Child Traumatic Stress Handout

What Is Child Traumatic Stress?

Child traumatic stress can happen when a child has had something scary or upsetting happen to them. Children react to stress in many ways. Some stress is normal. However, symptoms of traumatic stress may last for a long time. They may cause problems in daily life. Lots of stress can also make health problems worse. As an adult in the child's life, you can play an important part in preventing stress from becoming traumatic.

What Causes Child Traumatic Stress?

Children with child traumatic stress have had one or more scary or upsetting events happen during their life. This can be an accident, violence, life changes like a divorce or loss of a loved one or seeing something bad. Even being in the hospital can be traumatic for a child.

What Are the Symptoms?

A child's reaction to trauma depends on a number of things, including age and personality. Having support people in their lives also affects a child's response. After a traumatic event, a child may react the first time they go to the same place or do the same thing again. After a car crash, the first time a child rides in a car again may be very stressful. Their heart may race and they may start to sweat or cry. This is a very normal first reaction to dealing with their fears and feelings. Some fears and feelings of distress stay for a longer time. A child may:

- Feel very sad or numb, anxious or crabby
- Have strong, long-lasting emotional upset
- Have problems playing or talking with others
- Have a hard time paying attention
- "Space out" or fidget
- Have learning and school problems
- Be afraid to go to sleep
- Have a hard time sleeping or sleep more than usual
- Have nightmares or night terrors
- Have stomachaches, headaches or other pain

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Common Signs at Different Ages

Preschool	School-Age	Teens
Feeling helpless and fearful about many things	Feeling overwhelmed with sadness or fear	Feelings of fear, feeling unsafe and fear of being different from friends
Fear of being away from parents or falling asleep at night alone	Worries about their safety or family and friends' safety	Risky, aggressive or self-destructive behaviors and may be more accident-prone or clumsy
Having a hard time talking about their feelings	Telling the story of the trauma over and over again	Embarrassed about their emotions and reactions
Loss of toileting, speech, feeding or other skills they used to have	Feelings of guilt or shame about what they did or didn't do during the trauma	Feelings of shame and guilt and possible thoughts of revenge
Play may be about the trauma happening again and may be less creative	School or sleep problems, anger or fighting	May pull back from family and friends

How Can I Help My Child?

Focus on your child's current safety and recovery. Talk about the safe people in your child's life and how they will help. Listen if they want to talk. Stay positive. Return to normal routine and activities. This should include school, chores, sleep schedule and play. It is important to talk with your child's doctor about how to support your child after a traumatic event. A school counselor, social worker, psychologist, clergy or pastor may also be helpful. Getting help early may limit long-lasting problems with school, personal, social or family life.

Is This Different Than Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Some children with traumatic stress may go on to develop PTSD, which occurs when the symptoms last more than one month. With PTSD, the child re-lives the event in their mind with intense fear and may also have problems with memory. They may become very upset and anxious. A mental health professional is needed to treat PTSD.

ALERT: Call your child's healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns, and if you are afraid about your child's safety, call 9-1-1.

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