

When times get tough

What is trauma?

Often people think trauma is an unusual event that happens to only a few unlucky people. However many people are affected by trauma to some degree during their life. A traumatic experience can happen when a person's life has been threatened or severe injury has occurred such as a car accident, a bad fall, a hospital operation, a natural disaster like a flood, fire or cyclone, or being the victim or witness of violence such as physical and sexual abuse. Sometimes the effects of trauma are immediate and more obvious; on other occasions they may also take some time to appear. The experience of trauma occurs when an event overwhelms a person and has a major impact on their ability to cope. Sometimes people describe the experience as 'having their legs knocked from under them'.

'Trauma changes the way children understand their world, the people in it and where they belong.'¹

¹Australian Childhood Foundation (2010). *Making space for learning: Trauma informed practice in schools*. Available through www.childhood.org.au or by direct link at: www.childhood.org.au/Assets/Files/bdb91340-c96b-457d-a408-ce4d790e3c00.pdf.

Children and trauma

Many people believe that young children are not affected by trauma and do not notice or remember traumatic events. This belief often means when children are traumatised, their feelings may not be acknowledged. Understanding the possible impact trauma may have on children helps to make sense of their behaviours and emotions, make links between previous events in their lives and assist in promoting their mental health and wellbeing. With support, children can recover from the harmful effects of trauma. To do so they need the adults in their lives to be understanding of and responsive to their needs.

Trauma can impact on all aspects of a child's development.



How can parents, carers and staff support children through tough times?

There are a number of ways parents, carers and staff can help children recover from a traumatic event; some of these are to:

Talk to children about the traumatic event

Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds'. In the long run this can make children's recovery more difficult.

Provide consistent and predictable routines

Children who have been traumatised can find changes in routines, transitions, surprises, unstructured social situations and new situations frightening. Maintaining children's routines and their environment can help them feel safer and more secure so they recover from the effects of trauma.

The more familiar the routine, the more settled the child.

Tuning in and being responsive to children

Children who have experienced traumatic events often need help to tune into the way they are feeling. When parents, carers and staff take the time to listen, talk and play, they may find children start to tell or show how they are feeling.

Traumatised children find it difficult to understand what their experiences mean.

Managing your own reactions

Parents, carers and staff experience a range of feelings when they are caring for children who have been exposed to traumatic events and may feel overwhelmed by the child's trauma and reactions. This can lead to a traumatic stress of their own. Finding ways for adults to reduce their stress helps them continue to be effective when offering support to children who have experienced traumatic events.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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