



# Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

Children who have experienced trauma often feel fearful and unsafe, both physically and emotionally. Your support can help reduce the fear and safety concerns. Here are some ways you can support a traumatized child.

**Make yourself available to talk about the traumatic event** - When children are afraid that adults are upset about the event, they probably will not bring it up. However, encouraging children "not thinking about it" or to "put it out of their minds" makes recovery more difficult.

- Don't bring it up on your own.
- When the child brings it up be willing to listen, to answer questions, and to provide comfort and support.
- Try not to avoid or over-react to the subject.

**Provide a consistent, predictable pattern for the day** - Children feel safe when they know what to expect during the day and can trust that adults are "in control."

- Make sure the child knows the pattern.
- If the day includes new or different activities, tell the child beforehand and explain why this day is different.
- If you feel overwhelmed, irritable or anxious, help the child understand why and tell them that these feelings are normal and will pass

**Be nurturing, comforting, and affectionate when appropriate** - For children traumatized by physical or sexual abuse, intimacy is often associated with confusion, pain, fear and abandonment.

- Provide hugs, kisses and other physical comfort to younger children when they seek it.
- Do not interrupt the child's play or other activities by grabbing them and holding them.
- Abused children take commands very seriously. Telling them to "give me a kiss" or "give me a hug" makes them more likely to associate intimacy/physical comfort with power.

**Discuss your expectations for behavior and your "style of discipline" with the child** - Clear rules and understanding what will happen if they break rules can help the child feel safe.

- Make sure the child understands what you want them to do and what will happen if they don't follow rules.
- When applying discipline: be consistent, use flexibility to illustrate reason and understanding, utilize positive reinforcement and rewards, and avoid physical punishment.

## **Tell the child age-appropriate information**

- Things that are unknown or not predictable can make a child feel anxious and fearful. This will increase impulsive, anxious and aggressive behaviors, and children are more likely to have problems with sleep and moods.
- Answering questions about who, what, where, why and how the adult world works will help a child feel less fearful.
- It is okay if you don't know the answer. Your honesty and openness will help the child develop trust, even when it is a difficult issue.

**Be patient when children imitate or “re-live” traumatic experiences** - Many children seem withdrawn, fearful, anxious, impulsive and/or over-reactive for many years after the trauma.

- When you see these symptoms, it is likely that the child has had some reminder of the event, either through thoughts or experiences.
- Offer comfort and be patient with the child's emotional and behavioral problems.
- These symptoms will come and go, sometimes for no reason that you can see. Write down (in a calendar or journal) the behaviors and emotions you see and look for patterns.

**Protect the child** - Interrupt or stop activities which are upsetting or re-traumatizing for the child.

- If a child gets upset in certain situations or following exposure to specific things (movies, people, activities, etc) avoid those things when you can.
- Try to change or limit activities that upset the traumatized child.

**Give the child "choices"** - If a child is given some choices or some control during an activity or interactions with an adult, they will feel more safe and comfortable and will be able to feel, think and act in a more 'mature' fashion.

- Children (especially those who have experience trauma) may behavior poorly when they feel like they do not have control of a situation.
- When a child is having difficulty following your rules, explain the 'consequence' as a choice for them: "You have a choice: you can choose to do what I have asked or you can choose something else, which you know is . . ." Again, this simple framing of the interaction with the child gives them some sense of control and can help defuse situations where the child feels out of control and therefore, anxious.

**If you have questions, ask for help** - These suggestions can help you support a traumatized child. Knowledge is power; the more informed you are, the more you understand the child, the better you can provide them with the support, nurturance and guidance they need.

Adapted from Dr. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

**[www.catalystdvservices.org](http://www.catalystdvservices.org)  
1-800-895-8476**