



Supporting and Understanding Trauma During COVID-19

Head Start Heals - Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What are signs of trauma in young children?

Children who have lived through a frightening or life threatening situation may react in many different ways. Young children (including infants and toddlers) may have difficulties with eating and sleeping. They may be very fearful and easily startled, especially when something reminds them of the situation that scared them. Some, including children who have been separated from loved ones, may become clingy or show extreme anxiety at separation, such as at drop-off in the morning. Some children seem plainly unhappy, passive and unresponsive, while others cry easily and seem very hard to soothe. Preschoolers may re-play the frightening event over and over again or keep talking about it. They may have physical symptoms (like stomach aches) or revert to behaviors (for example, like bed wetting,) that they had left behind. Some children become easily overwhelmed, inattentive, or overactive or have difficulties with peers. If you have concerns about the distress you are witnessing, do not hesitate to reach out to your mental health consultant or social services team.

Additional Resources:

Trauma Signs for Children

<https://childmind.org/article/signs-trauma-children/>

Webinar

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3485-supporting-infants-young-children-and-families-addressing-inequities-related-to-covid-19>

Supporting Recovery After Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/supporting-recovery-after-trauma>

Understanding Trauma in an Early Childhood Context

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/understanding-trauma-early-childhood-context>

Q. How can I support infants and toddlers with their feelings?

First, never underestimate the protective and healing power of a nurturing relationship and a calm, safe, predictable environment. Focus on your relationship with each child through repeated, loving connections throughout the day.

- Give the child your full attention while positioned face to face, with a gentle voice and gentle touch.
- Make sure each child and parent feels warmly welcomed and at ease.
- Make sure the day is infused with fun and soothing activities and positive feedback.
- Maintain a predictable and calm routine, supported at each step by visual cues like pictures so children have the comfort of knowing what comes next.

Remember that infants and toddlers understand best when you speak with short phrases paired with big gestures, objects or pictures. When they seem ready, start teaching the words for emotions using Feeling Faces, starting with a few at a time, and ask them to point out their own feelings. Label emotions that you observe in the children or in stories (“you look mad!” or “doggy feels sad”) and also in yourself, so that children can start to understand the feelings they experience. (If you are wearing a mask, it will be especially important to describe your own feelings.) Read books that support social emotional learning. Remind yourself to first connect at eye level (“You look mad!” or “You want the truck!”) before you gently correct with positive reminders (“We touch gently”) or coach more peaceful behavior, for example: “Ask him: my turn?”.

Additional Resources:

Helping Us Calm Down: Strategies for Children

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/resources/index.html>

Activities for Families to Support Emotions/Feelings

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/activity-ideas-families.pdf>

Tucker the Turtle Social Story - Home Version|

https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/TuckerTurtle_Story_Home.pdf

Supporting Deep Breathing for Young Children

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/Smell-Blow.pdf>

Effective Practice Guides Emotional Functioning Improve

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/emotional-functioning-improve>

Effective Practice Guides/Social Emotional Development

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/social-emotional-development>

Q. I know that one of our children is going through a terrible time at home. How can I support them now?

Ongoing connection with a trusted teacher can mean a lot to a small child. If she is old enough, by all means stay in frequent touch by phone or video calls, with a parent's support. If you have not done so already, you could consider sending photos or drawings or little packets of toys or art materials. Is there a story the child would remember from school? If so, make a recording and send it. Reach out to her caregiver with friendly check-in calls and find out what would make a difference for the family. Children take their cues about how to react to difficult situations from the adults around them, so any support you can offer to the adults will be helpful to the child.

Additional Resources:

Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-traumatic-event/>

Books to Support Young Children Going Through Tough Times

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3399-our-favorite-books-for-families-facing-tough-times>

Supporting Children Experiencing Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/blog/supporting-children-experiencing-trauma>

Promoting Empathy, Understanding Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/promoting-empathy-understanding-trauma>

Q. How will I know if a child’s challenging behavior is related to something they experienced and what I should do?

It is important to consider what a child may have experienced that could be behind the behavior or distress that you observe. It would be helpful for you or someone in your program to spend extra time with the family and find out if the child may have gone through an upsetting or frightening experience (absence of a parent, homelessness, family violence, natural disaster, loss, etc). Though it is best if you can understand the circumstances, you can be helpful even if you do not know exactly what happened. You can fairly assume that children will communicate through actions when they are not able to express complex feelings in words in the heat of the moment (this is very hard, even for highly verbal children). What would the feelings be, what would the words be if the child did not use action instead? Some children who have experienced adversity can tell you why they are upset, of course, but others cannot. For the child who hits a teacher, for example, it could be: “I am furious that you made me stop painting!” For the child who throws a chair over when a father comes in the room, it could be: “I desperately miss my daddy!”. This is really important because it may give you a chance to acknowledge confusing and difficult emotions so that the child can talk about them and learn other ways to express them. It may also give you a chance to alter the environment or expectations so that the child can feel safe, for example; providing extra time and warnings for the child who has difficulty with transitions. It is helpful to find quiet times to connect with the child who has challenging behavior.

Remember that positive attention helps to prevent or decrease challenging behavior. List out the children’s strengths with your team and do your best to remind yourself of each child’s essential goodness. When you feel frustrated, which is very natural, use your own self-calming strategies so that you can respond from a place of compassion rather than reacting in anger. Do not delay in putting positive supports in place if a student is in distress or has difficulty regulating behavior in the classroom.

Additional Resources:

Trauma Signs for Children

<https://childmind.org/article/signs-trauma-children/>

Trauma Effects on Behavior

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>

We Can Be Problem Solvers at Home

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/resources/index.html>

Promoting Empathy, Understanding Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/promoting-empathy-understanding-trauma>

Effects of Trauma, Managing Challenging Behaviors

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/effects-trauma-managing-challenging-behaviors>

Q. How can I make sure my classroom is responsive to children who have experienced trauma?

Focus on connecting repeatedly throughout the day with every child (at eye level, with your full attention). Children who have experienced trauma need to feel safe and accepted in your class and they need a calm and predictable environment in order to feel at ease. Emphasize social-emotional learning so they can learn to label feelings, self-calming strategies, and social negotiation in your planning, as well as careful (written) lesson planning for difficult moments in the classroom day, such as transitions. It is important for visual cues and schedules to be used consistently so that children know what to expect. Find out what specific triggers may be upsetting to children so you can plan to make them feel safe. Think through the cultural background of every family and how you can make sure everyone feels like they fully belong when they walk in your room.

Additional Resources:

Rebuilding the Pyramid: Reconnecting After a Break

<https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/Rebuilding-the-Pyramid.pdf>

Trauma Informed School Strategies

[trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19](#)

When Students Are Traumatized, Teachers Are Too:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>

Building Resilience in the Face of Trauma and Adversity

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/building-resilience-face-trauma-adversity>

Promoting Empathy and Understanding Trauma

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/promoting-empathy-understanding-trauma>

Q. We have a child with special needs who went through some traumatic experience during this time. How can I help him understand and cope with his feelings?

As for all children, it is critical to make sure that this little boy feels very safe and calm in your classroom. Since every child is different, it will be important to be attuned to his language level, the best ways to communicate with him and his sensory preferences. Perhaps his family, your disability coordinator, the mental health consultant and/or his therapists can help you understand how best to communicate with him and respond to his needs if this is not already clear. Does he understand spoken language better if you use short phrases? Many children catch only bits of long sentences. Would it help for you to learn new strategies to engage him in play? Would he understand better if you used more pictures? Would he be able to participate more comfortably if you pre-planned accommodations for each classroom activity? Does he have difficulty with changes in the schedule or at transitions? Are there sensory strategies that can help him feel more comfortable and available for learning (like extra opportunities for movement)? In general, it may be helpful to consider social stories, visual supports for learning about feelings (or auditory support for children with limited vision) and imaginative ways to teach deep breathing and other self-calming strategies.

Additional Resources:

The Road to Recovery

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/road-recovery-supporting-children-intellectual-and-developmental-disabilities-who-have>

Facts Sheet: Traumatic Stress and Children With Developmental Disabilities

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/facts-traumatic-stress-and-children-developmental-disabilities>

Safety and Children with Disabilities

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandsafety/trauma.html>

Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

<https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-traumatic-event/>

Q. We had a Category 5 hurricane 18 months ago. Our families and staff are still recovering from that and then COVID-19 happened. How can I assist them?

Parents and staff who have experienced life-threatening events or prior trauma may need extra support when faced with later stress or danger that challenges their sense of security. The most important things you can do are to check in with them frequently to connect and listen, assure that their basic needs are met, and provide support and comfort. Self-care and soothing activities (meditation, music, walking, prayer) are especially helpful for people experiencing prolonged or recurrent threats. Provide space and time for self-care. Trauma-specific counseling can be very effective for people experiencing anxiety, panic, nightmares or other intense symptoms. Your mental health consultant, community mental health agencies, and/or an employee assistance program may also be helpful resources for staff and families.

Additional Resources:

How Can We Promote Resilience and Recovery For People Who Have Experienced Traumatic Events?

<https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/families-and-trauma>

How to Beat Stress, Trauma and Adversity With Resilience

<https://positivepsychology.com/stress-resilience/>

Examining the Effects of Toxic Stress and Trauma on the Mental Health of Young Children

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/examining-effects-toxic-stress-trauma-mental-health-young-children>

Q. What is the long-term outlook for our children? How will this experience of trauma affect them in terms of their academic, social, and emotional well-being?

Trauma occurs when children are exposed to events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope. While significant trauma may increase vulnerability, long-term distress is not inevitable. This is because loving relationships, a sense of safety, and nurturing environments can buffer the effects of stress. We know that the long-term negative consequences of adverse experiences in childhood can be reduced by a strong relationship with one caring adult. Positive relationships in a Head Start program can help children and families heal and develop resilience in the face of stress.

Additional Resources:

ACES

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>

How Childhood Trauma Can Affect Long Term Health

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/well/mind/how-childhood-trauma-can-affect-your-long-term-health.html>

Understanding Stress and Resilience in Young Children: Head Start Staff

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/understanding-stress-resilience-young-children-head-start-staff>