

Age-Related Reactions to Traumatic Events

Resources for Advancing
Mental Health in Pediatrics



How might my child react?

Preschool and young school-aged children:

- They may experience a general fear that extends into other aspects of their lives.
- They may have trouble describing what is bothering them.
- Distress is often expressed as a loss of previously acquired developmental skills such as trouble sleeping alone or being less confident in play or with others.

School-aged children:

- They may experience feelings of persistent concern over their own and other's safety.
- They may feel guilt or shame over what they did or did not do during the traumatic event.
- May display sleep disturbances, difficulty in school, and reckless or aggressive behavior.

Adolescents:

- They may feel shameful or self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event.
- Feelings of fear, vulnerability, and concern may cause withdrawal from family and friends.
- They may experience a big shift in the way they think about the world.
- Some adolescents engage in self-destructive or risky behavior.

How can I help my child?

Preschool and young school-aged children:

- Provide comfort, rest, and an opportunity to play or draw.
- Offer reassurance that the event is over and they are safe.
- Help them verbalize their feelings so that they do not feel alone with their emotions.

School-aged children:

- Answer questions about the event if they have them. Help them avoid misconceptions.
- Encourage discussion of their worries and acknowledge that their feelings are normal.
- Talk to their teacher when their distress is getting in the way of their learning.

Adolescents:

- Discuss the expectable strain on relationships with family and peers and offer support.
- Help them understand "acting out" as an effort to express anger about traumatic events.
- It may be important to discuss thoughts of revenge, the realistic consequences, and help them formulate constructive alternatives.
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings, it may help your child process and understand your response to the event.

