Protective Factors: What Helps Children Recover After a Traumatic Event

Many parents wonder, “Will my child develop PTSD?” Most children don’t. Strong reactions after a traumatic event are normal, and many things help children recover, including much of what parents already do.

Every child’s path is different

Though all of the children were affected by the same event, they will have different experiences in the months to come. The impact of trauma is shaped by several factors:

Level of exposure. Directly experiencing or witnessing an event generally increases risk.

Previous experiences. Prior trauma, anxiety, or other mental health concerns may increase vulnerability.

Developmental stage. Age and development influence how children understand events.

Caregiver responses. Children often look to trusted adults to understand danger and safety.

Social support. Strong relationships with caregivers, friends, teachers, and community promote resilience.

Ongoing stressors. Continued uncertainty, disruptions, or exposure to reminders may affect recovery.

Beliefs that predict recovery

- **Optimism:** having hope about the future.
- **Predictability:** believing that life is generally predictable.
- **Positive expectations:** believing that things will turn out reasonably well.
- **Trust in outside systems:** believing that institutions and other sources of support will act in one’s best interests.
- **Religious or spiritual faith:** having strong faith-based beliefs.
- **Positive personal beliefs:** believing good outcomes are possible for oneself.
- **Access to resources:** having practical resources such as stable housing, employment, and financial support.

In crisis? Call or text 988. Emergency: 911.

Protective factors after a trauma

These factors help protect children after a traumatic event. Parents can strengthen many of them.

Protective factor	How you can help build it
Calmer reactions in parents and children	Take care of your own reactions, stay steady, and show your child how you cope with big feelings.
Strong social support	Keep up time with friends, family, teachers, and community. Allow playdates and extracurriculars.
Good coping skills	Help your child name and calm their emotions, and use familiar comforts that already work for them.
Strong family coping and communication	Be available to talk without forcing it. Spend one-on-one time together and focus on connection.
Limited time spent talking about the event and exposure to media	Limit news, social media, and upsetting conversations around your child.

Have hope. Children are amazingly resilient.

For many of us, this feels worse for parents than it does for children. Even though this was traumatic, many children will not need therapy because of this event. Be strong for your children, but also seek support for yourself, and focus on the supports and connections arising in our community.

Concerned about your child? Our therapist directory can help you find a licensed clinician: bendresilienceproject.com/providers/. Our other handouts for parents are at bendresilienceproject.com/resources/.