

How Is Early Childhood Trauma Unique ?

Traumatic events have a profound sensory impact on young children. Their sense of safety may be shattered by frightening visual stimuli, loud noises, violent movements, and other sensations associated with an unpredictable frightening event. The frightening images tend to recur in the form of nightmares, new fears, and actions or play that reenact the event. Lacking an accurate understanding of the relationship between cause and effect, young children believe that their thoughts, wishes, and fears have the power to become real and can make things happen. Young children are less able to anticipate danger or to know how to keep themselves safe, and so are particularly vulnerable to the effects of exposure to trauma. A 2-year-old who witnesses a traumatic event like his mother being battered may interpret it quite differently from the way a 5-year-old or an 11-year-old would. Children may blame themselves or their parents for not preventing a frightening event or for not being able to change its outcome. These misconceptions of reality compound the negative impact of traumatic effects on children's development.

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As with older children, young children experience both behavioral and physiological symptoms associated with trauma. Unlike older children, young children cannot express in words whether they feel afraid, overwhelmed, or helpless. However, their behaviors provide us with important clues about how they are affected.

Young children who experience trauma are at particular risk because their rapidly developing brains are very vulnerable. Early childhood trauma has been associated with reduced size of the brain cortex. This area is responsible for many complex functions including memory, attention, perceptual awareness, thinking, language, and consciousness. These changes may affect IQ and the ability to regulate emotions, and the child may become more fearful and may not feel as safe or as protected. Read more about the impact of trauma on brain development in [Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain](#) [1], a working paper from the Center on the Developing Child.

Young children depend exclusively on parents/caregivers for survival and protection—both physical and emotional. When trauma also impacts the parent/caregiver, the relationship between that person and the child may be strongly affected. Without the support of a trusted parent/caregiver to help them regulate their strong emotions, children may experience overwhelming stress, with little ability to effectively communicate what they feel or need. They often develop symptoms that parents/caregivers don't understand and may display uncharacteristic behaviors that adults may not know how to appropriately respond to.

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