiver.
- Racism or discrimination based on identity.
- Covid-19 related isolation.

## WHAT ARE TRAUMA REACTIONS?

Trauma reactions are **emotional, mental, physical and behavioral responses** that continue after the event itself has ended. For some children, these symptoms may resolve on their own. When they do not, we call this impact, **traumatic stress**.

## FOR CHILDREN, THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

### EMOTIONAL

- Increased feelings of:  
Anger;  
Irritability;  
Sadness;  
Guilt;  
Shame;  
Confusion.
- Emotional Numbness.
- Difficulty feeling positive feelings like happiness or love.
- Rapid changes in emotion.

### MENTAL

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Unwanted and persistent memories of the event.
- Believing that what happened was their fault.
- Feeling as if the event were happening again (i.e. having “flashbacks”).

### PHYSICAL

- Sleep disturbances (nightmares/difficulty falling or staying asleep).
- Increased jumpiness/startle response.
- Headaches, stomachaches, or other physical complaints.
- Developmental regression (i.e. bedwetting after being potty trained, etc.)

### BEHAVIORAL

- Isolating from friends/family.
- Avoiding people/places/conversations that might remind them of the event.
- Changes in grades.
- No longer participating in things they used to enjoy.
- Physical acting out.
- New, high risk behaviors.

There are many ways for caregivers, families and community members to support children who experience a traumatic event.

### CAREGIVERS AND TRUSTED ADULTS CAN SUPPORT CHILDREN BY:

- Meeting immediate physical needs.
- Talking with the child about what they are feeling and why.
- Reminding them they are not responsible for what happened.
- Providing day-to-day structure and routine.
- Helping the child find coping skills that are safe, for when they feel overwhelmed.
- Expecting and accepting rapid changes in emotion, mood and behavior.
- Encouraging the expression of feelings through writing, dance, art, music, sports, community supports, etc.

### COMMUNITY SUPPORTS:

**Communities play a vital role in supporting children and families. This might look like:**

- Mentorship with trusted adults.
- Meaningful recreational activities.
- Activities that build cultural identity.
- Spiritual groups.
- Youth community engagement groups.
- Positive experiences at school.
- Supportive peer relationships.
- Counseling/therapy.