

# Trauma and Development

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Did you know that 90 percent of a child's brain is developed by the time she is 3 years old? We learn fastest when we are young. Yet many people think that babies are too young to be affected by bad experiences. In fact, the opposite is true. The younger a child is when she experiences trauma, the more at risk she is for social and emotional difficulties later in life. Understanding the effects of trauma on brain development is important whether you are working with children or teens. No matter the age of the traumatized young person, the effects are often evident even in adulthood.

## The Developing Brain

When a child or teen has any experience, a connection is made in the brain. The brain grows as it makes connections.

- Connections become stronger when they are repeated. For example, if a baby cries and his mother soothes him every time, the baby learns to trust her. The trust connection is strong.
- Connections become weaker or disappear when they are not repeated. For example, if a baby cries and her mother only soothes her some of the time, the baby does not learn to trust her mother. The trust connection is not strong.

There are very important times in the brain's development. This means that the brain is ready to learn a skill at a certain time. If that skill is not taught or experienced at that best time, it becomes harder to learn that skill. The child can still learn the skill, but it will be more difficult to make the connections.

## What Does Trauma Do to the Developing Brain?

A child or teen can be traumatized in many ways. Abuse and neglect cause trauma. So do abandonment, natural disasters, and war. What is common is that the child or teen feels helpless, overwhelmed, and afraid.

When a child whose brain is developing experiences a lot of trauma, the strong connections repeated in the brain are about staying safe no matter what. The connections for healthy relationships, healthy emotions, and learning are weaker or may not be developed at all.

Children or teens who have experienced a lot of trauma may not have the brain connections needed to develop in a healthy way. They may have learning difficulties. They may struggle with relationships because the trust connections have not been made. They may have trouble controlling their emotions.

If caring adults can provide these children and teens with healthy experiences, places of safety, and consistent structure, these young people have a chance to begin to make healthy connections and develop as they should.