



What If My Child Has Experienced Trauma?

When it comes to childhood trauma, it is important to know what signs to look for, when to worry, and what to do. This handout shares information to support you in this process.

Trauma is an emotional and physical response to an event that is actually or perceived as threatening. Examples of events that can be traumatic include violence, abuse, bullying, or neglect. An event may happen directly to a child or someone they know, or be witnessed through the media, such as with a mass shooting.

Things to Know

- Trauma is variable. Different children may react either mildly or severely to a single traumatic event. However, the repeated, ongoing experience of trauma, like bullying, violence, or racism, have greater risks of trauma symptoms.
- Trauma can impact a child's sense of self, and their sense of confidence and competence – even in cases where there is no physical harm like emotional abuse or witnessing violence.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood include:

- Experiencing violence, abuse or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home/community
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide
- Substance use disorder in the household
- Mental health concerns in the household
- Instability in the household due to parent separation or an incarcerated family member

What to Look For. Symptoms following a traumatic event may include [anxiety](#), [depression](#), or [PTSD](#) (post-traumatic stress disorder). PTSD symptoms are broken down below.

Re-Experiencing Trauma

As a child's brain tries to make sense of what happened, it relives the traumatic event. This can result in flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts about the trauma.

Arousal & Hypervigilance

Arousal is experiencing a rapid heartrate, hyperventilation, feelings of doom, sweating, or dizziness upon thinking about the traumatic event. Hypervigilance is being on constant high alert, watching out for another traumatic event before it happens.

Emotional Shut-Down & Avoidance

A child may shut down their emotions rather than put their body and mind through a constant state of alarm. Signs include: avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the trauma; emotional numbing; avoiding social interactions; and feeling hopeless about the future.

When to Worry & What to Do. If you notice any [signs of trauma](#) – immediately or up to 6 months after a possibly traumatic event – take action early to lessen symptoms in your child and help them build resilience. Contact your primary care pediatrician. Some of the most successful treatments include psychotherapy, self-help groups, meditation, support from family and friends, and in some cases short-term medication. The effects of trauma *can* be treated, but it's important not to let your child manage it alone.

**Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life.
It really makes a difference.**

For more resources on childhood trauma and other topics, visit us online: mgchclaycenter.org

