Resources for Parents and Caregivers
Welcome, parents and caregivers to your section of the NCTSN [1] website!
You can play an important role in helping your children and teenagers recover from traumatic events. We have designed these pages for birth parents, adoptive parents, resource/foster parents, grandparents, caregivers, and all others who care for children and teens.

We are using the words "child" or "children" to include adolescents. Although teens may not think of themselves as children, parents and caregivers most often refer those of any age (toddler, school-age, teen, youth, adult) in our care as children. No matter how old they get, they are always our children!

“It’s all in your heart, what you want, and what you can do. You can overcome anything.”
- Quote from a mother of three

The more you learn about how traumatic events affect children, the more you will understand the reasons for your kids’ behaviors, and emotions, and the better prepared you will be to help them cope. When you let your children know that you and other caring adults are working to keep them safe, that you are there to support them, and that there are people who can help them with what they are feeling, most children who have traumatic stress can recover and go on to live healthy and productive lives. To learn more and access resources on families and trauma, click here [2].

What You Will Find in These Sections

- Definitions of trauma, traumatic events, and traumatic stress
- Answers to commonly asked questions about child traumatic stress
- Signs and symptoms of child traumatic stress
- Suggestions for ways to cope with child traumatic stress
- Advice on how and where to find help
- Information on evidence-based treatments (scientifically proven practices) that can assist families in helping children recover from child traumatic stress
- Links to resources to help children and families better understand what they are feeling when they (or someone close to them) has experienced a traumatic event
- Support to help children cope with their traumatic experiences

Trauma and Traumatic Events
Understanding Trauma

Parents want to protect their children from scary, dangerous, or violent events, but it is not always possible for them to protect their children from danger. After one or more traumatic events, many children do not just forget and move on. Those who develop reactions that continue and affect their daily lives—even after the traumatic events have ended—suffer from child traumatic stress.

Child traumatic stress happens when children experience traumatic events or situations that upset and overwhelm their ability to cope. When signs and symptoms interfere with daily life, a child is experiencing traumatic stress.

Not all children who experience a traumatic event will develop symptoms of child traumatic stress. Children’s reactions can vary depending on their age, developmental level, trauma history, and other factors.

What makes it likely that my child will develop child traumatic stress after a traumatic event?

Risk factors for developing child traumatic stress include:

**Severity of the Event**
How serious was the event? How badly were your children or someone they love physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were your children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die?

**Amount of Destruction Seen/Distance from Trauma Event**
Were your children actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did your child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened?

**Caregivers Reactions**
Did you believe that your child was telling the truth? Did you take your child’s reactions seriously? Did you respond to your child’s needs? Did you do your best to protect your child and make him or her feel safe? How did you cope with the event?

**Exposure to More than One Traumatic Event in the Past**
In general, children exposed to one traumatic event are less likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions.

**Children, Family and Community**
The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and/or resources that help lessen or eliminate risk and protect them against long-term harm. One of these protective factors can be the child’s cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience.
Parents Can Help

Parents Can Help

Children can and do recover from traumatic events. As parents, you play an important role in helping your children and your family cope with the stress reactions that can follow these events. Try to maintain a balanced perspective. On one hand, do take your child's reactions seriously. Don't say that “It wasn’t so bad.” Don't think “If we don’t make a big deal, she will forget all about it.” On the other hand, don’t decide that the trauma was so bad that your child will never recover. Instead, try to maintain a hopeful belief that your child will heal and that your family will recover from the event as well.

Family members may each react differently to a traumatic event that a child has experienced. Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that each of your family members may have a different reaction to a traumatic event. Reactions will differ, depending not only on the family member's age, developmental level, and own trauma history, but also on his or her relationship with the child and personal exposure to the event. For example, one may have shared the child’s experience, another may have witnessed it, still another may have heard about it after the fact. While all family members may be upset, only some will have posttraumatic stress reactions themselves; each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience.

While your world may feel changed forever after a traumatic event, you, your children and family members, and your community are more resilient than you might imagine. You do have a great ability to heal and return to feeling “normal” again. To learn more and access resources on families and trauma, click here [7].

What can my family do to recover?
You can help your family recover by doing the following:

- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Try not to push your child to “just get over it.” Instead, reassure him or her that they do not need to feel guilty or bad about any feelings or thoughts.
- Explain to your child that he or she is not responsible for what happened. Children often blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control.
- Assure your child that he or she is safe. Talk about the measures you are taking to keep him or her safe at home and about what measures his/her school is taking to ensure his or her safety at school.
When Should I Ask for Help from a Mental Health Provider?
There is no correct timetable for recovery. Some children/teens will recover quickly. Other children recover more slowly. Some families get better with time and the support of others. For families having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting their children's needs, trauma treatment from a mental health provider (i.e., psychotherapists such as psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists) is available to help your family seek safety, grow stronger, and recover. Not getting help can have long-lasting consequences but, fortunately, entering treatment can have concrete beneficial results.

“You can’t change the past, but you can do something with the present and prepare for the future. This is what really kept me going.”
- Quote from a mother of two

Getting Help

What kind of mental health provider do we need?
Many families first discuss their concerns with a family physician, school counselor, or clergy member, who may refer them to a specialist such as a child or adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist. Ask your pediatrician, family physician, school counselor, or clergy member for a referral to a mental health professional. Today, many family practitioners work with a team of providers, including mental health providers, and can refer you to someone they know and trust. Ask close family members and friends for their recommendations, especially if their child or adolescent has had a good experience with psychotherapy.

When seeking help for your child, you will want to try to find a mental health provider who meets these requirements:

- Has experience in helping families overcome traumatic stress
- Offers services near your home or is easy for you to get to
- Uses evidence-based practices (EBP), that is, treatments proven to help all members of the family:
  - Feel safe
  - Learn about trauma and its effects
  - Cope with difficulties caused by the trauma
  - Recognize and build on the family and family members’ strengths
  - Talk about ways to get the family back on track

How do I choose a therapist or counselor who's right for my family?
Resources

Page Contents:

- General Resources
- Childhood Traumatic Grief
- Children’s Books
- Domestic Violence
- Medical Trauma
- Military Children & Families
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Substance Abuse
- Terrorism and Disaster
- More Information and Resources
- Need Immediate Help?

All of the resources on this page are free and downloadable. You may prefer printed materials instead. When you see this icon , it indicates that a paper copy of that resource can be ordered and delivered anywhere in the United States. In some cases, color versions are available.

“There are moments when I start to feel it won’t get any better, but then I just remember all the challenges that I have faced and overcome. That gives me hope.”

- Quote from a father of two

General Resources

**Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event** [17][18]
A traumatic event can be something that happens in nature (such as a flood or earthquake). It can be something one person does to another person (such as shooting or hitting someone). When very young children see such an event—or if someone hurts them—they may not be able to tell you how they feel. Teenagers may not want to tell you. Even months later, a child or teen may still be scared or sad. This page (1) explains how children of different ages may react to a traumatic event, and (2) gives parents and caregivers ways to help their children understand and get better.

**Early Childhood Trauma** [19](2010) (PDF)
*Early childhood trauma* usually means a trauma that happens to a baby or a child under age six. This page (1) explains some of the difficulties that can result from early childhood trauma, (2) describes symptoms to look for in your child, (3) lists ways to help protect your child, (4) provides ideas for helping your children and family get better faster, and (5) lists treatments for young children.