

OVERCOMING TRAUMA AS A FAMILY



According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, a traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens the life or security of a loved one can also be traumatic. Like natural disasters, pandemics can be a source of extreme stress and trauma for children and adults alike. In fact, it is likely that the stress adults feel as a result of this coronavirus crisis will be mirrored in their children. So, how do we begin to recognize trauma not only in ourselves, but also in our children and put in place practices and routines to overcome it?

To answer this question, it is important to understand how stress and trauma show up across different age-groups. How your 5-year old responds to traumatic events will be very different from how your 12 and 17-year old respond. Here are some signs to look out for:

Age Range	Common Reactions + Signs	How to Help
Infants to age 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased crying • Fear of being alone • Need to be held or cuddled more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience and tolerance • Engage in play and soothing activities • Provide verbal and physical reassurance (hugs, age-appropriate explanations of what’s going on)
Preschool (< age 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being alone • Nightmares • Speech difficulties /loss of words / extreme quietness • Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bed-wetting • Change in appetite and sleep patterns • Increased temper tantrums and whining • Attachment issues /clinginess 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience and tolerance • Provide verbal and physical reassurance (hugs, discussions, answer questions) • Use role-play and storytelling as a strategy to get your child to work through their challenges • Plan activities that are calming, especially before bedtime • Maintain regular family routines • Monitor eat and sleep habits and try to regulate as much as possible • Avoid excessive media exposure and limit screen time (television, apps, etc.)

Age Range	Common Reactions + Signs	How to Help
Ages 6-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased feelings of sadness, fear, and anxiety • Trouble focusing on tasks / forgetfulness • Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior • Change in appetite and sleep patterns • Tiredness, withdrawal from family and friends, and loss of interest • Headaches, stomach aches, etc. • Competition for parents' attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience and tolerance • Provide verbal and physical reassurance (hugs, discussions, answer questions) • Allow your child to connect with peers and family members virtually or over the phone when possible • Engage your child in regular exercise, meditation, and mindfulness activities (e.g., breathing and yoga) • Continue routines and establish new ones as needed • Set gentle but firm limits • Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation • Monitor eat and sleep habits and try to regulate as much as possible • Avoid excessive media exposure and limit screen time (television, apps, etc.)
Adolescents (13-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased feelings of sadness, fatigue, and anxiety • Trouble focusing on tasks • Aggressive or violent behavior • Increased irritability • Change in appetite and sleep patterns • Withdrawal from family and friends, loss of interest • Physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, rashes) • Destructive behavior (e.g., substance use, cutting school when in session, reckless driving) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience and tolerance • Provide verbal and physical reassurance (hugs, discussions, answer questions) • Allow your child to connect with peers and family members virtually or over the phone when possible • Engage your child in regular exercise, meditation, and mindfulness activities (e.g., breathing and yoga) • Continue routines and establish new ones as needed • Set gentle but firm limits • Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation

Children with special needs may demonstrate some of the same symptoms described above; however, they may feel more distress or anger than children without special needs who may have more control over their daily activities. As a result, they may need more reassurance, comfort, and additional explanations about what's going on.

While feelings of distress may melt away over time, they can return, especially if your child is directly exposed to the traumatic event. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, we are all feeling a bit of trauma because of school and work closings, canceled events, job losses, and being cooped up from social distancing, to name a few. If your child has experienced trauma in the past, it is also important to recognize that the feelings and behaviors associated with the previous event can come back. We encourage you to create as much space as possible to talk to your child about how they are feeling, why they are feeling it, and what they need to feel safe. Giving your child an opportunity to use their voice and be part of the solution can empower them and provide them with some level of control over the situation. You can also reach out to local resources such as a school counselor, therapist, or your primary care provider. If you need additional help, feel free to check out these resources:

- SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline: Call **1-800-985-5990** or text **TalkWithUS 66746**
- <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html>
- https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf
- Call **311** to learn about support services in your local area