

Understanding Trauma and Stress in *Early Childhood*

Young children are born with a remarkable capacity to recover from trauma and adversity. Research shows that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments promote healthy child development and lessen the negative effects of traumatic stress.



Understanding a Child's Stress Response

Any frightening or overwhelming event can be traumatic for a young child. When children feel fear, their brain's stress response system acts as an alarm, preparing the body to freeze, hide, run, or fight. Because young children rely on parents and caregivers for safety, harm to caregivers can also affect the child. Potentially traumatic events young children may experience include:

- Accidents, injuries, or serious health procedures
- Animal bites
- Natural disasters, war, or exposure to violence
- Abuse, crime, or bullying at home, school, or in the community
- Family separation or death of a loved one

Recognizing Signs of Traumatic Stress

Recovery is possible when caregivers help children feel safe and assure them they are not to blame for what happened. When children are left to cope alone without comfort or soothing, recovery is difficult. Watch for these signs of traumatic stress in young children:

- Eating or sleeping problems, including nightmares
- Upset by noises, touch, smells, tastes, or busy environments
- Feeling sick or flare-ups of health problems such as asthma
- Being overwhelmed by strong emotions like sadness, anger, or frustration
- Frequent tantrums, very active behavior, or trouble paying attention
- Reluctance to play, try new things, or engage with others
- Clinginess, fussiness, worry, or thinking they are to blame for what happened

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is built on strengths, skills, and resources that help children heal from traumatic stress. Research shows that nurturing, responsive relationships are the essential ingredients to help young children recover. Children thrive when they feel:

Safe

Loved

Understood

Capable

Taking Care of You

Everyone experiences stress. Practicing coping skills helps you reset so you can keep teaching, inspiring, and caring for children. Get rest, stay hydrated, learn new skills, and accept help from friends, family, and peers. Consider using the “PRN” approach to promote your resilience.



Pause

Check how your body is feeling in the moment



Reset

Actively work to calm yourself and steady yourself for the next task.



Nourish

Replenish your mind, body, soul, and spirit.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood

How to Seek Help

Talk to your pediatrician and provider. Talking about traumatic events can be sensitive. Your pediatrician will listen and guide you on what steps you can take. Effective treatments exist for both children and caregivers. Look for therapists trained in:

- Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP)
- Parent Child Interactional Therapy (PCIT)
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

Parent programs such as Circle of Security, Strong Roots/Mom Power, and Attachment Vitamins can help caregivers support children experiencing traumatic stress.



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Healthy New Families is a program of the Mental Health Association of Maryland. We promote mental health and well-being for new parents, infants and young children, and families across Maryland by connecting families and providers with resources, education, and support.

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