



Supporting your child with trauma – some tips

What is trauma



Traumatic experiences are experiences that cause us to feel powerless, scared, unsafe and shocked. This could be a single event such as a traffic accident, could be a community trauma such as a pandemic, or be an ongoing experience such as domestic violence, bullying or discrimination. If your child has experienced trauma it can impact their sleep, they might be more emotional than usual, might be angry and easily irritated, feel physically ill, be confused and forgetful, their behaviour might seem irrational and they might be jumpy or have low mood. Trauma symptoms can look and feel different for different people and what is traumatic for one person might be experienced differently by someone else. The good news is that although lots of us experience some trauma at some time in our lives most of us will be just fine without needing any specialist help. There are lots of things you can do to support your child if they have experienced trauma.

First things first – keep yourself safe and secure



Your child's trauma might very well trigger your own previous experience of traumas. In order to provide the vital support to your child, you first need to look after yourself. Maybe you can try out all these top tips for yourself? Find strategies that help you look after yourself and lean on others who can support you.

Understand what has happened



The better we understand what has happened the better we will be able to make sense of it and process it. When we make sense of the trauma our brain is more able to move it from the 'conveyor belt' part of the brain to the 'store cupboard' part of the brain – which makes it easier for us to manage. So, talking through a traumatic event and being informed can be helpful.

Stay connected



Just being there for your child, being by their side, giving gentle reassurance and showing empathy and compassion is invaluable. Enabling your child to feel safe and secure is paramount. Focus on your child's strengths and achievements and praise their bravery. Ensure that your home is as safe and calm as possible.

Understand triggers



You might find that certain smells, noises, environments, or experiences trigger your child's trauma. Together, work out what the triggers are and see if you can reduce them (for example, reducing loud sudden noises). Sometimes triggers can seem quite obscure and this might need some detective work. If it isn't realistic to reduce the trigger, just being aware of the impact it can have can be helpful in itself. Your child might also see threats that other people don't see and therefore react to this perceived threat. For example, they might get into a fight if they thought another child was threatening them.

In the moment



You might find your child has flashbacks (where the memory of the trauma pops into their head and it's hard to get it out). They might feel out of control of their emotions and behaviour, or you might see them emotionally 'disappear' (as though they have gone into their own world and they can't see or hear you). If this happens, gently help them come back into the moment, you can do this by talking gently in a soothing voice, say their name regularly and tell them repeatedly that they are safe. You could help your child re-connect by using their senses – nice things to smell, taste, feel, hear and see. Some people find mindfulness a good way to stay in the moment, but it does take a bit of practice.

Find ways to calm down



You could help your child identify what helps them self-soothe. Different things work for different people so you might have to try out a few ideas. Some ideas are – doing a focused task like a jigsaw, crossword, knitting, catching a ball, painting your nails or colouring; doing relaxing activities like having a bubble bath, blowing bubbles, slow breathing, listening to music or having a hand massage; doing active things like running, skipping, dancing or baking a cake. What other self-soothing things could your child do?

Enable control



Can you help your child feel empowered and have control in some parts of their life? Can they have more responsibility to increase their self-worth? Having a clear routine can help your child feel more in control and helps create a calm environment. They may need to write things down if they are forgetful. Being informed about trauma can also help you all feel empowered.

Teamwork



Help others understand your child's needs, so your child can feel safe and secure in school as well as at home.

