Preschool reactions after a traumatic event

What to notice and when to seek help • Ages 3 to 5

Young children often show stress through behavior rather than words. Many reactions ease with time, safety, and support. A change does not automatically mean your child needs therapy. Notice what is new or different for your child.

Changes you may notice

Clinginess and hard goodbyes
Wanting you close, following you around, or becoming more upset at preschool drop-off or bedtime.

Regression
Returning to baby talk, toileting accidents, or needing help with skills they had already learned.

Sleep and eating changes
Trouble falling asleep, waking more, nightmares, or changes in appetite and mealtime habits.

Bigger feelings or withdrawal
More tears, irritability, tantrums, or hitting. Some children become quieter or less interested in play.

New fears and body complaints
Worry about safety, startling easily, avoiding reminders, or more headaches and stomachaches.

Changes in play and questions
Repeating scary themes in play, asking the same questions, or worrying the event will happen again.

Look at the pattern

Notice how strong reactions are, how often they happen, whether they are easing, and how much they affect daily life. Ask other caregivers what they notice. Reactions can come and go. Play about the event alone does not mean treatment is needed.

When to reach out

Contact your child's pediatrician or a therapist experienced with young children and trauma if reactions worsen, disrupt sleep, eating, play, preschool, or relationships, or are not beginning to ease over the next few weeks.

You can ask for help at any time. A consultation can guide monitoring, brief support, or treatment.

Get prompt help if your child cannot manage basic needs or you cannot keep them safe. Call or text 988, or contact your child's pediatrician or an urgent care clinic. New or significant physical symptoms need medical attention. For immediate danger or a medical emergency, call 911.

Sources: National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Preschool Children and Early Childhood Trauma; American Academy of Pediatrics, Behavioral Health Initiatives.