

# Trauma and young people

A guide for parents,  
carers and professionals

The  
Children's  
Society

[childrenssociety.org.uk](https://childrenssociety.org.uk)

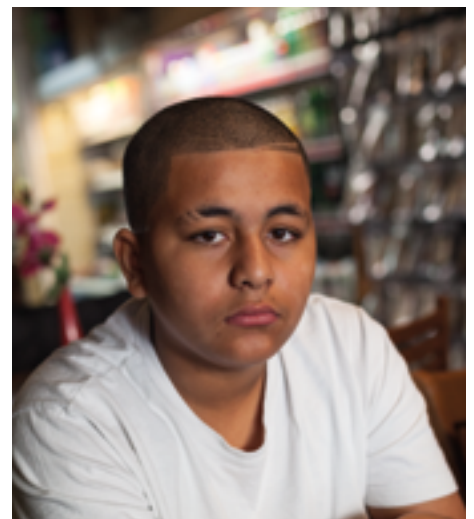
# Introducing trauma

Too many children and young people see or experience traumatic events such as abuse, violence, disasters, war, tragic accidents or major incidents such as terrorism. Some of these experiences may be one-off or short-term, but they may also be enduring, and it is important for adults to take note and help children understand and cope with their emotions following a traumatic event.

This guide has been developed to help parents, carers and professionals supporting children and young people affected by traumatic events or experiences.

## This guide aims to provide:

- A brief overview of some of the signs and symptoms children and young people experiencing trauma may face.
- Some practical tips and advice to help you talk to children and young people about their feelings and concerns.
- Information and resources you can use with children and young people to help them express their feelings.
- Additional resources developed by The Children's Society to help promote young people's well-being.
- Further information and signposting if you, or the young person you are supporting, need additional support.
- Highlighted text throughout the document are links to useful resources and further information.



# Signs and symptoms of trauma

After shocking or unexpected events where a child or young person has experienced intense feelings of fear or helplessness, they may experience an ongoing reaction to the event that leaves them unsettled. For example, they may experience repetitive and distressing memories, or re-experience the feeling of being scared or worried. They may also feel constantly unsettled or on their guard.

Some young people will avoid talking about the subject completely (not at all), while others will struggle to stop thinking about it and how they could have prevented or changed

the outcome. Younger children might have bad dreams or re-enact their experience through play, some may also have difficulty concentrating, or feel lonely or irritable.

## Reactions to trauma can be complicated and symptoms can include:

- Psychological symptoms: denial, shock, feeling irritable, anger, guilt, shame, low mood, depression, hopelessness, helplessness, confusion, concentration and communication problems, anxiety, fear, isolation, numbness.
- Physiological symptoms: sleep problems, flashbacks, heart racing, low energy, being on edge and easily startled, tension, aches, pains and loss of appetite.
- Behavioural regression: with particularly small children, trauma can lead to a loss of developmental milestones. Children can become more infant-like, clingy, fearful, thumb-suck, disengage from nursery/school, start bedwetting and imitate the traumatic events.

Trauma and feelings of stress are psychological and physical responses to a one-off, prolonged and/or repeated exposure to one or more distressing or life threatening events. Many children and young people are resilient, and often symptoms of trauma diminish with time – but

where a situation is exceptionally threatening, this is less likely. It is estimated that around a third of people go on to experience the symptoms of trauma for a longer time, and are at risk of developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

## Typical responses to stress:

Stress is the body's direct response to overwhelming life pressures. Once these life pressures reduce, so too do the feelings of stress.

When the body is under stress it produces hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones prepare the body to take urgent action – to fight or take flight – and in turn have a number of negative health side-effects such as anxiety, depression, concentration problems, weight gain/loss, dizziness and sleep problems.

When we feel stress, we all react differently. At times, we may feel like shouting and throwing things, but at other times we withdraw, stop socialising and stop answering messages. When we think we cannot cope, we may feel tearful yet outwardly appear angry and behave aggressively. In younger children, changes in behaviour (eg bedwetting, headaches, stomach upsets, sleep problems and refusing school) can indicate stress.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

Severe distress and anxiety caused by very frightening or life threatening event(s).



After a few months, symptoms of trauma usually begin to reduce, although it is common for them to return when something reminds the person of the traumatic event (such as an anniversary). However for some people their traumatic symptoms can get worse instead of better over time and develop into mental health problems, including PTSD. If, after a traumatic incident you are concerned about the symptoms a child or young person is displaying, please seek advice from a health professional (such as a GP) or child and adolescent mental health services. If the young person's symptoms are mild, it may be recommended you monitor them over a month to see if they subside. If the symptoms persist, you may be advised to return to the health professional.

## What you can do

As a parent or professional working with children or young people the link between the symptoms and the incident may not be obvious. Children and young people may not have the words to describe their traumatic experiences, or understand the link between what has happened and how it influences their feelings or behaviour.

At the time of the traumatic event your first course of action should always be to keep the child or children in question safe, administer first aid if required and, where abuse has taken place, report the incident to the

## Things you can do

### Intervening early:

- PTSD can be treated early when identified and there are things you can do to reduce the negative impact of traumatic events. Awareness of the symptoms is the first step: children and young people need those who support them to be watchful.

If you are identifying any of the symptoms on page 2, discuss with your GP and/or child and adolescent mental health service.

### Your response matters:

- In the first instance, the way that you cope with and respond to the event will influence the way the child reacts or deals with it. Evidence has shown that support from parents or carers is key to helping a child or young person cope with what is going on.
- Be honest and open about how the incident makes you feel, but try to remain calm and reassure the child or young person that you will keep them safe.
- Let them explain what happened if they want you to, try to talk about the facts and identify any misconceptions or misunderstandings. Protect them from any information or details they do not need to know.

police or local authority children's services. After the event has passed, you may want to think about what additional support you can provide whilst the child in question comes to terms with what has happened.

- Talk through the common reactions to stress and trauma and explain that their reactions, whether visible or not, are normal reactions to extraordinary incidents.

### Try to strengthen your communication:

- Give children and young people experiencing trauma-related symptoms undivided time. Listen carefully, avoid interrupting and ask open questions, make eye contact and show them you are interested. For some children different forms of expression are helpful. Drawing, play or stories can be metaphors to help a child to communicate.
- Talk to them about ways they can help themselves and come up with a plan for if they start to feel worried or down. These tactics may include breathing exercises and relaxation techniques. **Take Time Out**, a guide by YoungMinds, highlights nine great ways to help children and young people relax.
- Encourage children and young people to think of ways they can disrupt unwanted or negative thoughts such as playing with a pet, reading a book, exercising or spending time with friends.

## Support for children and young people

We have provided some worksheets to help children and young people think about any difficulties and worries they may have and how they might deal with them. They can do these worksheets on their own or with someone.

- **Things that scare and worry me:** Different people have different things that can worry or scare them, but it always helps to talk with someone you trust.
- **Dealing with different feelings:** Experiencing trauma can cause all sorts of difficult and complicated feelings. Use this worksheet to help identify your emotions.
- **Where do I go for help?:** It's not always easy to talk about your life at home, but if you can find people you trust it can be a help. Use this worksheet to think about people who could help you.
- **How I can feel better:** Sometimes when we feel down it can be difficult to think about feeling any other way. This worksheet will help you think of the things that can help.
- **What I want for the future:** Everyone has hopes and dreams for the future and how they want things to turn out. Use this worksheet to think about what you would like and how you could achieve it.

## Additional resources

As part of our groundbreaking research into the well-being of children, we have worked with the New Economics Foundation (NEF) to find out what children can do to support their own well-being and how you can help them. Our parent's guide **How to support your child's well-being** gives some simple tips for parents on how they can encourage children to take part in activities that could enhance their well-being.

The five 'Ways to Well-being' for children are available as a set of postcards that serve as a reminder of the things that children can do to support their own well-being. You can download the postcards [here](#).

### Top Tips for children and young people:

- **Connect with friends and people you trust:** Trying to forget or not talk about the event does not usually help in the long term. Finding a way to express the experience when ready, whether through talking, drawing, writing, music, dance or simply sharing a space with others can help to reduce the effects of trauma.
- **Exercise, relaxation/meditation:** Exercise and activities such as **meditation, visualisation, breathing exercises** and **deep muscle relaxation** can be helpful.
- **Talking therapy:** If you are finding it difficult to cope, consider meeting with someone trained to help; this might include your GP and/or having **talking therapy**.

## Further support

Below are details and links to other organisations that can provide further support, guidance and information:

**Supporting children worried about terrorism:** NSPCC have developed **advice** to help parents talk to their children worried about recent terrorism-related events.

**After the event:** Supporting children after a frightening event: **This leaflet** is designed to help adults to understand how children and young people might react to frightening events, and to give some ideas of what might help. Further copies are available from **[traumaticstress.org.uk](http://traumaticstress.org.uk)**

**MindEd:** A free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults. Below are links to free sessions on:

- **Flashbacks, trauma, bullying.**
- **Trauma and coping for parents.**
- **Death and loss for parents.**

**Guidance for schools on discussing terrorism by the PSHE Association:**

- Supporting primary aged children: **Guidance** on how to discuss a terrorist attack with children in the primary phases.
- Supporting secondary aged children and young people: A **framework** for discussing terrorist attacks is more suited to secondary aged pupils.

### **NHS Choices:**

Post-traumatic stress disorder: Information and advice about causes and symptoms of PTSD and when to seek medical advice.

### **Royal College of Psychiatrists:**

Traumatic Stress in children: Information for parents, carers and anyone who works with young people. This factsheet describes the causes and symptoms of traumatic stress, and provides practical advice on how to get help.

### **Youth Wellbeing Directory:**

A list of local and national organisations for anyone up to the age of 25.

### **Take Time Out:**

A guide by YoungMinds that highlights stress busting techniques and nine great ways to help children and young people relax.

**The Mix** provides mental health and well-being resources for young people.

## Helplines

### **NSPCC helpline for parents/ carers and professionals:**

**0808 800 5000**

The NSPCC helpline is a place adults can contact by phone or online to get advice or share their concerns about a child, anonymously if they wish.

### **Childline:**

**0800 1111**

Childline is a free, private and confidential service that helps anyone under 19 in the UK with any issue they're going through.

### **YoungMinds Parent's Helpline:**

**0808 802 5544**

YoungMinds' Parents Helpline is available to offer advice to anyone worried about a child or young person's (up to the age of 25) behaviour, emotional well-being, or mental health condition. Support is available Monday to Friday 9.30am – 4pm, and it's free to call from mobiles and landlines.

### **Child Bereavement UK:**

**0800 02 888 40**

Child Bereavement UK provide confidential support, information and guidance to families and professionals throughout the UK. Their professionally trained bereavement support workers are available to take calls 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday.

### **NHS 111 service:**

**111 is the NHS**

**non-emergency number.**

If you are concerned about a child's health or well-being and need urgent or emergency access to help, you can contact the NHS 111 service. It's fast, easy and free and allows you to speak to a highly trained adviser, supported by healthcare professionals.

You can also call **999** – when a child or young person is seriously ill or injured and their life is at risk.

# About the Children's Society

**Too many children and young people in this country don't feel safe, loved or able to cope.**

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country's most vulnerable young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children they are on their side.

If you would like to know more about The Children's Society and our work with children and young people, please visit **[childrenssociety.org.uk/impact](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/impact)** or call our Supporter Care team on 0300 303 7000.

You can download a PDF or read an online version of this report at **[childrenssociety.org.uk/mental-health](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/mental-health)**

If you would like to make a donation to The Children's Society, please visit **[childrenssociety.org.uk/donate](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/donate)**

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