

TRAUMA INFORMED CHILD DEVELOPMENT



WHAT IS TRAUMA?

A child witnessing or experiencing an event that poses a perceived threat to the life or well being of the child or someone close to the child (such as a parent or sibling). The event overwhelms the child's ability to cope and causes feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror, which may be expressed by disorganized or agitated behavior ([National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)).

TYPES AND CAUSES OF TRAUMA IN CHILDREN

- **Acute:** exposure to a single traumatic event that is limited in duration.
- **Chronic:** exposure to multiple events over time that has a cumulative effect.
- **Complex:** both the exposure to multiple events occurring over time and the long-term impacts of these events on a child's development.
- **Historical:** the collective and cumulative wounding of a group of people across the lifespan and generations, resulting from large-scale cataclysm or historical conditions.

KEY FACTORS OF TRAUMA THAT AFFECT DEVELOPMENT

The earlier and more pervasive the trauma, the more devastating the impact.

- **Timing:** At what age did trauma occur?
- **Nature:** What type of trauma occurred? The nature of the trauma experience will shape the nature of the trauma response.
- **Pattern:** Was the trauma a single incident, a regularly occurring event, or an event that occurred in a chaotic pattern?

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

- Feelings of vulnerability and helplessness.
- Flinching, crying, attempts to hide.
- Sudden strong outbursts or tantrums.
- Acting out the traumatic events in their play.

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

- Create an environment that is as safe as possible.
- Learn the child's story.
- Look for patterns.
- Allow for avoidance.
- Provide tools to manage a child's reaction.
- Don't be surprised or impatient.
- Anticipate anniversaries.
- Offer reassurance and comfort.
- Be self-aware.
- Seek professional consultation.

"There's been an unusual amount of trauma that has happened to Indian people and there are very clear physiological as well as behavioral responses to trauma. Historical trauma is a critical perspective for understanding that."

— Dr. Ann Bullock, Cherokee, North Carolina

