

Trauma Informed Care Toolkit

Information for Parents and Caregivers

Introduction: Why Is This Important?

Click on the link below to see a short video and learn more about how trauma affects young people.

<http://www.newsreel.org/video/WOUNDED-PLACES>

Stress and trauma are common in our lives. However, when trauma seriously threatens our safety and security or happens repeatedly, it can change us in surprising ways. Trauma can affect our bodies, our brains and the way we act for the rest of our lives.

Has your teen been exposed to trauma or toxic stress? How can you tell if that experience is affecting him or her? What can you do to help?

What is Trauma?

What Happens to People When They Experience Trauma or Toxic Stress?

What Can I Do to Support My Teen?



What is Trauma?

People often use the word “trauma” to refer to a traumatic event. A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event that can happen to anyone. Not all dangerous or scary events are traumatic events,

Trauma Informed Care Toolkit

however. An event may be traumatic when we face or witness an immediate threat to ourselves or to a loved one, often followed by serious injury or harm. We feel terror, helplessness, or horror at what we are experiencing and at our inability to stop it or protect ourselves or others from it. Often people feel bad after a trauma.

Even though we try to keep children safe, dangerous events still happen. This danger can come from outside of the family (such as a natural disaster, car accident, school shooting, or community violence) or from within the family (such as a serious injury, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one).

What Experiences Might Be Traumatic?

- Accident
- Injury
- Serious illness
- Fires
- Crime
- Community violence
- Living in/escaping from war zone
- Combat injury of loved one
- Death of a loved one
- Violence within the family
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Homelessness
- Human trafficking/sexual slavery
- School violence
- Natural disaster
- Sudden loss of a loved one
- Act of terrorism
- Bullying/cyberbullying
- Economic stress/poverty
- Parent deportation/immigration issues



Do Traumatic Events Happen Often?

The number of traumatic events varies. For example, between 25% and 43% of children are exposed to sexual abuse; between 39% and 85% of children witness community violence. And more than half of

Trauma Informed Care Toolkit

children report experiencing a traumatic event by age 16 (Presidential Task Force on PTSD and Trauma in Children and Adolescents, 2008).

A research study known as the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACEs) found that 2/3 of the adults studied had at least one traumatic experience before the age of 18. 12% of those adults indicated they had experienced 4 or more traumatic experiences.

What Happens to People When They Experience Trauma or Toxic Stress?

When trauma and toxic stress happen, it affects us physically and mentally. Our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure goes up and chemicals in our bodies get us ready to fight, flee or freeze. We get very alert and only think about the danger that is right in front of us. These responses to stress are valuable and help us adapt to and cope with the challenges that come our way. Often they literally help us survive. These changes usually go away once the danger is past.

When the memories and feelings connected to trauma stay strong for at least a month, we call that traumatic stress. **Traumatic Stress** refers to the ways that trauma affects a person's life after the event is over. Traumatic stress includes the event and the person's experience or feelings about the event. In other words:

$$\text{Traumatic Stress} = \text{Event} + \text{Experience (Feelings)}$$

Traumatic stress affects a person's behavior, feelings, relationships and view of the world. It can also lead to health and mental health problems later in life.

How Does Trauma Affect Teens?

After one or more traumatic events, many teens do not just forget and move on. Those who develop reactions that continue and affect their daily lives—even after the traumatic events have ended—suffer from traumatic stress.

Traumatic stress happens when a young person experiences traumatic events or situations that upset and overwhelm their ability to cope. When signs and symptoms interfere with daily life, a teen is experiencing traumatic stress.

Not all youth who experience a traumatic event will develop symptoms of traumatic stress. Reactions can vary depending on age, developmental level, trauma history, and other factors.

People who have had 4 or more traumatic experiences are more likely to:

- Cope by smoking, drinking or using drugs
- Take part in risky behaviors such as unprotected sex
- Suffer from depression, anxiety or uncontrollable anger
- Develop health problems later in life, such as heart disease or breathing problems

Risk factors for developing traumatic stress include:

Severity of the Event

How serious was the event? How badly was your teen or someone they love physically hurt? Did they or

Trauma Informed Care Toolkit

someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Was your child separated from his/her caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die?

Amount of Destruction Seen/Distance from Trauma Event

Was your teen actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did your teen watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened?

Caregivers Reactions

Did you believe that your teen was telling the truth? Did you take your teen's reactions seriously? Did you respond to your teen's needs? Did you do your best to protect your teen and make him or her feel safe? How did you cope with the event?

Exposure to More than One Traumatic Event in the Past

In general, teens exposed to one traumatic event are less likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. Teens continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions.

Children, Family and Community

The culture, race, and ethnicity of teens, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that teens and families have qualities and/or resources that help lessen or eliminate risk and protect them against long-term harm. Culture often has a positive impact on how teens, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, culture can also increase a teen's risk for traumatic stress symptoms.

What are the signs that a teen may be experiencing traumatic stress?

The signs of traumatic stress are different in each person. Middle and high school aged youth may experience some or all of the following:

- Feel depressed and alone
- Discuss or write about the traumatic events in detail
- Develop eating disorders and self-harming behaviors such as cutting
- Start using or abusing alcohol or drugs
- Become sexually active
- Feel like they're going crazy
- Feel different from everyone else
- Take too many risks
- Have sleep disturbances
- Don't want to go to places that remind them of the event
- Say they have no feeling about the event
- Show changes in behavior

What is a trauma reminder or "trigger"?

Teens may feel anxious, nervous, or scared when they are near places, people, sights, sounds, smells,

Trauma Informed Care Toolkit

and feelings that remind them of past traumatic events, even years afterwards. These trauma reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions.

Common reminders (also called triggers) include: sudden loud noises, destroyed buildings, the smell of fire, ambulance or police sirens, locations where they experienced the trauma, encountering people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the trauma, and television or radio news about the event.

Your teen may not be consciously aware of these reminders, but it is important for you and others to anticipate reminders and to help the teen recognize and learn how to cope with them. As parents/caregivers you can let your teen know how much you would like to help them whenever they are reminded of their experiences or losses. It is helpful to be open about how you yourself are also still affected by reminders. As a family, you can then offer each other emotional support through physical comfort, understanding, and reassurance.

(Adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network website

www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers)

What Can I Do To Support My Teen?

Parents are an important source of support for teens that have experienced trauma. The important thing to remember is that it is possible to heal and recover from trauma. Every person's response to trauma is individual and what may be helpful to one person may not be helpful to the next. If a parent has experienced the same trauma or has a history of trauma, this may impact the ways that they provide support for their teen. Here are some ideas on ways to support your teen:

- Be patient-each person recovers at their own pace, some recover quickly and others take a longer time. Let your teen know that healing will happen but that it may take some time.
- Reassure your teen that he/she is safe and talk about what you and your teen can do to insure their safety.
- Explain that the trauma was not the teen's fault-Teen's often blame themselves for events that are out of their control.
- Maintain regular home and school routines as much as possible. Routines help all of us to return to our "normal" state.
- Be available to talk with your teen when they are ready. Don't press them but do let them know you are willing to talk with them about what happened.
- Learn as much as you can about trauma and how it affects teens and families.
- Pay attention to your own reactions to the trauma and your history of trauma and know that it can affect the way that you respond to your teen.
- If traumatic stress symptoms (e.g. nightmares, fears, etc.) last more than a few weeks consider seeking professional mental health treatment for your teen. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides information about how to find effective professional help. www.nctsn.org