

## **Trauma in the Lives of Children**

**by [Sarah J. Norris, Ph.D., HSPP](#)**

Trauma takes many forms in the lives of children. In her book, [\*Children and Trauma: A Guide for Parents and Professionals\*](#), Cynthia Monahan defines trauma as an event/experience of being “suddenly overwhelmed by an extraordinarily terrifying situation that a child finds himself/herself helpless to cope with. Extraordinary, unpredictable, sudden, overwhelming, shattering, transforming: these are the key words that define trauma (p. xvi)”. Most adults can readily identify a severe traumatic event for a child such as the death of a parent or a close loved one; severe accidents or injury; loss of a home due to events such as tornadoes, flooding, hurricanes or a fire; and/or the divorce of parents. Adults often minimize the effect that trauma has on a child’s functioning and will assume that the child didn’t hear or see anything when in fact they have vivid memories of details of an event. Also, adults assess the severity of trauma based on their own experiences with the event and may miss the significance of a seemingly minor event on a child’s sense of safety and well-being.

Children look to protective parents and trusted adults in the wake of upsetting events for reassurance and support. They look for comforting, normality and routine in their daily life to undo the sense that life has dramatically changed. However, children’s fears will not go away because a grown-up says that it is safe now. Their fears often linger much longer than parents anticipate and may be expressed in unusual and confusing behaviors. Often childhood trauma is complicated by the fact that the triggering event has also impacted parents and trusted adults, too. They are trying to process the event and what it means to their sense of security and family while trying to care for their traumatized children. Parents may feel like a failure if their child is harmed. The reality is that parents cannot always protect their child. However, their involvement is essential to a child’s recovery and a re-establishment of a sense of safety. This article offers suggestions as to how parents and other adults can facilitate a child’s recovery from traumatic events.

### **Positive Ways to Help Children Recover from Traumatic Events**

**Safety and Security.** Reestablishing a sense of safety and security is essential for children and their parents after a traumatic event. Children need comforting and reassurance. Children may seek comfort in ways that are more typical of a younger child. They need soothing experiences that relieve the tension in their bodies. Special comforting at bedtime is usually needed with extra attention given to nighttime rituals. Many children are so frightened at bedtime that they plead and become hysterical if not allowed to sleep near or with their parents. Comfort and reassurances are also the treatment of choice for nightmares. Children need to know that these reactions are common after such an event and that the nightmares will come less often over time. They need to be reassured of their safety and that parents or other adults are in charge to keep them safe. They may also need basic facts about what has happened to avoid distortions in their thinking and their tendency to internalize that what has happened is their fault.

**Maintain Routines and Avoid New and Challenging Situations.** Routine is especially helpful to children who are fearful, clingy, and distressed. Even special events may be disturbing to children rather than comforting. A child who shows excessive fears should not be expected to take on new challenges unless he or she expresses a great desire to do so. If possible, it is important to avoid big changes or disruptions in family life. This might mean postponing a move or a change in schools, even if it had been planned before. Children who have been through trauma cling to sameness, consistency and routine for comfort.

**Expect Regression.** Traumatized children often act and appear like a younger child. Fears from an earlier age may reappear. Previously-acquired developmental milestones may disappear along with a return to earlier problematic behaviors such as bedwetting, biting, wanting to drink from a bottle, or wanting a pacifier. Separation anxiety may make it difficult for a child to attend school or engage in age appropriate activities with others. Often children will want to play with toys from a previous time in their life. The quality of their play may show a return to earlier patterns of play.

**Provide Opportunities for Talking about Feelings/Expect and Tolerate Retelling of a Traumatic Event.** Children often have trouble putting their feelings into words. These feelings may come out as aggressive fantasies. Parents need to listen to the emotional content of these thoughts and feelings. Children typically need to retell their stories to attentive adults. The retelling helps provide progressive relief. Sometimes this is difficult hard for parents to hear but the retelling is part of the healing process.

**Provide Opportunities and Props for Play.** Playing out trauma can be expected and is necessary for young children. This play may be frequent and intense, especially right after a traumatic event. This play often has a seriousness about it that is not seen in non-traumatic play. Children may need additional props to replicate what happened. They will play out what happened to gain mastery of the situation. Usually the intensiveness and seriousness of this play will change over time as the child introduces some adaptive changes. Encouraging art work is also helpful. Play may need to be monitored with others as traumatized children may play out themes that are frightening to others. In addition, the play of a child who has been sexually traumatized will need to be closely monitored. Hurtful and re-enactive play is not helpful for children or their peers and does not encourage a child to progress through traumatic memories. Parents should see a transition of play and artwork over time. If this does not occur, professional help may be needed.

**Expect Some Difficult Behavior.** A traumatic event usually suggests a loss of control or predictability. Children may have more difficulty controlling their thoughts and feelings. They may be more upset over trivial things, become more aggressive with parents and siblings, and test long-established limits and rules. Structure and limit setting are comforting to a child and reinforce the routine that they have come to expect. Parents who can enforce the rules in an understanding and sympathetic way will be the most helpful to their children.

#### **Related Resource**

[Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experiences on Mind, Body, and Society](#)