NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Complex Trauma:

Facts For Caregivers

This fact sheet presents information that can help you recognize the signs and symptoms of complex trauma in your child and offers recommendations for what you can do to help your child heal.

Complex trauma describes both children's exposure to multiple traumatic events and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure. These events are severe, pervasive and often interpersonal, such as abuse or profound neglect. They usually begin early in life, may disrupt many aspects of the child's development, and interfere with the child's ability to form secure attachment bonds. Many aspects of a child's healthy physical and mental development rely on this primary source of safety and stability.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A CHILD WITH COMPLEX TRAUMA?

We all have an internal alarm system to warn us of danger and prepare us to respond. The "fight, flight, or freeze" response prepares us to fight off an attack, flee if fighting does not seem possible, or freeze if we can neither fight nor flee. This response is something that has been built into the human body and brain for thousands of years. When we perceive danger, this internal alarm system turns on, and when the danger passes, the alarm system shuts down.

Children with complex trauma often have overactive alarm systems, where their alarm system "goes haywire." These children may jump at any loud noise, or feel their hearts pounding when they see one child shove another on the playground. They might wake up from sleep every time a dog barks in the neighborhood. They are always on the lookout for danger. Often they think safe situations are dangerous. They have false alarms when things remind them of the traumatic events. We call these "trauma reminders."

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Recommended Citation: National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2014). *Complex trauma: Facts for caregivers.* Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

WHAT ARE REACTIONS TO REMINDERS?

Trauma reminders make a child think about or "relive" a frightening event from the past. Trauma reminders (some people may call these "triggers") can be places, sounds, smells, tastes, colors, textures, words, feelings, and even other people. Children can have trauma reminders many times a day. They can be reminded of traumas that happened even before they could understand or talk about them.

A child may react to a trauma reminder without being aware of the reminder. Parents and caregivers may not be aware of them either. Here are some common trauma reminders for children with complex trauma:

- Ketchup—reminds a child of the blood she saw when her father hit her brother
- A book dropping off a desk—reminds a child of gunshots in his neighborhood
- Packing suitcases—reminds a child of the day he was taken from his mother's home and placed in foster care
- Arguing—takes a child back to seeing her father beat her mother
- Feeling alone and overwhelmed—reminds a child of how she felt while being sexually abused

HOW MIGHT COMPLEX TRAUMA AFFECT THE WAY MY CHILD SEES THE WORLD?

Complex trauma changes how a child views the world and connects with other people. Some children with a complex trauma history may do the following:

- Believe that the world is and will always be an unsafe place
- Have trouble depending on a caregiver or other adults, such as teachers or police officers, to keep them safe
- Have trouble building and maintaining healthy relationships with others; approach relationships with suspicion and distrust
- Overreact or feel completely betrayed by a minor misunderstanding or squabble with a friend

- Respond negatively to seemingly positive events, such as praise, intimacy, or feelings of peace. A child who lacks experience of and memory for happy and safe times may not understand or be comfortable with such feelings.

HOW DOES COMPLEX TRAUMA CHANGE MY CHILD'S THINKING?

A child with a complex trauma history may:

- Have trouble developing skills and learning, due to the amount of mental energy being spent reacting to trauma reminders
- Have trouble focusing, organizing, and processing information; this might make the child seem to be ignoring a caregiver or teacher who has to repeat requests or instructions to get a response
- Seem distracted because he is trying to predict or avoid the next "bad thing" that will happen
- Seem very nervous, emotionally intense, or to have a "hair-trigger" response; frequently, she may be flooded by overwhelming and unbearable emotions
- Seem "shut down," numb, and unable to experience or express any emotions

PART OF TAKING CARE OF YOUR CHILD IS TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF FIRST.

- ***Be aware of your own feelings and reactions.*** How you are coping affects how you are able to help your child. Children often take their cues about how to react from the important adults around them, using the adult as a model for their own feelings and behaviors. If you are sad or upset in front of your child, that's okay. Show your child, through words and actions that, even when you're upset, you are still able to manage your feelings and to take care of him/her.
- ***Take care of yourself as best you can***, and accept help from those around you. Taking care of yourself is an important part of taking care of your child. Try to get enough rest and exercise, and take some time away from your childcare responsibilities.
- ***Keep other family members and important adults*** (such as early child care and pre-school providers, teachers, coaches, clergy, and youth leaders) ***informed of what your child is experiencing***. Partner with them to support your child by helping them to understand the connection between traumas and your child's feelings and behaviors.
- ***Do not hesitate to seek professional support***. Parents and caregivers sometimes feel as though they should handle everything on their own. Experiencing repeated traumas can be extraordinarily painful, even overwhelming, and doesn't necessarily get better on its own. It makes sense to seek the advice, guidance, and support of someone who knows about trauma and can help you and your child.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO HELP MY CHILD HEAL FROM COMPLEX TRAUMA?

- ***Keep to a daily routine***, as much as you can, so she knows what to expect. Children are reassured and comforted when things are predictable and familiar.
- ***Listen to his words <u>and</u> watch his behaviors***. While some children can tell you what they're experiencing, others won't want to talk about it, won't know what they are feeling, or can't express it in words. "Listen" to what your child is showing and telling you in words, behaviors, or physical complaints like headache or stomachache.
- ***Praise your child*** for making good choices, cooperating, and handling things well.
- ***Set reasonable and consistent limits and give clear expectations***. Holding children accountable, especially children who have experienced traumas, helps them feel in control and successful.
- ***Use simple language and watch your child's reaction***, when explaining what has happened. Follow your child's cues as to how much to say. Don't get frustrated if she asks you to tell it again. Older children may get quiet and seem not to want to discuss things, even though they want to know.
- ***Reassure your child*** when you leave him, in clear cut ways, and let him know when you will be back together. After an incident where your child has reacted to a trauma reminder or other upset, he might be clingier, have trouble separating, or be more fearful. If you tell your child, for example, "I will pick you up right after school," do your best to stick to that. (And it's best to be honest, rather than tell him what he wants to hear.)
- ***Watch for trauma-related reminders*** or "triggers" that are hard for your child. If she gets overly upset or angry when seeing people who hurt or neglected her or when overhearing adults talk about what happened, she may need to learn how to cope with painful events or images.
- ***"Respond" to your child rather than "react."*** Children often act out when faced with stressful situations. What seems like a tantrum or a rude demand may be a reaction to a trauma reminder. Before you jump in and punish, Think *trauma first*. Take some time to explore and understand the roots of the behavior.
- ***Advocate for your child within the school system,*** discuss what the school can do to support her (e.g., understanding potential trauma reminders or triggers such as fire alarms, offering counseling or accommodations, etc.).
- ***Keep an eye out***, as your child gets older, for new situations that stir up trauma reactions. Be prepared for your child to "revisit" the traumas and, if you need to, seek professional support.