

Children's Responses to Trauma

Age-Related Reactions of Children to Trauma

Children's responses to trauma vary according to the age of the child. Generally, children respond by reverting to behavior typical of an earlier developmental stage. It is important to recognize some changes are considered "normal" if they are brief (less than three weeks) in duration. If symptoms continue, you may consider seeking help.

Ages 1 – 5 years old

Typical Reactions:

- Bed-wetting
- Fear of darkness or animals
- Excessive clinging
- Nightmares
- Loss of bladder or bowel control, constipation
- Speech difficulties
- Loss of or increase in appetite
- Crying
- Immobility
- Fear of being left alone
- Confusion
- Disobedience

Helpful Hints:

- Provide calming words and physical comforting.
- Give frequent attention.
- Establish comforting bedtime routines
- Encourage expression through play re-enactment

Ages 5 – 11 years old

Typical Reactions:

- Thumb sucking
- Irritability, whining
- Clinging
- Aggressive behavior
- Competition with younger siblings for attention
- Nightmares
- Fear of darkness
- Withdrawal from peers
- Loss of interest or poor concentration in school
- Headaches or other physical complaints

Helpful Hints:

- Patience and tolerance
- Play sessions with adults and peers
- Discussions with adults and peers
- Relaxed expectations at school or at home (temporarily)
- Opportunities for structured but not demanding chores and responsibilities
- Rehearsal of safety measures

Ages 12 – 17 years old

Typical Reactions:

- Running away
- Stealing
- Sleeplessness
- School problems
- Confusion
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Relationship difficulties
- Aggressiveness
- Irritability
- Inattentiveness
- Radical changes in attitude
- Premature entrance into adulthood

Helpful Hints:

- Monitor media exposure
- Spend time talking as a family about how everyone is feeling/doing
- Bring friends and families together
- Encourage postponing major life decisions.
- Encourage constructive activities
- Explain that strain on relationships and changes in attitude are common but bounce back over time

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Our mission is to strengthen individual, family and community wellness by providing exceptional, compassionate, inclusive, responsive and integrated behavioral health care.

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Criminal Justice Services
Victim Services
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