

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a scary event or a group of scary events that changes how a person reacts to stress. These types of events make people feel afraid or in danger. Trauma can also be when a person is abused by another person, in a physical, mental, or emotional way. Some examples of an event that may cause trauma are death of a family member, divorce, a fire, or abuse.

When a child has gone through trauma they may have trouble dealing with some situations for the rest of their life. Trauma can change a child's behavior, how they relate to others, and the way they react to everyday events. A child who has gone through trauma may have other health problems as they become an adult. But children can control their behavior better if they receive help.

Children who experience trauma may also experience negative impacts relating to their education. Trauma may lead to increased school absences, decreased reading levels and school performance.

Traumatic Events

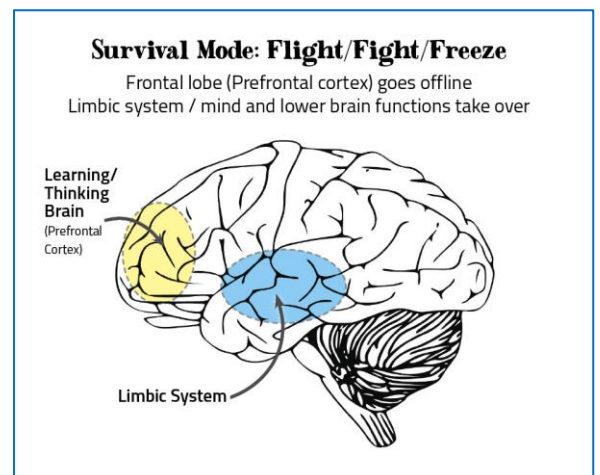
A traumatic event may be a single episode or could happen repeatedly over a period of time. The effects of trauma on a child usually worsen if they continually go through traumatic events. Some examples include:

- Sexual or physical abuse
- Neglect or abandonment
- Life-threatening illness or death of a family member or caregiver
- Family member in jail
- Victim or Witness of Domestic violence
- Homelessness or temporary housing
- Victim or Witness of violence in the community or at school

Signs of Trauma

A body's natural response to any stress is **fight, flight, or freeze** which causes the nervous system to go into an elevated state and then returning back to its natural state. When a child has experienced **toxic stress** (trauma) however, the body thinks the elevated state as normal.

Triggers, or "threat-cues", are situations that may set off a reaction by a child who has experienced trauma. Triggers may include loud noises, criticism, demeaning tone of voice, or activities that involve particular memories.



As a group leader, you may be able to notice **trigger warnings**, or situations that signal possible triggers. If a child is restless, short of breath, shaking, crying, laughing at inappropriate times, using aggressive language, or clenching their teeth or fists, they may be particularly prone to reacting to triggers.

Effects of Trauma

Students who experience trauma may show specific behaviors in the classroom. Trauma may affect the way a child develops. The effects of trauma can be different between students in lower and upper elementary grades.

Behaviors Indicative of Exposure to Trauma in Children, by Elementary Age Group	
<i>Preschool Students (Ages 3-5)</i>	<i>Elementary Students (Ages 6-12)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Separation anxiety or fear caregiver will not return ● Regression of mastered skills (e.g. language, problem solving) ● Tiredness from difficulty sleeping ● Absenteeism ● Overreactions to loud noises, physical contact, sudden movements ● New fears ● Questions about death or dying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anxiety or worry for safety of self and others ● Decreased focus and concentration ● Withdrawal from activities ● Angry outbursts and aggression ● Absenteeism or declining school performance ● Inappropriate response to social cues ● Difficulty with authority