



Understanding
Child Traumatic
Stress: A Guide
for Parents



What is Child Traumatic Stress?

When children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or traumatic situations, and when this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope.

If your child has been exposed to situations where she feared for her own life, believed she could have been injured, witnessed violence, or tragically lost a loved one, she may show signs of traumatic stress. The impact on your child depends partly on the objective danger, partly on her subjective reaction to the events, and partly on her age and developmental level. You might notice the following signs:

- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- Refusing to go to school
- Lack of appetite
- Bed-wetting or other regression in behavior
- Interference with developmental milestones
- Anger
- Getting into fights at school or fighting more with siblings
- Difficulty paying attention to teachers at school and to parents at home
- Avoidance of scary situations
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Nervousness or jumpiness
- Intrusive memories of what happened
- Play that includes recreating the event

What is the best way to treat child traumatic stress?

There are effective ways to treat child traumatic stress. Many treatments include cognitive behavioral principles:

- Education about the impact of trauma
- Helping children and their parents establish or re-establish a sense of safety
- Techniques for dealing with overwhelming emotional reactions
- An opportunity to talk about the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment
- Involvement, when possible, of primary caregivers in the healing process

For more information see the NCTSN website: www.nctsn.org.

What can I do for my child at home?

Parents never want their child to go through trauma or suffer its after effects. **Having someone you can talk to about your own feelings will help you to better help your child.** Follow these steps to help your child at home:

1. Learn about the common reactions that children have to traumatic events.
2. Consult a qualified mental health professional if your child's distress continues for several weeks. Ask your child's school for an appropriate referral.
3. Assure your child of her safety at home and at school. Talk with her about what you've done to make her safe at home and what the school is doing to keep students safe.
4. Reassure your child that she is not responsible. Children may blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control.
5. Allow your child to express his fears and fantasies verbally or through play. That is a normal part of the recovery process.
6. Maintain regular home and school routines to support the process of recovery, but make sure your child continues going to school and stays in school.
7. Be patient. **There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Other children recover more slowly.** Try not to push him to "just get over it," and let him know he should not feel guilty or bad about any of his feelings.



How can I make sure my child receives help at school?

If your child is staying home from school, depressed, angry, acting out in class, having difficulty concentrating, not completing homework, or failing tests, there are several ways to get help at school. Talk with your child's school counselor, social worker, or psychologist. Usually, these professionals understand child traumatic stress and should be able to assist you to obtain help.

Ask at school about services through Federal legislation including:

1. Special Education—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which, in some schools, includes trauma services; and
2. Section 504—which protects people from discrimination based on disabilities and may include provisions for services that will help your child in the classroom.

Check with your school's psychologist, school counselor, principal, or special education director for information about whether your child might be eligible for help with trauma under IDEA.

The good news is there are services that can help your child get better. Knowing who to ask and where to look is the first step.



This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.