

## Trauma and Families

### How do we define family?

The word "family" refers to two or more persons who are related in any way—genetically, legally, culturally, or emotionally. Families define themselves. The family's primary function is to protect, support and care for its members so that the entire family can meet its full potential.

### What is trauma?

Traumas are frightening, often dangerous, and/or violent events or conditions that are experienced as overwhelming to a family and/or any or all its individual members. These experiences can include breaches in the protective shield or social contract that diminish a family's sense of safety and support. Each member of the family may experience trauma differently but each individual family member's adaptation is linked to the reactions and responses of the others.

There are many kinds of potentially traumatic experiences, such as:

- Accident and/or injury
- Death of a loved one
- Serious illness
- Fire
- Animal attacks
- Community violence/crime
- Combat injury of a loved one
- Separation or removal from family
- Violence within the family
- Abuse and/or neglect
- Sexual violence and rape
- Homelessness
- School violence
- Natural disaster
- Sudden loss of a loved one
- Act of terrorism
- Bullying/cyberbullying
- Living in or escaping from a war zone

### How does trauma impact families?

Trauma changes families as they work to survive and adapt to their circumstances and environment. Research demonstrates that trauma has a range of impacts on individual family members, their relationships with each other, and overall family functioning:

- **Individuals** can experience a range of reactions to a potentially traumatic experience. Initial distress is likely. Subsequent adaptations range from resilience to thriving or, on the other end of the spectrum, short term to chronic physical health concerns (e.g. headaches, sleep problems, digestion problems, high blood pressure, etc.) or mental health problems (e.g. acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, etc.). In both children and adults of all ages, these symptoms can slow developmental growth or change the course of one's life.
- **Adult intimate relationships** can be a source of strength in coping with a traumatic experience and its aftermath, but when coping resources are stretched too thin and the stress is too high, partners can have problems communicating, managing emotions and intimacy; increasing the chances for separation or even interpersonal violence.
- **The parent-child relationship** is vital to development and recovery. Parent's protection, nurturance and guidance speeds recovery and supports their child's coping in the face of trauma. When parents are not available or struggling with their own reactions or behavioral and/or physical health problems, they may have trouble staying in tune with their children's reactions and responses to the traumatic experience, creating changes in parenting behaviors.
- **Sibling relationships** are important sources of companionship, comfort, daily support and family connection, especially when living under stressful conditions or impacted by traumatic events. When the stress and burden of such changes are too heavy, sibling relationships become over-taxed and developmentally normal rivalries can turn into more intense conflict or feelings of rejection.
- **Extended family and kinship relationships** can offer the day-to-day assistance as well as the emotional support needed to recover from trauma. Families separated from their extended family often develop a new "kinship" network. Families separated for safety reasons have to make difficult determinations about how or if they can have safe interactions or reunions.

- **The family as a whole** provides resources to meet the basic needs of each family member (safety, love, food, shelter, health, education, etc.) and support the family's well-being and day-to-day functioning. Traumatic circumstances often drain families of resources, such as time, money and energy, interfering with growing, learning and working. The burdens often associated with trauma (e.g. costly court proceedings, moving to a new home, changing schools, etc.) result in cascading effects such as loss of income, as well as the time to spend with family and friends. When trauma limits access to needed resources and social support, families have difficulty carrying out daily routines and sustaining important traditions that bind them together.

### How can providers support families impacted by trauma?

Growing awareness of trauma's impact on families – including the important roles families play in helping children recover, highlights the importance of putting families at the center of trauma services. When families carry out routines, rituals and traditions, they strengthen their connections and grow stronger together. Talking, laughing, sharing memories and feelings, as well as working together to solve problems, manage stress and plan for each day and the future are necessary for resilience and recovery from traumatic stress. If families experience numerous or ongoing traumas, resources diminish and the “wear and tear” effect on health and well-being may call for family informed trauma services, in addition to resources for recovery and ongoing healing. Providers who actively engage primary, biological, extended, kinship, birth and foster families and work with professionals in other child and family serving systems are better partners in the delivery of family-centered, trauma-informed services.

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