

# Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\*

## *Trauma in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers*

### Definition

Trauma is caused by a sudden and unforeseen event that causes extreme fear and possible harm to a child. It is also referred to as emotional harm and it is the relatively normal reaction that occurs in response to an extreme event. A student's age, level of development, and availability of support will factor into how well he/she deals with the trauma.

- Trauma-causing events can include but are not limited to:
  - Violence (e.g. school shootings, witness/victim of abuse)
  - War
  - Terrorism
  - Natural disaster (e.g., fire, hurricane, earthquake, flood)
  - Accidents
  - Medical procedures
  - Serious threats (e.g. bomb threats)
- With psychiatric trauma, emotional and distressful memories are stored in the brain and can lead to other emotional and social problems. Trauma does not typically appear during the traumatic event, but rather once it is over. The trauma can appear within days, weeks, months or years.

### Why do we care?

- As many as 67% of trauma survivors experience lasting psychosocial impairment.
- Trauma can affect a child's brain and delay certain abilities which can make it harder for the child to concentrate and study. A traumatic event can also hinder a child's emotional maturity, causing a child to close the world out, not allowing emotional growth. The child may also experience many negative emotions in which he/she may feel extreme betrayal and lack of faith in his/her life and the world.
- Trauma can have serious effects on a student's well-being physically, emotionally and academically.
  - Some children will experience difficulty coping with the traumatic events and may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Child Traumatic Stress (CTS), depression or overwhelming, prolonged grief.
    - PTSD is an anxiety disorder that occurs following exposure to an extreme stressor (i.e., when a person sees or is a part of a highly traumatic event). The event will usually be a life-threatening or extremely distressing situation that causes a person to feel intense fear, horror or a sense of helplessness. The risk of developing PTSD is related to the seriousness of the event, the child's proximity to the event, whether or not the event was repeated, and the child's relationship to those affected.
    - CTS is a psychological response that some children have as a result of a traumatic event. These responses remain once the event has passed and negatively affects the daily life of the child.
      - 1 out of 4 children will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16 and some of these children will develop CTS
      - If left untreated, CTS can lead to long term difficulties in school, relationships and jobs.

## **Signs & Symptoms**

People respond in different ways to extreme trauma. Some people may:

- Re-live the event.
- Avoid reminders and experience frequent flashbacks.
- Have ongoing fears related to the disaster (involving loss or separation from parents).
- Have sleep disturbances or nightmares.
- Look as if he/she is on guard, is uneasy or jumpy.
- Seem disconnected or have relationship problems.
- Have psychiatric problems such as depression, suicidal thoughts, dissociation (losing conscious awareness of the “here and now”), or anxiety.
- Engage in aggressive and/or self-destructive behavior (i.e., alcohol or drug abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors).
- Have physical complaints (i.e., stress-related conditions, eating disorders, headaches).
- Have lower grade point averages.
- Receive more negative remarks from faculty.
- Have more absences from school/refusal to go to school.
- Experience concentration difficulties or irritability.

## **What can we do about it?**

Early intervention is critical! If you are noticing any of the above symptoms after your child was exposed to a stressful event you should consult a medical professional to help in the recovery process.

- Family is the first line of action for a child’s recovery. Some things you can do to help your child:
  - Explain the trauma to the best of your ability.
  - Answer your child’s questions.
    - Be as honest as possible.
    - Use simple words.
    - Avoid generalizing or stereotyping.
    - Be prepared to repeat answers and conversations.
  - Allow the child to express his emotions and listen without passing judgment or offering opinions.
    - Give the child time to talk about his emotions.
    - Make sure that this conversation is prompted by the child and he is not being forced to talk about the incident.
  - Make sure the child knows that it is okay to be experiencing particular emotions after a traumatic event occurs.
  - Provide support and attention.
  - Ensure the child that the occurrence of the event was not his fault.
  - Do not put the child down if he/she demonstrates regressive behaviors (i.e., returning to acting as he/she did at a younger age by doing things like thumb sucking or wetting the bed).
  - Let the child be sad or allow him/her to cry.
    - Do not expect him/her to be tough or brave.
  - Allow the child to feel some sort of control (i.e., allow him/her to choose his/her own meal, how to dress).
  - Make sure to take care of yourself so you can take care of your child.
    - Children are very aware of their parents’ emotions.
  - Be alert to changes in the child’s behavior, however keep in mind that depending on the child’s age he will express different behavioral changes. See symptoms above.

## Key Resources & Links

- **National Institute of Mental Health: Helping Children and Adolescents cope with violence and disasters:** Defines trauma, describes how children react to trauma and how to help them, including tips for parents and caregivers. Also defines PTSD and its treatments.  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-what-parents-can-do.shtml>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Helping Children after a disaster:** Information for parents about trauma, PTSD, and what behavioral changes to look out for.  
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/disaster.htm>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Defines PTSD, and gives symptoms of PTSD.  
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/ptsd70.htm>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Talking to Children about Terrorism and War:** Tips on how to talk to children after a traumatic event occurs, not limited to terrorism/war.  
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/87.htm>
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Understanding Child Traumatic Stress Brochure:** Defines Child Traumatic Stress, symptoms, PTSD, responses to stress, and traumatic stress recovery.  
[http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/edu\\_materials/Understanding\\_Child\\_Traumatic\\_Stress\\_Brochure\\_9-29-05.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/edu_materials/Understanding_Child_Traumatic_Stress_Brochure_9-29-05.pdf)
- **National Center for PTSD/ PTSD in Children and Adolescents:** Offers a fact sheet for PTSD in children and adolescents including diagnosis of PTSD, causes, risk factors, symptoms, and treatment.  
[http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact\\_shts/fs\\_children.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_children.html)
- **When Children Experience Trauma: A Guide for Parents and Families:** Information about how to help children deal with trauma.  
<http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/materials/publications/act/trauma.pdf>

*\*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*