

Resource Article

Trauma

Janette Pepall

Trauma is anything that makes children or teens feel worthless, unlovable, and insecure. They may be traumatized by physical or mental abuse, the death of a parent, a natural disaster, being placed in foster care, or even being adopted.

The Ability to Cope

Coping abilities vary widely, especially among children and teens. There is no typical way young people handle trauma. There are many factors that can influence their ability to cope. These include:

- Temperament and intelligence
- Parental relationships and other support
- The independence level
- Involvement in hobbies, sports, and church
- The age when the trauma took place
- The event that caused the trauma and its frequency. For example, sexual abuse over many years may traumatize a child or teen more than a flood that destroyed her home.

Who or what the stressor was. For example, if a child was sexually abused by her father, it may affect her differently than if she had been sexually abused by a stranger.

Important Things to Know about Traumatized Children and Teens

Children and teens cannot cope with trauma as well as adults can. They often cannot identify their emotions or put them into words. They may show their trauma through poor behavior, aggressiveness, or withdrawal.

Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

- Poor appetite or overeating
- Constant loose feces
- Poor sleep patterns or nightmares
- Not thinking before acting
- Not responding to touch, sound, and smell
- Frequent illnesses
- Poor skin color
- Return to younger behaviors, such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting
- Repetitive movements, such as rocking or head-banging
- Unexplained fear
- Extreme temper tantrums
- Aggressive or disruptive behaviors
- In infants, constant crying, clenched fists, or arching of back

- Reluctance to explore the environment
- Reliving the event in play, games, or art
- Masturbation
- Soiling or wetting underclothes or bed
- Skipping school or disobedience at school
- In older children, substance abuse, promiscuity, suicidal tendencies, self-mutilation, or poor relationships.

Strategies for Working with Children or Teens in Trauma

- Pray for and with the child or teen.
- Encourage the child or teen to express her thoughts and feelings. (Be sure to respect what is shared.)
- Be understanding of poor behavior, but do not approve of it.
- When appropriate, give physical comfort, such as smiles and hugs.
- Do not make unrealistic promises, such as “Soon you will be better.” This may not be true, which may cause you to lose the child’s trust.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Ensure predictability.
- Model appropriate behaviors, such as controlling anger and practicing forgiveness.
- Whenever possible, plan earlier bedtimes and quiet times.

When working with traumatized children or teens in orphanages or group homes, have individual care plans so all adults can understand the unique needs of each child or teen. This should include training on trauma. When appropriate, speak with the other children and teens in the home about how the traumatized child or teen might be feeling. If nothing seems to be effective, seek additional help. Do not give up.

Children and teens in trauma need to know they are safe. They must learn to trust again. This will take extra commitment, energy, patience, and grace from you. Over time, these young people, who are so precious to their Heavenly Father, can reach their God-given potential.