Oklahoma Systems of Care

Serving the needs of children, youth, and families with a serious emotional disturbance. A program from the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Understanding Child Trauma & Resilience

RESOURCES:

www.nctsn.org

www.ctisp.org

www.acestudy.org

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Experiences are considered traumatic when they threaten the life or well-being of a child or of someone critically important to the child (such as a parent, grandparent, or sibling). These include events such as witnessing or being the victim of violence, serious injury, or physical or sexual abuse, along with witnessing disasters, acts of terrorism or community violence. Unexpected separations from family (such as prolonged hospitalization or entering foster care) can also be traumatic for children.

Traumatic events can lead to intense physical and emotional reactions, including:

- Overwhelming sense of terror, helplessness, and/or shame and guilt
- Automatic physical responses such as rapid heart rate, trembling or dizziness
- Feeling irritable, agitated or hyper-alert

While these reactions are distressing, they are, in fact, normal (our bodies' way of protecting us and preparing us to confront danger). However, some children experience more intense, longer-lasting trauma reactions that can interfere with their physical and emotional health and development.

TYPES OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

Acute Trauma is a single traumatic event that lasts for a limited period of time, for example: a natural disaster, motor vehicle accident or being bitten by a dog. During a brief traumatic event, a child may go through a variety of thoughts, feelings, and physical responses that change from moment to moment as the child assesses the danger faced and the possibility of safety. During the event, a child's emotional and physical reactions can be frightening, adding to the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Chronic Trauma is a series of traumatic events, often over a long period of time. For example: a child is exposed to domestic violence as well as community violence - or recurrent events of the same kind, such as physical or sexual abuse. Chronic trauma may result in any or all of the symptoms of acute trauma, but effects may be more severe and longer lasting. Overtime, children who have felt overwhelmed by trauma over and over again may become more sensitive and less able to tolerate ordinary everyday stress.

Complex Trauma is when the trauma is caused by loved ones who are in a position to care for and protect the child. This trauma refers to multiple traumatic events that may begin at an early age and are caused by actions/inactions of the parents of caregiving adult(s), which cause intense effects on a child's physical and psychological development. As a result, these children often:

- Have difficulty regulating their feelings and emotions
- Have a hard time feeling safe
- Have difficulty forming trusting relationships
- Find it hard to navigate and adjust to life's changes
- Display extreme emotional and physical responses to stress

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HOW DO CHILDREN RESPOND TO TRAUMA

Every child reacts to trauma differently. What one child finds very distressing may be less so for another. A child's response to a traumatic event will vary, depending on certain factors that include:

- Child's age and developmental stage
- Child's perception of the danger faced
- If the child was the victim or a witness
- Child's relationship to the victim or perpetrator
- Child's past experience with trauma
- Difficulties the child faces in aftermath of trauma
- The presence/availability of adults who can offer help, protection, and support

Children who have experienced trauma may show traumatic stress reactions in any of these categories:

- **Hyper-arousal:** The child is jumpy, nervous, and easily startled
- **Re-experiencing:** Images, sensations, or memories of the traumatic event come uncontrollably into the child's mind. This may take the child "back into the trauma" or relive the event in the form of nightmares
- **Avoidance and withdrawal:** The child may feel numb or cut off from normal life and other people. They may also engage in risky behaviors to avoid feelings or reminders, such as misuse of food, drinking alcohol, using drugs, participating in criminal activity, or seeking unhealthy relationships
- **Dissociation:** Some children may disconnect or withdraw internally during a traumatic event and feel detached and separate from their bodies. They may even lose track of time and space.

For the most updated listing of children's resources and services, please dial 2-1-1 or ask your primary doctor, your child's school counseling department or your child's social worker.

BEHAVIORS AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Traumatic stress reactions can lead to a range of troubling, confusing, and possibly alarming behavioral or emotional responses in children such as:

- Trouble learning, concentrating, transitioning between activities, or taking in new information
- Problems falling or staying asleep, or nightmares
- Emotional Instability, mood swings, or suddenly becoming angry or aggressive

RISING ABOVE TRAUMA; RESILIENCE AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

The ability to recover from traumatic events is called resilience or being able to "bounce back." There are many influences in a child's life that can promote resilience and help a child see the world as meaningful, predictable and manageable. Some of those influences are:

- A strong, supportive relationship with a caring, committed adult
- A connection with a positive role model or mentor
- Recognition and nurturance of their strengths and abilities
- Some sense of control over their lives
- A sense of membership in a community larger than themselves, such as their neighborhood or cultural group

Regardless of the child's age or the types of trauma experienced, healing is possible. With nurture and support, these children can regain trust, confidence and hope. We can help by creating a safe, structured, predictable and nurturing environment; listening to the child's story at the child's pace; and working with a team of professionals trained in trauma and its treatment.

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
Parent-Child Interaction Therapy
Seeking Safety

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