

Supporting Youth Following Trauma: Tips for Caregivers and Educators

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma involves physical and emotional reactions to frightening, dangerous, harmful, or violent events. These events may threaten one's life, mental health, or physical well-being and can have lasting emotional or physical impact. Examples include:

- Abuse and maltreatment
- Domestic violence
- Natural disasters
- Assault or physical violence
- Community or school violence
- Bullying or cyberbullying
- Racism or other discrimination
- Refugee and war experiences
- Parental incarceration or substance abuse

Trauma can co-occur with loss and grief. Loss occurs when you lose something or someone important to you. Grief is the emotional reaction to loss, characterized by sadness and emptiness. Loss can result in both grief and trauma, if one also feels unsafe, harmed, or injured because of an event. For example, if a child witnesses their pet's death, they may experience both trauma (from the frightening event) and grief (due to missing one's pet).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful or aversive conditions or events, such as family conflict, poverty, neglect, or peer rejection. ACEs may directly result in trauma or may amplify the impact of other traumatic events. Frequent or long-lasting exposure to ACEs without adequate support or intervention may result in negative health and social-emotional outcomes.

TYPES OF TRAUMA

It is common to experience multiple traumatic events throughout life. Both children and adults can recover from trauma through resilience, which is the ability to bounce back when faced with adversity. However, variables such as the type of event, threat perceptions, personal characteristics, and history of trauma can impact the severity of the reactions and the length of time taken to resolve the trauma. Examples of types of traumas:

- **Acute Trauma:** Results from a single threatening event.
- **Secondary (Vicarious) Trauma:** Results from indirect exposure to trauma (e.g., learning that a loved one was harmed or viewing gruesome details on the media). Caregivers may experience vicarious trauma from youth they support.
- **Interpersonal Trauma:** Inflicted by the actions of a person, especially if the act is intentional or the perpetrator is a familiar adult.
- **Chronic Trauma:** Occurs when traumatic events repeat over an extended time, such as with domestic violence.

- **Complex Trauma:** Involves a trusted caregiver or adult and results in a sense of betrayal and distrust. For example, a child experiences trauma with physical abuse, which leads to family separation, adjustment to a new placement (school and foster home), and overcrowded placement in foster care.
- **Intergenerational/Multigenerational Trauma:** Occurs when trauma transfers across generations through biological predispositions and behavioral experiences. A parent with unresolved trauma may transmit anxiety, fear, and distrust of others to a child through their parenting practices and biological responses to stress.

HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS YOUTH

It is important to understand that no two people are likely to respond in the same way to the same experience. One youth may experience severe trauma, while another might be relatively unimpacted. Youth's reactions to trauma can vary based on:

- Age/developmental level
- Ethnicity and cultural factors
- Previous exposure to traumatic events
- Availability of resources
- Witnessing a threatening event
- Direct attack on their well-being
- Learning about a traumatic event affecting a loved one
- Threat perceptions

Common Reactions to Trauma

It is common to experience a variety of reactions after a traumatic event. Children, adolescents, and adults may have similar reactions such as:

- **Biological Reactions:** headaches, body aches, insomnia, nightmares, changes in appetite, lack of energy, and weak immune system
- **Emotional Reactions:** negative moods, poor emotional regulation, fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, hopelessness, guilt, tension, irritability, and hypersensitivity/emotional reactivity
- **Cognitive Reactions:** worries, confusion, recurrent thoughts, threat perceptions, intrusive thoughts, and concentration problems
- **Behavioral Reactions:** withdrawal from others, avoidance of specific situations or people, poor school/work performance, outbursts, and overactivity/underactivity (behavioral regulation)

Signs of Trauma in Youth

Caregivers and educators may notice:

- Attention seeking, tantrums, defiance, rule breaking, running away from home, or substance abuse
- Poor academic performance or refusal to go to school
- Clingy behaviors and separation problems from significant others
- Crying for unclear reasons or prone to crying
- Regressive behaviors (e.g., bed wetting, thumb sucking)
- Reenactment of traumatic experiences in play
- Withdrawal from peers or close, familiar adults

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUTH EXPERIENCING TRAUMA

Following a traumatic event, adults can help reestablish youth's sense of security and stability. To do so, caregivers and educators must manage their own trauma reactions, which could interfere with their ability to provide a calm, reassuring, and safe environment. Adults should connect youth with their existing supports and be prepared to employ new strategies following a trauma. Some of these strategies may include:

- Leverage the youth's existing relationships as a source of support.
- Allow youth to express themselves and process the event in developmentally appropriate ways (e.g., telling the story of the event or through play) but don't force them to talk about the event.
- Answer the youth's questions related to the traumatic events in honest, developmentally appropriate language and terms.
- Listen, empathize, and let them know most initial reactions are normal.
- Get professional support for youth whose reactions continue to worsen or place them in harm's way.
- Encourage maintenance of a regular schedule, but don't push youth who seem overwhelmed. Short-term classroom accommodations to reduce demands can help with the transition.
- Provide time and space for the youth to connect with their peers and families in positive and constructive ways.
- At school, educators can embed these strategies within a multitiered system of support.

This is an example of how to start a conversation about trauma with youth:

Trauma is when something scary happens that makes you feel unsafe, hurt, and fearful. It could be when someone screams at you, calls you names, or hurts you physically. You might also feel scared if someone you love gets hurt. These situations can make you feel bad for a brief time or a long time. It's important to talk to a grown-up about these feelings so they can help you feel better.

Considerations for Supporting Marginalized Youth

Differences in individual characteristics, backgrounds, and context can impact the experience of trauma. It is important to understand the youth's characteristics and aspects of their environments that might impact how they react to traumatic events. For youth who are targeted because of one or more of their identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, disability status), caregivers or educators might say:

Let's say that someone treats you unfairly or badly because of the color of your skin, your accent, where you live, or where you come from. Feeling threatened or made fun of because of who you are can be very scary and make you feel unsafe. These experiences may be traumatic, and you might react with feelings of hurt, fear, and worry. It is important to talk to us when this happens because there are ways to feel better, safe, and not worried.

Additionally, support should be tailored to youth's developmental level. For those at a younger developmental level, use clear and simple language and real-life examples to help them understand trauma. For instance, you can refer to an actual experience (e.g., "Remember when you got lost at the grocery store, and you were very scared and felt unsafe?"). Caregivers and educators should:

- Express that it's okay to feel upset.
- Reaffirm their protection and support.
- Encourage expression through drawings, art, music, and play.
- Be comfortable expressing their own emotions.
- Use social stories, books, and real-life examples to guide conversations.

RELATED RESOURCES

- [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACE\) Study](#)
- [Helpguide.org](#)
- [Kid's Mental Health Info.com](#)
- [National Center for PTSD](#)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

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Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2025). *Supporting youth following trauma: Tips for caregivers and educators* [handout].