
What is Childhood Trauma?

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet explaining the different types of childhood trauma

A potentially traumatic event/s is an event/s in which a threat or the perception of threat overwhelms a person's capacity to cope. This causes a biological stress response, known as the fight, flight and freeze response. This human stress response is very attuned. That means that our brain and our body are biologically wired to respond to many situations as if they are life-threatening.

Such threats can include tripping in the street, something falling near us, or seeing a garden hose that we mistake for a snake! Because humans are social creatures who rely on other humans to survive, we can also respond to stressful social events as if they are life-threatening. For example – when we receive news that a loved one is sick, when we are speaking in public and voicing our ideas in front of others, or when someone is yelling at us.

When a child experiences everyday childhood events the child recovers from the threat of that event. However when a child experiences traumatic events, and often repeatedly in an ongoing way, they do not. This means that potentially traumatic events may remain traumatic when there is no opportunity to recover from them i.e. they

are not “resolved.” In this case resolution does not mean that there is a reasonable outcome (the “snake” is really a garden hose, the speech goes well, the person yelling at us apologises). Resolution means that our body and brain do not store the trauma, or that we are no longer distressed (either consciously or subconsciously) by it.

Childhood trauma

Childhood trauma is trauma which is experienced under the age of 18. The impacts of childhood trauma are often more extreme and diverse than adult trauma. This is because a child’s brain is still developing. Children are also physically and psychologically dependent on adults, and they are in different stages of development to adults. This means that they process information about the world, other people, and themselves in a different way.

Some factors such as having secure attachment to caregivers and having emotional and social supports can help build resilience to traumatic events. However other factors such as being socially isolated, homeless, ostracised or having few economic resources can make negative impacts more likely.

Childhood trauma can impact lots of different areas. These can include child’s memory, their identity, their sense of belonging. It can also affect how children understand the world, other people, and themselves, as well as their mental and physical health into adulthood.

The main thing to recall is that, with the right support, people can and do recover from even early childhood trauma.

Child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect are particular kinds of childhood trauma. This is because their childhood trauma is intentionally or unintentionally inflicted by someone else. This is called interpersonal trauma. It can happen actively with abuse or passively with neglect. The people who inflict this abuse and neglect are often adults, who are often responsible for the care of that child. Sometimes they are older children. A feature of child abuse and neglect is that it often happens repeatedly, can be extreme and can occur in an ongoing way.

Child abuse can be physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or sexual. Many children experience more than one type of abuse, neglect and victimisation. All sorts of adverse experiences in childhood can have a cumulative effect on many aspects of health and well-being in childhood into adulthood.

Childhood trauma can also occur when a child witnesses or experiences overwhelming negative experiences in early life. Many adverse experiences in childhood can be overwhelming.

Children can experience trauma as a result of something that is done to them by a person, persons or events. Examples include:

- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- Witnessing or experiencing domestic and family violence
- Community trauma such as civil unrest or war refugee or asylum seeker trauma

Children can also experience serious trauma because of what does not happen (e.g. lack of nurture via physical and emotional neglect by a caregiver).

Childhood trauma can also occur without abuse or neglect, in situations in which a caregiver has their own trauma. This can limit their capacity to meet their child's emotional needs. Examples include:

- Parental ill-health
- A parent who is incarcerated
- Parental separation or divorce

Parents/caregivers who have unresolved trauma can unintentionally transmit trauma to their children through their impaired styles of relating. This is called disrupted attachment. When a parent has not come to terms with their own life trauma it can disrupt the child's secure attachment.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE), a large population study conducted over 15 years of 10 types of adverse experiences has documented the many physical, mental health and other impacts of childhood trauma.

