

Talking with Children About Traumatic Events: Tips and a Toolkit

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Objectives

- Participants will
 - Understand the potential impact of traumatic events on children;
 - Discuss screening methods for identifying children and families that are experiencing distress from traumatic events;
 - Discuss tips for talking with children and families about traumatic events

Definition of Trauma

- Trauma is any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning.
 - Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical.
 - Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

Three Main Types of Trauma

- **Acute** trauma results from a single incident.
- **Chronic** trauma is repeated and prolonged such as domestic violence or abuse.
- **Complex** trauma is exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature.

Developmental Issues

- **Preschool (1-5)**
 - Regression
 - Fears (of dark, monsters, etc
 - Clinginess and separation problems
 - Physical complaints, changes in eating and sleeping
 - Disobedience, hyperactivity, aggression, withdrawal

Developmental Issues

- **Childhood (5-11)**
 - Withdrawal
 - Fear of going to school or dropping academic performance
 - Compete for attention of parents
 - Poor concentration
 - Aggression
 - Regression
 - Nightmares

Developmental Issues

- **Adolescence (12-14)**
 - Physical complaints
 - Abandon responsibilities (homework, chores, etc)
 - Withdrawal, resist authority, disruptiveness, high-risk behaviors (drugs, etc)
 - Compete for adult attention, but resent feeling controlled

Identification of Childhood Trauma

- **Children may not disclose traumatic events for fear of negative reactions or retribution.**
 - One should have a high index of suspicion if a child presents with a significant change in their emotional state or behaviors.

CTS

Child Report (Age 6-17)

1

Child Name/ID: _____ Age: _____ Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

Administered By: _____ Date Completed: _____

2

EVENTS: Sometimes, scary or very upsetting things happen to people.

These things can sometimes affect what we think, how we feel, and what we do.

	Yes	No
1. Have you ever seen people pushing, hitting, throwing things at each other, or stabbing, shooting, or trying to hurt each other?	☐	☐
2. Has someone ever really hurt you? Hit, punched, or kicked you really hard with hands, belts, or other objects, or tried to shoot or stab you?	☐	☐
3. Has someone ever touched you on the parts of your body that a bathing suit covers, in a way that made you uncomfortable? Or had you touch them in that way?	☐	☐
4. Has anything else very upsetting or scary happened to you (loved one died, separated from loved one, been left alone for a long time, not had enough food to eat, serious accident or illness, fire, dog bite, bullying)? <i>What was it?</i>	☐	☐

3

REACTIONS: Sometimes scary or upsetting events affect how people think, feel, and act. The next questions ask how you have been feeling and thinking recently.

How often did each of these happen in the <u>last 30 days</u> ?	Never/ Rarely	1-2 times per month	1-2 times per week	3+ times per week
5. Strong feelings in your body when you remember something that happened (sweating, heart beats fast, feel sick).	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐
6. Try to stay away from people, places, or things that remind you about something that happened.	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐
7. Trouble feeling happy.	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐
8. Trouble sleeping.	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐
9. Hard to concentrate or pay attention.	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐
10. Feel alone and not close to people around you.	0 ☐	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐

PTSD

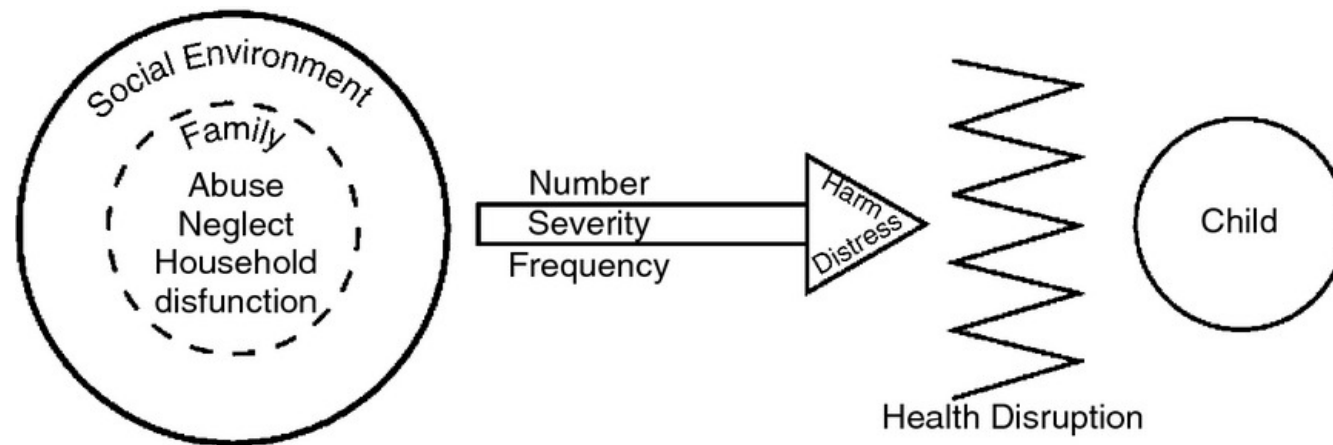
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) results in
 - Heightened amygdala activation
 - Reduced activity in the Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (vmPFC) and the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC)
 - Reduced hippocampal volume, resulting in hyperarousal and difficulties with fear processing.

Brain changes associated with trauma

- Maltreatment and Abuse Chronology of Exposure [MACE] scale) was tied to hyper- and hypoactive amygdala responses in young adulthood after childhood trauma
- Amygdala– fight, flight, freeze reactions
- Pre-pubertal children: reduced amygdala response to threat.
 - disinhibition and impaired social judgment, such as in substance use and conduct disorders.
- Post-pubertal children: increased amygdala response to threat.
 - anxiety and inhibition, as in PTSD, and phobias

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Adverse childhood experiences: towards a clear conceptual meaning



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Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

After a Public Traumatic Event (e.g. School Shooting)

- Find out what they know
 - Correct misconceptions
 - Offer concrete information using developmentally appropriate language
 - Admit if you don't know answers
 - Let parents know to monitor children's exposure to traumatic media, etc
- Encourage children to share their feelings
 - What do you mean by--?
 - How have you been feeling about that?
- Share your feelings
 - In a limited way.
 - You seem sad about this. I feel sad, too.

Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

Following a Known Trauma that Happened to Child/Family

- Initiate the conversation (ask-tell-ask)
 - How do you feel about what happened? Let me know if you want to talk?
- Listen calmly
 - What do you mean by--?
 - How have you been feeling about that?
- Validate Feelings
 - That must have been very scary.
 - Other children I treat sometimes have trouble sleeping or get stomach aches after bad things happen. How about you?
 - You seem to be blaming yourself. Other children I treat sometimes feel the same way. I want you to know that this is not your fault.
- Reassure
 - Supports and who will be there for them– they are safe
 - They can ask questions at any time

Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

Following a Screener that Is Positive for Trauma– family does not know

- Initiate the conversation– review the limits of confidentiality
 - You marked down on the form that someone has touched you on your body where a bathing suit covers. Have you let any adults know about that?
 - I'm very sorry that this happened. Do you feel comfortable telling me about it?
- Listen calmly
 - What do you mean by--?
 - Ask details about where, when, who?
 - Be very careful not to ask questions or say things that could influence an investigation of the child's abuse.
- Validate Feelings
 - That must have been very scary.

• Validate Feelings

Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

Following a Screener that Is Positive for Trauma– family does not know

- Initiate the conversation– review the limits of confidentiality
 - You marked down on the form that someone has touched you on your body where a bathing suit covers. Have you let any adults know about that?
 - I'm very sorry that this happened. Do you feel comfortable telling me about it?
- Listen calmly
 - What do you mean by--?
 - Ask details about where, when, who?
 - Non-judgmental and understanding about the child's non-disclosure about the event
 - Be very careful not to ask questions or say things that could influence an investigation of the child's abuse.
- Validate Feelings
 - That must have been very scary.

Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

Following a Screener that Is Positive for Trauma– family does not know

- If the patient says that a person touched them inappropriately, review the fact that you need to let adults know so that they can keep them safe.
 - Use developmentally appropriate language
 - Validate feelings and an understanding of why they may not have wanted to tell adults
 - Optimize patient autonomy, as appropriate
- We need to let your mother know what happened. Do you want to let her know and I am here to support you?
- To parent: Your child told me about a situation that happened that was really upsetting. As you know, they never want to cause any trouble or hurt feelings, so they didn't tell anyone. But it is something that you need to know about.
- To patient: “How can I help you tell your mother?”

Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

Following a Screener that Is Positive for Trauma– family does not know

- Ensure the patient is not pushed to say more than they are ready to say.
- Make a plan:
 - Safety
 - DCF report
 - Supportive adults
 - Re-iterate that it is not the child's fault

Other Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

- Focus on the good
 - Look for helpers
 - There are good people all around you
- Encourage children to act
 - Ask to set up group for divorcing families
 - Get involved with safe schools initiatives
- Seek outside help when needed
 - Symptoms are not resolving and/or are increasing
 - Child's functioning is decreasing

The ACCESS-Mental Health Trauma Resources

- <https://www.accessmhct.com>