



*About Building Connections
for young children and their families*

www.ProjectABC-LA.org

Project ABC is designed to create change at the beginning of children's lives. Even as infants and toddlers, children need support to optimize their healthy social and emotional development. Our goal at Project ABC is to ensure that families, professionals and community organizations work together to support every child's healthy development through awareness of the central role that relationships play in building healthy lives.

For further resources visit:

- ProjectABC-LA.org
- nctsn.org
- SAMHSA.gov/children
- developingchild.harvard.edu
- childtrauma.org

Acknowledgments

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Project ABC is a collaboration of:

- Children's Institute, Inc. – www.childrensinstitute.org
- University of Southern California University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at Children's Hospital Los Angeles – www.uscucedd.org
- USC School of Social Work – <http://sowkweb.usc.edu>
- Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services – <http://dcfs.co.la.ca.us>
- Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health – <http://dmh.lacounty.gov>

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What is Early Childhood Trauma?



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What is Early Childhood Trauma?

Early childhood trauma refers to frightening experiences that occur to children from newborn to five years of age. Because infants' and young children's reactions may be different from older children's, and because they may not be able to express feelings about threatening or frightening events, many people assume that young children don't feel the impact of frightening experiences.

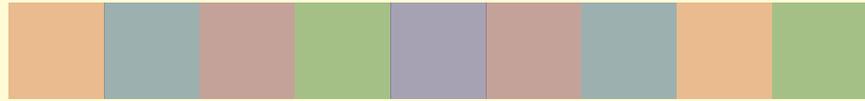


What kinds of trauma do infants, toddlers and preschoolers experience?

Children can be exposed to a range of frightening experiences that are traumatic to them.

- Violence in the home (as a witness and/or as a victim)
- Harsh punishment
- Severe neglect
- Sexual abuse
- Grief over separation from loved ones
- Natural disasters
- Life-threatening or invasive medical procedures
- Loss of primary caregiver or other important people in their lives due to:
 - Hospitalizations
 - Foster placement
 - Military deployment
 - Incarceration
 - Death
- Community and school violence
- Terrorism, war zone trauma





How will my child behave after being exposed to trauma?

Young children may experience both behavioral and physical symptoms associated with trauma. Unlike older children, they cannot use words to let us know they are feeling afraid or helpless. Young children who experience trauma are at particular risk because their rapidly developing brains are very vulnerable, and trauma may lead to reduced growth of the brain.

Children suffering from traumatic stress often have difficulty regulating their behaviors and emotions. Young children, even infants, may develop symptoms from events that threaten their safety or the safety of their parents. The symptoms listed below can be indicative of physical illness or of typical behaviors at certain stages of a young child's development. They may also be symptoms of early childhood trauma.

- Increased irritability, crying
- Difficulty in being comforted
- Physical symptoms such as stomachaches
- Fear of being alone; refusing to be separated from an adult; a tendency to cling
- Aggression toward people
- Aggression toward animals
- Repeating the trauma in their play
- Reckless behaviors or refusing to play and explore
- Anger, refusing to comply, acting out
- Loss of developmental skills; reverting to younger behaviors

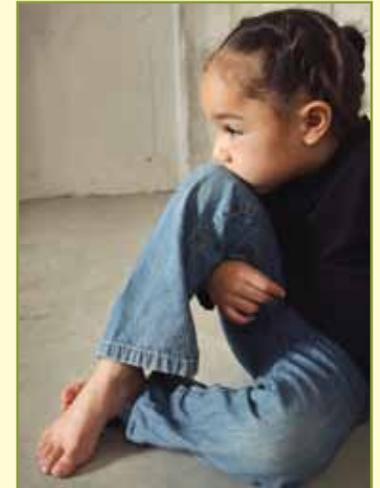


“ Sometimes adults say, ‘They’re too young to understand.’ However, young children are affected by traumatic events even though they may not understand what happened. ”

When do reactions to trauma occur?

- Immediately after the trauma experience
- Days later
- Weeks later

A child's sense of safety may be shattered by frightening things they see, loud noises, violent movements, and other unpredictable sensations. Without an accurate understanding of cause and effect, young children believe that their thoughts, wishes, and fears are real and can make things happen. Young children are less able to know how to keep themselves safe, and so are particularly vulnerable to trauma.



Reminders that can trigger reactions may include:

- Smells
- Sounds (sirens, loud voices, other noises)
- Sights (such as people who remind the child of the traumatic experience)
- Dreams

“ Children may blame themselves or their parents for not preventing a frightening event. ”





How can we help young children who experience trauma?

When young children experience a traumatic stressor, their first response is usually to look for reassurance from caregivers and adults who can help reestablish security and stability by:

- Following the child's lead regarding his or her needs
- Showing love and affection and physical comfort such as cuddling, holding, rocking
- Helping the child identify and deal with his or her feelings
- Helping expand their "feelings" vocabulary
- Listening to the child; being careful not to minimize the child's feelings
- Answering the child's questions in language s/he can understand, so he or she can develop an understanding of the events
- Reassuring the child about safety
- Using a calm voice and behaviors
- Being patient



What can family members do following trauma?

- Maintain routines and schedules
- Set limits with love
- Be consistent and available
- Take care of themselves, as young children are very sensitive to the responses of important adults in their lives
- Engage in developmentally appropriate family activities.
- Find ways to have fun and relax together
- Honor family traditions that bring children close to the people they love (for example, storytelling, holiday celebrations, reunions, trips)



Research on resilience in children shows that an essential protective factor for children is the presence of a reliable, positive, loving, and protective adult to shield children against harmful experiences and be a consistent source of support.

When should I seek help for my child?

If you suspect your child is suffering from any form of trauma, speak with your family health practitioner or pediatrician. If problems continue over time, seek professional help from an infant/family and early childhood mental health expert.

