

In 2019, UK researchers found **31% of young people** had a traumatic experience during childhood and those who were exposed to trauma were **twice as likely** as their peers to have a range of mental health disorders. The UK Trauma Council explain that **one in three** children and young people are exposed to **at least** one potentially traumatic event by the time they are 18.

Children and young people may experience traumatic events such as abuse, violence, tragic accidents or major incidents. Some of these incidents may be one-off or short-term but others may be enduring. This guide discusses trauma, its effects on children and young people, and ways to help support them.

# TRAUMA

## in Children & Young People

### AIMS OF THIS GUIDE

What is trauma?

Types of traumas

Trauma & the brain

Signs & symptoms of trauma

What you can do

Support for children & young people



### What is trauma?

Trauma is a person's **emotional response** to a **stressful, frightening or distressing** experience or event. A traumatic experience often involves a **threat** to a child or young person's **physical or emotional safety**, and a sense of being trapped, powerless or unsupported in the face of a perceived danger or in the time afterwards. The harm can be **physical or emotional, real or perceived, directly experienced or witnessed**, and it can threaten the **young person** directly or **someone close** to him or her.

### Types of traumas

**Acute trauma** reflects intense distress in the immediate aftermath of a *one-time event* and the reaction is of *short duration*. Like a car crash, an assault or sudden loss of a loved one.



Physical or Sexual Assault



Sudden Grief



Serious Accident



Serious Incident



Bullying



Neglect



Abuse



Domestic Violence

**Chronic trauma** can arise from harmful events that are *repeated or prolonged*. It can develop in response to persistent behaviours the young person is exposed to.

**Complex trauma** can arise from experiencing *repeated or multiple* traumatic events from which there is no possibility of escape. Like other types of trauma, it can undermine a sense of safety in the world and lead to hypervigilance, constant monitoring of the environment for the possibility of threat.



War



Serious Illness



Mental Illness



Substances



Family in prison



Divorce

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** cover a wide range of difficult situations that children either *directly face or witness* while growing up, before they have developed effective coping skills.

ACEs can disrupt the normal course of development and the emotional injury can last long into adulthood.

## Advice for Parents, Carers & Professionals



## Trauma & the brain



When a person experiences something traumatic, adrenaline and other neurochemicals rush to the brain and **print a picture** into the amygdala (which holds emotional memories and fear responses).



The traumatic memory is stored in the amygdala as **sensory fragments** (sight, sounds, smells etc) rather than a story and can **loop** in the emotional side of the brain, disconnecting from the part of the brain that conducts reasoning and cognitive processing. The reasonable part of the brain is **unable to help** the emotionally loaded part of the brain get away from the trauma.



Consequently, after trauma, the brain can **easily be triggered** by sensory input, reading normal circumstances as **dangerous**. For example, a barbecue had been just a barbecue, but now it sounds like an explosion. The sensory fragments are **misinterpreted**.



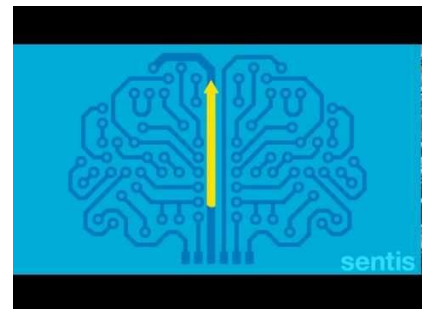
Children and young people's brains can remain in a constant state of **hypervigilance** due to losing its ability to discriminate between what is threatening and what is normal. They can experience exaggerated **fight, flight, or freeze** responses or exaggerated **startle responses** because they are in **survival mode** when they are not in danger.



## THIS CAN BE FIXED...

**Neuroplasticity** is the brain's ability to change – to **rewire, relearn** and **strengthen** important connections. Think learning a new language, driving a new journey or playing a new game. When we encounter a new experience (good or bad) our brain will change in response to it.

The neuroplasticity that enables **brains to change** in response to trauma also allows them to **heal**. The majority of people's brains **process trauma** over a period of **4 – 6 weeks** following an event



Exercises that can help promote neuroplasticity includes:

- Mindfulness
- Music and dance
- Art
- Gaming
- Exercise i.e. yoga
- Memory tasks and games i.e. crosswords and sudoku

## Signs & symptoms of trauma



Trauma affects everyone **differently** but children or young people may experience some of the following...

It is **normal** to experience these types of symptoms, 80% of people have these symptoms within the **first month** after a trauma.

They can feel horrible and scary, but they are the brain trying to **process** the trauma that the young person has been through and / or witnessed.

Trauma may affect their...	In the following ways
<b>Bodies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to control physical responses to stress</li> <li>• Chronic illness, even into adulthood (heart disease, obesity)</li> </ul>
<b>Brains</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty thinking, learning, and concentrating</li> <li>• Impaired memory</li> <li>• Difficulty switching from one thought or activity to another</li> </ul>
<b>Emotions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Feeling unsafe</li> <li>• Inability to regulate emotions</li> <li>• Difficulty forming attachments to caregivers</li> <li>• Trouble with friendships</li> <li>• Trust issues</li> <li>• Depression, anxiety</li> </ul>
<b>Behaviour</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of impulse control</li> <li>• Fighting, aggression, running away</li> <li>• Substance abuse</li> <li>• Suicide</li> </ul>

## SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

**Kooth** offers an online mental health community with access to..

**Articles** – with personal experiences and tips from young people and the Kooth team

**Discussion boards** – conversations with the friendly Kooth community on lots of topics

**Chat with the team** – about anything currently worrying them or on their mind, young people can message or have a live chat

**Daily journals** – young people can write a daily journal to track feelings or emotions and reflect on how you're doing

**Young Minds** is a charity for children and young people's mental health. They provide...

**Advice and guidance** – to help with emotions, coping with life and trauma, medication and mental health advice.

**Real stories** – about young people's experiences and tips for getting through it

**Signposting services** – types of support, how to access them and who to talk to if you need help

**Rise** is a charity that supports people affected by domestic abuse and violence. Although this may not be relevant for all young people, they have some fantastic **resources**, including short YouTube videos for children and young people.



## What you can do

Whilst trauma can have **serious, lasting effects**, there is **hope**. With the help of **supportive, caring adults**, children and young people **can and do recover**. Consider the following tips, that can be used interchangeably at both home and school/college:

### Parents / Carers

- **Spend time together** - Do things that are soothing, relaxing, or fun, like cook together, take a walk or watch a movie. Try to develop a regular / predictable routine.
- **Be patient and warm** - Use kind words. Give praise when your child is doing well / trying hard. Provide attention, comfort and encouragement. Be patient when they make a mistake and encourage them to try again.
- **Show love** - Use hugs, smiles, words, and caring actions to show your love. Use soothing words and offer comfort in a way they will accept.
- **Respond, don't react** - Your reactions may trigger a child who is already overwhelmed. When they are upset, do what you can to keep them calm. Lower your voice, validate feelings and be reassuring and honest.
- **Don't take behaviour personally** – to have emotion without judgement.

### Professionals / Teachers

- **Encourage self-esteem** - Positive experiences can help children recover and build resilience. Learning a new skill, feeling a sense of belonging to a group, community or cause.
- **Allow some control** - Reasonable, age-appropriate choices can encourage a child's sense of having control of his/her life.
- **Avoid punishment** – this may make a child's stress or anxiety worse. Set reasonable and consistent limits and expectations, using praise for desirable behaviours.
- **Listen** – avoid uncomfortable/difficult topics. Validate feelings after a trauma and take their reactions seriously. Offer reassurance and correct misinformation.
- **Help to relax** – encouraging children to practice relaxation and mindfulness strategies to lower high arousal states.

## Support for children & young people

### Reach out for help

To encourage the child or young person to let somebody know when they're struggling with their feelings. Trying to cope alone is really difficult, therefore reminding them that they don't need to struggle on alone.

#### MY SELF-CARE RULES



### Learn about other people's experiences

Some people find it really helpful to speak to other people who have been through the same thing as them as it can help them feel less alone. This isn't for everyone though!



### Practice self-care

Self-care put simply, is the little things that can help look after someone's mental health. It is about encouraging the child or young person to listen to how they are feeling and understand what they can do to care for themselves. This will look different for everybody. Whatever it is, it's important to try and build into their routine the **self-care** they need.

### Grounding techniques

Are a type of coping strategy designed to 'ground' the child or young person, and connect them with the present moment. It can be helpful to encourage others to practise some **grounding techniques** when they feel overwhelmed, or create and use a **self-soothe box**. The important thing is to encourage self-kindness and Recovery from trauma at an individual pace.

*If symptoms last longer than a month and stop the child doing things they normally used to do then encourage them to speak to their GP to help them access services.*

### 5-4-3-2-1 SENSES MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

-  5 things you can **see**
-  4 things you can **feel**
-  3 things you can **hear**
-  2 things you can **smell**
-  1 thing you can **taste**