

PARENT Talk



Childhood Trauma

We'd like to think that incidents of childhood trauma happen infrequently, and the effects pass quickly. Sadly, that's often not the case. When trauma affects your child, recognizing the symptoms and knowing how to respond to them can make the difference between them experiencing a relatively short-term event with resiliency or experiencing the effects physically and or emotionally for years to come. When the memories, feelings and physical responses to a trauma stay strong for at least a month, we call that traumatic stress. Traumatic stress can lead to health and mental health problems throughout life, affecting our behavior, feelings, relationships, and our view of the world.

What causes trauma? And what happens to us when faced with trauma?

Trauma can occur from an event or set of events that are physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and have long-lasting adverse effects on the ability to function and affect physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Exposure to these events activates our body's warning and protective system – the fight or flight response. Our body reacts both physically and mentally. Our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure goes up, and chemicals are released in our body to prepare us for the fight or flight response. We become very alert and responsive to the danger right in front of us. The fight or flight response is activated without our making a conscious decision, and usually goes away after the danger passes.

What can the reaction to a trauma look like in children?

These are some of the reactions you might see – each child can react differently depending upon their age and particular situation.

- Becoming anxious or fearful
- Feeling guilt or shame
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Feelings of depression or being alone
- Eating disorders
- Self-harming activities
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse
- Engaging in risky sexual behavior
- A loss of verbal, nonverbal, and social abilities

Adverse Childhood Experiences or Traumatic Events can include:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Intimate partner violence
- Mother treated violently
- Substance misuse within household
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

What can I do?

You can take steps now to help your child develop resiliency, or the ability to return to being healthy and hopeful after experiencing a trauma by:

- Caring for and nurturing your relationship with them.
- Pay attention to their physical, emotional, and social needs.
- Building social connections with family, friends, teachers, and the community.
- Learn about how children grow and develop, and how to parent them in a healthy way.
- Teach and help them to build healthy and strong social and emotional skills.
- Taking care of yourself and your own resiliency.

If you need professional help, you can contact GHS' Access Center and 24-hour Crisis Line at 810.257.3740. We're here for you.