

When Hard Things Happen: How Trauma Affects Young Children



Young children, even babies, feel it when something scary or hard happens in their world. More than 1 in 5 babies have a hard experience—like separation from a parent—in their first three years. It helps to know what **trauma** looks like and what can help.

What is trauma?

Trauma is something that feels scary or unsafe. This can be:

- ▶ Being hurt or seeing others get hurt
- ▶ Losing a parent
- ▶ Big changes, like divorce or a long time apart from a loved one

Trauma can be one event or many events over time.

What you might see

Young children may not have words for their feelings. They show them with actions.

You may see:

- ▶ More crying
- ▶ Wanting to stay very close to you
- ▶ Trouble with sleep, eating, or using the toilet
- ▶ Not wanting to play
- ▶ Getting angry or acting out
- ▶ Going back to baby habits, like thumb sucking

These are normal reactions. It does not mean something is wrong forever.



What happens in the brain

When a child feels unsafe, their brain goes into “protect mode.” If stress lasts a long time, the brain starts to look for danger all the time. This can make it hard to learn, play, and connect with others.

The good news: A child’s brain can heal. It grows strong with love and safety. When caring adults are there to offer comfort and safety after something scary, children are much more likely to get better and do well.

How caregivers help

Having a calm, loving, and steady caregiver is very powerful for a child.

- When you **keep daily routines the same**, your child feels safer, even when things feel unsure.
- **Say what you see**: “You look scared. I am right here for you.” This helps your child understand their feelings.
- **Give your child safe ways to show feelings**, like drawing, playing pretend, or telling stories. This helps them work through hard things.
- **Make time for fun, laughter, and being together**. This reminds your child that happy moments are still part of life.

If your child is having a hard time learning, playing, or connecting,
talk to your child’s healthcare provider or one of
the professionals supporting your family.

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