

**There are children in your preschool who have experienced trauma.**

**Consider Ricky.** Ricky, a three-year-old boy, cries inconsolably when his mother drops him off at school in the morning. His teachers thought his crying would stop when he became more comfortable in the classroom; however, he continues to cry every day and does not interact with his teachers or play with his peers. Ricky also has a speech delay and gets very upset when the other students are loud or when his daily routine is interrupted. One day the teacher asked Ricky to talk about his drawing, and he said, “Daddy hurt mommy.” Ricky’s mother was later observed to have a black eye and bruises that were consistent with assault.

**Another example is Alexa.** Alexa, a four-year-old girl, has been kicked out of two other preschools and is about to be expelled from her current school. She curses at teachers, hits, kicks, and scratches other students, and bangs her head on the table when she is frustrated. Alexa’s behaviors are most difficult when transitioning from one activity to another. When the teacher meets with Alexa’s father, the father reports that Alexa’s mother uses drugs, that Alexa has seen her mother arrested by the police, and that Alexa’s mother often does not come home at night.

What do these children have in common? They have both been exposed to trauma, defined as *an experience that threatens life or may cause physical injury and is so powerful and dangerous that it overwhelms the preschool child’s capacity to regulate emotions*. Generally, traumatic events evoke feelings of extreme fear and helplessness. Reactions to traumatic events are determined by the subjective experience of the child, which could be impacted by developmental and cultural factors. What is extremely traumatic for one child may be less so for another.

Some traumatic experiences occur once in a lifetime, others are ongoing. Many children have experienced multiple traumas, and for too many children, trauma is a chronic part of their lives. (For examples, see sidebar, at right.)

Some children show signs of stress in the first few weeks after a trauma, but return to their usual state of physical and emotional health. Even children who do not exhibit serious symptoms may experience some degree of emotional distress, which may continue or even deepen over a long period of time. Children who have experienced traumatic events may experience problems that impair their day-to-day functioning.

**Children who have experienced traumatic events may have behavioral problems, or their suffering may not be apparent at all.**

It is important to be aware of both the children who act out and the quiet children who don’t appear to have behavioral problems. These children often “fly beneath the radar” and do not get help. In any situation where there is a possibility of abuse, as in the cases above, you may be legally required to report the information to social services or law enforcement.

Be alert to the possibility of misdiagnosis due to the many presentations of trauma-related anxiety. For instance, many behaviors seen in children who have experienced trauma are nearly identical to those of children with developmental delays, ADHD and other mental health conditions. Without recognition of the possibility that a child is experiencing childhood traumatic stress, adults may develop a treatment plan that does not fully address the specific needs of that child with regard to trauma.

**Situations that can be traumatic:**

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Abandonment
- Neglect
- The death or loss of a loved one
- Life-threatening illness in a caregiver
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Automobile accidents or other serious accidents
- Bullying
- Life-threatening health situations and/or painful medical procedures
- Witnessing or experiencing community violence (e.g., shootings, stabbings, robbery, or fighting at home, in the neighborhood, or at school)
- Witnessing police activity or having a close relative incarcerated
- Life-threatening natural disasters
- Acts or threats of terrorism (viewed in person or on television)
- Living in chronically chaotic environments in which housing and financial resources are not consistently available

## What you might observe in Preschool children:

Remember, young children do not always have the words to tell you what has happened to them or how they feel. Behavior is a better gauge and sudden changes in behavior can be a sign of trauma exposure.

- Separation anxiety or clinginess towards teachers or primary caregivers
- Regression in previously mastered stages of development (e.g., baby talk or bedwetting/toileting accidents)
- Lack of developmental progress (e.g., not progressing at same level as peers)
- Re-creating the traumatic event (e.g., repeatedly talking about, “playing” out, or drawing the event)
- Difficulty at naptime or bedtime (e.g., avoiding sleep, waking up, or nightmares)
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, overreacting to minor bumps and bruises)
- Changes in behavior (e.g., appetite, unexplained absences, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lighting, sudden movements, or loud sounds (e.g., bells, slamming doors, or sirens)
- Increased distress (unusually whiny, irritable, moody)
- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Worry about recurrence of the traumatic event
- New fears (e.g., fear of the dark, animals, or monsters)
- Statements and questions about death and dying



Some children, if given support, will recover within a few weeks or months from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience. However, some children will need more help over a longer period of time in order to heal and may need continuing support from family, teachers, or mental health professionals. Anniversaries of the events or media reports may act as reminders to the child, causing a recurrence of symptoms, feelings, and behaviors.

Mental health counseling that has been demonstrated to be effective in helping children deal with traumatic stress reactions typically includes the following elements:

- Helping children and caregivers reestablish a safe environment and a sense of safety
- Helping parents and children return to normal routines
- An opportunity to talk about and make sense of the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment
- Explaining the trauma and answering questions in an honest but simple and age-appropriate manner
- Teaching techniques for dealing with overwhelming emotional reactions
- Helping the child verbalize feelings rather than engage in inappropriate behavior
- Involving primary caregivers in the healing process
- Connecting caregivers to resources to address their needs—young children’s level of distress often mirrors their caregiver’s level of distress

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