



# Trauma

When a child or young person is traumatised, it affects the whole person – their mind, body, spirit and relationships with others.

## What's trauma?

**Childhood trauma is the result of an event, or series of events, that cause a child or young person to feel overwhelmed and pushed beyond their ability to cope.**

All children and young people experience events that affect them both emotionally and physically, but which don't necessarily lead to trauma. Reactions to these events are usually brief and individuals recover without further difficulties.

At other times, ordinary events that may not appear overwhelming from an adult's perspective can be very frightening for a child or young person. These can include separations, falls, accidents or invasive medical procedures. Some are overwhelming to almost any child or young person – for example, exposure to violence, physical and sexual abuse, or being forced to leave their home or country.

Some events can have an impact on children and young people, not only from direct exposure, but also by seeing and hearing about them in the media, via the internet or from adults around them.

Sometimes the effects of trauma are immediate and more obvious but on other occasions, the impact may take some time to appear.

## Different types of trauma

One way to understand trauma is to consider different types of trauma.

### Complex trauma

Complex trauma involves threats and violence between people – it can also be referred to as 'interpersonal trauma'. This type of trauma often involves a series of events and lasts longer than unexpected one-off traumatic events such as car accidents, house fires, freak accidents, cyclones and floods. Examples of complex trauma include child abuse, bullying, family violence, rape, war and imprisonment. Often, people who experience complex trauma feel unsupported, isolated and blamed, with a sense of shame and stigma.

### Developmental trauma

This term refers to the significant impact (physical, emotional and psychological) that ongoing exposure to traumatic events can have on a child and young person's development. Ongoing exposure to complex trauma can impact the development of a child's brain. If a child is growing up in an environment of risk and danger, the parts of the brain that manage danger are going to dominate, rather than the higher parts of the brain (that is, the

cortex, or 'thinking brain', which can only flourish when a child experiences safety and security).

Developmental trauma impacts the way a child or young person can manage their feelings and behaviour and can affect their ability to reach their full potential. Developmental trauma includes incidents when children and young people are neglected, abused or experience ongoing conflict between family members.

### **Intergenerational trauma**

Intergenerational trauma occurs when trauma is passed down from original survivors who directly experienced trauma onto future generations.

When people don't have the opportunity to recover from trauma, they can inadvertently pass it on through their behaviour. The transfer of trauma isn't limited to any racial, cultural or religious group, or socioeconomic level; however, research suggests it's most common in disadvantaged communities.

### **What makes an event traumatic?**

#### **Not all children and young people are affected in the same way by an event.**

Both the type of event and the way a child or young person responds to it contribute to whether or not they'll be traumatised by it. It's a child or young person's experience of the event, rather than the event itself, that makes it traumatic or not.

Whether a child or young person feels overwhelmed and completely out of control or like they had some agency during the incident impacts on their perception of the event as traumatic. Children and young people are also strongly influenced by their past experiences – the more stressful experiences in a person's life, often known as 'risk factors', the greater the chance they'll be traumatised by future events.

#### **Experiencing difficult events doesn't necessarily mean a child or young person will be traumatised.**

A child or young person's relationships, their feeling of safety, the presence of risk versus protective factors, and the personal meaning they attribute to the experience all influence their response.

## **References**

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## **External links**

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network – [Trauma](#)

Emerging Minds – [Trauma and the child](#)

Healing Foundation – [Intergenerational trauma](#)