

Trauma and children – 2 to 5 years old

Public health information

Summary

Preschool age children can be seriously affected by trauma, just like older children and adults. Life-threatening events such as car accidents, bushfires, sudden illness, traumatic death in the family, crime, abuse or violence can cause trauma. A preschooler's language is still developing, so it is important to look for other clues in their behaviour and the way they play to understand if the trauma has had an effect.

Preschoolers know when things are not right

Preschoolers do not understand what has gone wrong but are very sensitive to things not being right. A child's response to a distressing or frightening experience will depend on a wide range of factors including their age, stage of development and personality, as well as the impact of the crisis on their parents, primary carers or significant others. Your child may not react in the ways you expect.

Common reactions in preschoolers

Children's responses to trauma can vary, but common reactions include:

- New or increased clingy behaviour, such as following the parent around the house.
- New problems with basic skills like sleeping, eating, going to the toilet or paying attention – it may seem like they've slipped back (regressed) and got younger.
- Mood changes – the child might not seem to enjoy daily routines or activities they used to like or may seem more 'shut down', listless and withdrawn.
- Changed behaviour – some children might be more aggressive to parents or playmates.
- Increased fear – for example, the child may:
 - Be more jumpy or startle easily
 - Develop new fears
 - Have more nightmares
 - Talk about the frightening event more or have it in their play or drawings
 - Not seem to be reassured when talking about the scary event and ask about it again and again
 - Be scared that the trauma will happen again.
- More physical complaints for which no cause can be found, such as tummy ache or headache, being tired and other problems.
- Blaming themselves – small children are likely to misunderstand the events of the trauma and somehow think it was their fault.

What parents and carers can do

There are a number of things you can do to help your preschool age child during times of trauma:

- Seek, accept and increase support for yourself to manage your own shock and emotional responses.
- Stay calm. Listen and tolerate the child's retelling of the event.
- Reassure your child that the event is over and they are safe. You may have to reassure them over and over again.

- Respect the child's fears and give them time to learn to cope with them. It is important to acknowledge and validate the child's concerns.
- Protect the child from re-exposure to frightening situations and reminders of trauma. These may include TV programs, stories, movies or other reminders such as visiting or seeing pictures of the location or physical situations.
- Accept and help the child to name strong feelings during brief conversations, but remember that a child of this age cannot talk about these feelings or the experience for long.
- Expect and understand that the child may act in a more babyish way – you may need to make allowances for this, while sticking to some of the more basic household rules.
- Expect some difficult or uncharacteristic behaviour.

When to seek help

Children of preschool age develop skills at different rates and some skills are learnt earlier than others. Trauma can slow things down or get in the way of new things being learnt. It can also cause marked changes in behaviour.

Parents or care-givers should seek help if:

- You are concerned or unsure about how your child is coping
- You are not coping yourself – this makes it harder for you to help the preschooler to cope and you may both need to seek help
- The child has lots of symptoms and things are not settling
- The household has experienced a significant loss and the community around the child is disrupted
- Several family members are affected and there does not seem to be enough attention to go around
- The family is struggling to re-establish any kind of routine or predictable pattern in the household and week.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your local doctor
- Your Maternal Child Health nurse
- Your local community health centre
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
- Paediatrician or Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist – your doctor can refer you
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- Preschoolers are very vulnerable to traumatic events.
- They will struggle to express their fears or thoughts and will show this through changes in behaviour and how they function.
- They will need assistance to make them feel safe and to help them understand the experience.

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