

»»» A RESOURCE FOR FAMILIES «««

Recognizing and understanding children's responses to trauma

The West Virginia Infant/Toddler Mental Health Association



Each child is born ready to form a strong bond with a primary caregiver, usually a parent. For babies, this is a critical element to survival. A baby depends on an adult to help facilitate every basic physical need—eating, sleeping, and staying clean and dry—AND babies also depend on their primary caregiver for their emotional needs.

Unlike the bone structure of a baby, the brain is not yet fully developed before birth. A significant amount of brain development occurs after birth during the first few years of life. This development is based on the interactions with the adults around them and the environment.

If the baby is experiencing a nurturing and responsive relationship with adults, this will positively shape how the child's brain will grow and develop. By consistently and promptly

responding to a baby's cry with a warm, soothing hug, or responding to the child's need with a smile and gentle touch, the child will learn to trust and regulate emotions. Over time this will lead to school readiness, positive social behavior, and lifelong nurturing relationships.

But sometimes, young children are not able to experience these critical nurturing and responsive relationships with adults, whether through the result of divorce, incarceration of a parent, domestic violence, substance use, removal from the home, stable housing challenges, parental mental illness, disasters, or other circumstances. These experiences can alter a child's brain development and lead to children who are unable to develop or maintain healthy relationships, handle stress, succeed in school, and have the foundation for healthy development and growth into adulthood.

Behaviors that children with trauma histories may exhibit

Trauma is the emotional response to a frightening or threatening event.

- May experience emotions that are intense and confusing
- May react more aggressively or defensively to people of authority or unfamiliar situations
- May appear unpredictable
- May appear unusually easy going to authority
- May appear distant or disengaged
- May participate in high-risk behaviors or engage in risk-taking behaviors
- May have difficulty expressing and controlling emotions
- May appear to “overreact” to situations
- May complain of stomachaches or headaches
- May appear overly sensitive to sounds, smells, or touch
- May become easily overwhelmed with little tasks
- May always appear fearful
- May have trouble problem-solving or reasoning
- May have trouble taking turns and following simple instructions
- May have difficulty reading emotional signals from others
- May find it difficult to be soothed or calmed
- May fall back to earlier behaviors
- May have underdeveloped verbal skills
- May appear to cry, be irritated, or scream excessively
- May appear to have a lack of appetite, low weight, or feeding difficulties
- May have trouble falling or staying asleep, or experiencing nightmares
- May have a lack of eye contact or trouble talking with others



Strategies for supporting young children

Start building a nurturing relationship through consistent, warm, and supportive interactions with the child. Recognize and understand how your own experiences (or trauma) could be impacting your relationship. Adults can model what it looks like to have healthy relationships by patiently listening and responding to the child and meeting the child’s physical (food, clothing, shelter, and health care) and emotional needs in a timely manner.

Recognize and understand that a child who has experienced trauma may develop and display behaviors or “act out” in ways that are challenging. Because infants and toddlers lack the verbal skills to talk about their experiences, their responses to trauma may be expressed through behavior and physical symptoms. These behaviors should not be taken personally by the supportive adult. Providing a sense of shared calm for the child will be helpful in building long term self-regulation skills.

Create a sense of predictability for the child through consistent routines, transitions, and rules. A consistent routine over time will be important.

Build up your community by connecting with family and friends who can help support you and the child.

Learn more about child development and how to support children’s growth in healthy ways. Seek resources that share tools and skills on reading cues, rebuilding attachment, supporting emotional regulation, breathing/self-soothing exercises, and developing a plan for self-care. It is important to remember that trauma can impact a child’s whole life. Don’t get frustrated if you don’t see immediate change or improvement.

Name and identify emotions for children until they are able to do so. Talking about emotions, what they are and what they feel like, will help the child learn to identify emotions. It is also important for children to have time and a safe place with a nurturing adult to practice how to handle big emotions.

Seek the help of professionals when behaviors worsen or development is being affected. Counseling and therapy professionals can offer more intensive services.



Resources

West Virginia Birth to Three (www.wvdhhr.org/birth23/)

West Virginia Home Visitation (www.wvdhhr.org/wvhomevisitation/)

West Virginia Help Me Grow (<https://dhhr.wv.gov/helpmegrow/>)

West Virginia Connections (wvconnections.findhelp.com)

1-2-3 Care Toolkit (srhd.org/1-2-3-care-toolkit)

ACES 101 (<http://acestoohigh.com/aces-101/>)

West Virginia Infant/Toddler Mental Health Association
(www.nurturingwvbabies.org)