

Supporting children after a traumatic event

WHAT TO WATCH FOR AND WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT



After a traumatic event, it is normal for children to have strong emotional, physical, and behavioral reactions. Most children will improve over time with the support of caring adults, a sense of safety, and a return to routines. Some children, however, may need additional support from a mental health professional. This guide can help you know what to look for.



Common early reactions

IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

The following reactions are common and often decrease over time. They do not necessarily mean that your child needs formal treatment.

- Feeling sad, anxious, or scared
- Increased clinginess or needing reassurance
- Irritability, anger, or emotional outbursts
- Changes in sleep (trouble falling asleep, nightmares)
- Changes in appetite
- More difficulty with concentration
- Wanting to talk about the event or ask questions repeatedly
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Temporary regression (e.g., bedwetting, needing help with routines)



Reactions can look different at different ages

EXAMPLES OF COMMON RESPONSES

PRESCHOOL (0–5)

Clinginess, regression (e.g., bedwetting), play that repeats aspects of the event, fears, changes in eating or sleeping.

SCHOOL-AGE (6–12)

Anxiety, sadness, irritability, physical complaints, trouble concentrating, questions about safety, changes in behavior.

TEENS (13–18)

Withdrawal, mood changes, sleep problems, anger, risk-taking, increased substance use, difficulty with school, feeling hopeless.



Signs to monitor over time

THAT MAY INDICATE A NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If your child shows any of the following symptoms that are intense, persist for more than a few weeks, or interfere with daily life, consider reaching out to a mental health professional for further evaluation.



EMOTIONAL CHANGES

Ongoing or worsening anxiety, sadness, fear, irritability, or mood swings.



SLEEP PROBLEMS

Persistent trouble falling or staying asleep, frequent nightmares, or fear of being alone.



BEHAVIOR CHANGES

Increased aggression, defiance, risk-taking, or significant changes in behavior at home or school.



THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Ongoing intrusive thoughts or worries about the event, appearing “on edge,” or strong startle reactions.



SOCIAL CHANGES

Withdrawing from friends and family, loss of interest in activities they usually enjoy, or difficulty connecting with others.



SCHOOL IMPACT

Ongoing difficulty with concentration, memory, attendance, or a noticeable decline in academic performance.



When and how to seek additional support

Consider reaching out to a pediatrician, school counselor, or mental health professional if your child:

- Shows the signs listed above and they persist for more than a few weeks
- Are getting in the way of school, friendships, or family life
- Seem to be worsening over time rather than improving
- Expresses thoughts of not wanting to be alive or wanting to harm themselves
- You are worried about their safety, emotional well-being, or ability to cope

Trust your instincts.
If something feels
“not right,” it’s okay
to ask for help.



Early support can help children recover and build resilience.