

Child Reactions to Trauma

Children can react to traumatic events in lots of different ways. They might have symptoms of depression, anxiety, dissociation, or even Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their caregivers may have trouble coping with those events and their children's reactions too! When caregivers have some knowledge of what to expect from their children they will be better prepared to help their family cope. This handout explains some common child responses to trauma.

Fear and Anxiety:

These are the most common symptoms in children who have experienced a traumatic event. Anxiety symptoms can include hyperactivity, and difficulty concentrating, looking a lot like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Fear symptoms can include the child being unusually fearful around bedtime or bathing.



Aggression:

Abused children are often aggressive, angry, and hostile, especially if they experienced physical abuse or witnessed violence.



Sexualized behaviors:

Children who are victims of sexual abuse may exhibit sexualized behaviors. This means that in their play, they show signs of knowing too much about sex.



Difficulty Relating to Others:

Traumatized children may have trouble with relationships and maintaining appropriate boundaries. For example, traumatized children may be very aggressive towards others, or they may be very clingy, demanding a lot of attention.

Avoiding:

Sometimes, children will try to avoid thinking about or doing anything that might remind them of a traumatic event. They might seem sad and withdrawn or seem extra "happy" because their avoidance is working, temporarily.

PTSD symptoms:

These symptoms include strange behavior, staring off into space for no reason, and hallucinating and/or flashbacks. All of these are symptoms of traumatic stress.

