Understanding trauma

Trauma describes the impact of an event or a series of events during which a child feels helpless and pushed beyond their ability to cope. A range of different events might be traumatic to a child, including accidents, injuries, serious illness, natural disasters, war, terrorist attacks, assault, threats of violence, domestic violence, neglect or abuse. Parental or cultural trauma can also have a traumatising effect on children; for example, the impacts of the Stolen Generations are still felt years later among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Types of trauma

Psychologists sometimes make a distinction between ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ trauma. Simple trauma pertains to a discrete, one-off traumatic event; for example, a flood or an earthquake. Complex trauma refers to that which is sustained through prolonged or repeated events like abuse or neglect, or the death of a parent compounded by a bushfire. It is thought that multiple traumatic events have a cumulative effect, so the impacts of complex trauma might be more serious and long-lasting.
How might children react to a traumatic event?

All children respond to trauma differently, and an incident that is traumatic for one child is not necessarily traumatic to another. A child’s response might be influenced by factors that are specific to:

- the child (e.g., age and developmental stage, personality traits, and past experiences)
- the family (e.g., the quality of the child’s relationship with their parents or carers, the degree to which the family understand the effects of trauma, the family’s ability to support the child after the traumatic event, and whether the family has also been traumatised)
- the community (e.g., the degree to which children and families have access to practical and emotional support services and their level of engagement with the school and other support services)
- the event (e.g., whether the trauma was a one-off or isolated event or occurred in the context of other traumatic events, whether the child was separated from significant adults during the event, and whether the life of the child or a loved one was threatened during the event).

Some children might react immediately after a traumatic event, displaying behaviours such as frequent crying and clinginess or experiencing nightmares. Others might not have a reaction, or their reaction might be delayed. The majority of children who experience simple trauma will return to normal functioning within a few weeks of a traumatic event without professional support, although they can still benefit from additional adult support during this period. For others, especially those who experience complex trauma, the signs and effects can linger. Ensuring the child is safe and providing ongoing support is crucial.

Signs that a child might be affected by trauma include:

- frequently talking about a traumatic event or a reluctance to talk about it
- re-enacting or drawing aspects of a traumatic event
- crying or feeling sad
- clinginess or separation issues before school
- ‘babyish’ behaviour or a regression in skills related to speech or toileting
- grumpiness, tantrums, or misbehaving at school or home
- complaints of physical illness like headaches and stomach aches
- difficulties in relationships with peers or teachers
- forgetfulness or problems with concentration
- problems with getting organised or finishing schoolwork
- sleep difficulties such as nightmares, difficulty getting to sleep or difficulty waking up in the morning.

Trauma can impact children’s memory and learning. It is also associated with problems in children’s relationships with peers and significant adults. Sometimes traumatic experiences can contribute to difficult behaviour in the classroom or at home, so it is important for school staff to look at the factors influencing a change in behaviour.

As children who have experienced trauma move into adolescence, they are at an increased risk of developing further emotional and health problems, becoming isolated from their peers and exiting school early.
What can primary schools do to support children who have experienced trauma?

Primary schools might like to use these strategies to support children who have experienced trauma.

- Build a school culture that provides safety, security and support for children through a predictable environment, positive relationships with adults, consistent routines and structure.

- Ensure that children and families are aware that they can talk about trauma if and when they feel comfortable to do so, and promote the school as a place that families can come to seek parenting resources or information about trauma.

- Promote development of social and emotional skills in the school community. Children who have experienced trauma may also have problems managing difficult emotions, getting along with others, making decisions and taking others’ feelings into consideration.

- Learn about the cultural aspects of trauma. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, this includes not seeing images or hearing recordings of a person who has passed away.

- Be mindful of the impacts of hearing about others’ trauma. This means that school staff need to take time to look after themselves, other children and other school staff when supporting a child who has been traumatised.

- Recognise the signs of mental health difficulties and the impact that trauma can have on a child’s social and emotional wellbeing.

- Establish links with community agencies or trauma experts who can support children and families.
How does KidsMatter Primary help?

KidsMatter Primary supports schools to promote mental health and wellbeing among children. The four components of KidsMatter Primary support the efforts of schools to respond to traumatic events or signs that a child is experiencing trauma.

**Component 1: Positive school community** supports schools to focus on building a positive school culture that provides safety and security for children, promotes a sense of belonging and supports the development of positive relationships. The needs of children who have experienced trauma are best met by a warm and supportive school environment that provides a sense of structure, predictability and consistency.

**Component 2: Social and emotional learning for students** helps schools to think about how to embed the teaching of social and emotional skills into the curriculum, with opportunities for children to practise these skills across a range of contexts. Skills for managing distressing thoughts and strong emotions (for example, identifying feelings and asking for help) can help children to recover from a traumatic experience.

**Component 3: Working with parents and carers** encourages schools to build strong relationships with the families in their community and create opportunities for families to get involved. Partnerships between families and school staff allow everyone to work together to support each other following a traumatic event.

**Component 4: Helping children with mental health difficulties** supports school staff to recognise signs that a child might be experiencing social or emotional difficulties and take appropriate action. This involves identifying clues that a child is not coping after a traumatic event, responding sensitively and establishing links with organisations and professionals within the community that have expertise in managing the impacts of trauma.
What can you do at your school?

Schools can use a variety of strategies at the policy and individual level to understand and respond to trauma. The following questions might guide your thinking about other things your school can do to support children who have experienced trauma.

- What policies does your school have to manage trauma that affects children inside the school?
- What policies does your school have to manage trauma that affects children outside of school hours?
- What can you do to help children who have been affected by trauma to feel safe and supported?
- How do you manage your own emotions and reactions when supporting other people who have been affected by trauma?
- Who might be able to support children who have experienced trauma and their families within the broader community? How could you build relationships with professionals and organisations in the community that specialise in helping children cope with the effects of a traumatic event?

For more information

- The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (ACATLGN)
  Resources for families and professionals working with young people affected by trauma and a range of related issues.

- Helping Traumatized Children Learn
  Information and publications to help schools support children affected by family violence and other adverse experiences in childhood.
  www.traumasensitiveschools.org/

- Making SPACE for learning: Trauma Informed Practice in Schools
  Tips for trauma informed practice in the classroom.
  www.childhood.org.au/training/learning-resources

- Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children
  Information for school staff about supporting children affected by trauma.
References


This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au