

Child traumatic stress

What is child traumatic stress?

Child traumatic stress can happen when a child has had something scary or upsetting happen to them. Children react to stress in many ways. Some stress is normal. However, symptoms of traumatic stress may last for a long time. They may cause problems in daily life. Lots of stress can also make health problems worse. As an adult in the child's life, you can play an important part in preventing stress from becoming traumatic.

What causes it?

Children with child traumatic stress have had one or more scary or upsetting events happen during their life. This can be an accident, violence, life changes like a divorce or loss of a loved one, or seeing something bad. Even being in the hospital can be traumatic for a child. Children who have a trauma are more likely to have stress symptoms if they had another traumatic event in the past.

What are the symptoms?

A child's reaction depends on a number of things, including age and personality. Having support people in their lives also affects a child's response. After a traumatic event, a child may react the first time they go to the same place or do the same thing again. After a car crash, the first time a child rides in a car again, it may be very stressful. Their heart may race, they may start to sweat or cry. This is a very normal first reaction to dealing with their fears and feelings. Some fears and feelings of distress stay for a longer time. A child may:

- Feel very sad or numb, anxious or crabby.
- Have strong, long lasting emotional upset.
- Have problems playing or talking with others.
- Have a hard time paying attention. They might "space out" or fidget.
- Have learning and school problems.
- Be afraid to go to sleep.
- Have a hard time sleeping or sleep more than usual.
- Have nightmares or night terrors.
- Have stomachaches, headaches, or other pain.



Common signs at different ages.

Preschool	School-age	Teens
Feeling helpless and fearful about many things.	Feeling overwhelmed with sadness or fear.	Feelings of fear and feeling unsafe. Fear of being different from friends.
Fear of being away from parents. Fear of falling asleep at night alone.	Worries about their safety or family and friends' safety.	Risky, aggressive, or self-destructive behaviors. May be more accident-prone or clumsy.
Having a hard time talking about their feelings.	Telling the story of the trauma over and over again.	Embarrassed about their emotions and reactions.
Loss of toileting, speech, feeding, or other skills they used to have.	Feelings of guilt or shame about what they did or didn't do during the trauma.	Feelings of shame and guilt. Thoughts of revenge.
Play may be about the trauma happening again. Play may be less creative.	School or sleep problems. Even anger or fighting.	May pull back from family and friends.

What should I do if I notice these things?

Focus on your child's current safety and recovery. Talk about the safe people in your child's life and how they will help. Listen if they want to talk. Stay positive. Return to normal routine and activities. This should include school, chores, sleep schedule, and play. It is important to talk with your child's doctor about how to support your child after a traumatic event. A school counselor, social worker, psychologist, clergy, or pastor may also be helpful. Getting help early may limit long-lasting problems with school, personal, social, or family life.

Is this different than Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Some children with traumatic stress may go on to develop PTSD. It occurs when the symptoms last more than one month. The child re-lives the event in their mind with intense fear. Your child may also have problems with memory. Or, they may become very upset and anxious. A mental health professional is needed to treat PTSD.

ALERT: Call your child's primary care provider, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child has:

- Behavior problems or symptoms listed above.
- Special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

Local Mental Health Referral Agencies

Centerstone

Multiple locations throughout Middle Tennessee

(888) 291-4357

<https://centerstone.org/>

Mental Health Cooperative (Co-op)

Multiple locations throughout Middle Tennessee

(615) 743-1555

<https://www.mhc-tn.org/>

Youth Villages

Multiple locations throughout middle Tennessee

(615) 250-7252

www.youthvillages.org

If you are afraid about your child's safety, call 9-1-1.

This sheet was created to help you care for your child or family member. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.