



# Developing a Better Understanding

## UNPACKING CHILD TRAUMA

It's like the backpacks children have to carry. In addition to the physical items they have to carry, imagine their feelings and emotions as physical objects as well; the stresses, responsibilities, expectations, experiences and worries children may have, they carry it all with them. This can become way too heavy for them to carry, and it's important to know that many students will be returning to school with emotionally heavy backpacks.

According to SAMHSA (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration), more than two thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age 16. Potential traumatic events include psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, community or school violence, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, natural disasters or terrorism, commercial sexual exploitation, sudden or violent loss of a loved one, refugee or war experiences, military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury), physical or sexual assault, neglect, and serious accidents or life-threatening illnesses.

A single, time-limited traumatic event is called an acute trauma. A natural disaster, motor vehicle accident, physical or sexual assault, or a school shooting are all examples of acute traumas. Over the course of even a brief event, a child or adolescent may go through a variety of complicated sensations, thoughts, feelings, and physical responses that are frightening in and of themselves and contribute to his or her sense of being overwhelmed.

The loss of someone critically important (e.g., a parent, sibling, or close friend) is an acute event that can lead to a traumatic stress reaction known as traumatic grief. Although all adolescents grieve after the death of a loved one, traumatic grief occurs when the teen experiences the death/loss as a traumatic event and experiences many of the symptoms of PTSD (e.g., intrusive thoughts about the death, increased physical agitation, emotional numbing). These symptoms hinder the natural bereavement process, can cause interference in daily functioning, and do not allow the teen to process and, eventually, let go of the loss. Traumatic grief is often complicated by the secondary consequences of the loss, such as moving in with grandparents after the loss of a parent.

The experience of multiple traumatic events is referred to as chronic trauma. Chronic trauma may encompass several different events—such as exposure to domestic violence, involvement in a serious car accident, and exposure to gang-related violence—or longstanding trauma such as physical abuse or war. One common form of chronic trauma is child neglect. According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, in addition to the neurobiological impact of traumatic stress, adolescents who have been exposed to trauma expend an enormous amount of emotional and mental energy responding to, coping with, and trying to coming to terms with the event or events. This can reduce their capacity to master other age-appropriate developmental tasks. For example: a youth whose mind is occupied with intrusive images of traumatic events cannot focus on learning, and so falls behind in school, or a teen who is emotionally overwhelmed by reminders of traumatic events cannot devote his or her energies to forming relationships with peers, or a teen who is fearful of taking any risk cannot take on the challenges that lead to growth.

### What Can I do to Help?

As suggested by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, try the following to help a child heal from trauma:

- Help the child feel safe
- Encourage (don't force)
- Give extra attention
- Teach the child to relax
- Remember that everyone heals differently from trauma
- Provide extra encouragement
- Find help when needed
- Show the child extra comfort

The impact of child traumatic stress can last well beyond childhood. In fact, research has shown that child trauma survivors may experience; learning problems, including lower grades and more suspensions and expulsions, increased use of health and mental health services, increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and long-term health problems (e.g., diabetes and heart disease). Trauma is a risk factor for nearly all behavioral health and substance abuse disorders.

### Trauma and Substance Abuse: Myth and Fact

**Myth:** Attributing drug or alcohol use to stress just prevents adolescents from taking responsibility for their actions.

**Fact:** Defining the relationship between a youth's trauma history and his or her substance use can actually enhance his or her ability to take responsibility for his or her actions, particularly in adolescents who are reluctant to acknowledge that their substance use is a problem. In addition, the self-medication hypothesis can be extremely helpful in understanding both the origins of a youth's substance abuse and the factors that may lead to continued use or relapse.

*Fact According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

In some cases, a teen will experience a trauma that is not noticeable right away. Another possibility is that an occurrence that is not always traumatic has greatly impacted a teen. Paradigm Treatment Centers explains, if a teen is hospitalized for an acute injury or illness, they might begin to experience PTSD symptoms. If at any time trauma becomes noticeable or it's discovered that an event is causing troubling symptoms, contact a mental health professional. It can be difficult to know how adolescent trauma will affect a child now and into the future. By keeping consistent and open communication with children starting in their formative years throughout their teens, it's easier to become aware of any mental health red flags that begin to emerge over time. Also, keeping in contact with the child's physician and letting them know about the traumatic event(s) can allow them to recommend the right resources for the child or teen that is struggling.

### Fast Facts About Adolescent Trauma

- **At least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse and/or neglect in the past year.**
- **Each day, more than 1,000 youth are treated in emergency departments for physical assault-related injuries.**
- **In 2019, about 1 in 5 high school students reported being bullied on school property in the last year.**
- **8% of high school students had been in a physical fight on school property one or more times during a 12 month survey time.**
- **Each day, about 14 youth die from homicide, and more than 1,300 are treated in emergency departments for violence-related injuries.**

Source: SAMSHA

Sources: Child Mind Institute  
SAMHSA

Child Welfare Information Gateway  
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Paradigm Treatment Centers

Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities

[www.oacbha.org](http://www.oacbha.org) (614)224-1111

Cheri L. Walter, CEO