What are trauma reminders?

Many children in the child welfare system have been through multiple traumatic events, often at the hands of those they trusted to take care of them. When faced with people, situations, places, or things that remind them of these events, children may re-experience the intense and disturbing feelings tied to the original trauma. These "trauma reminders" can lead to behaviors that seem out of place in the current situation, but were appropriate—and perhaps even helpful—at the time of the original traumatic event. For example:

- A seven-year-old boy whose father and older brother fought physically in front of him becomes frantic and tries to separate classmates playfully wrestling on the schoolyard.
- A three-year-old girl who witnessed her father beating her mother clings to her resource mother, crying hysterically when her resource parents have a mild dispute in front of her.
- A nine-year-old girl who was repeatedly abused in the basement of a family friend's house refuses to enter the resource family's basement playroom.
- A toddler who saw her cousin lying in a pool of blood after a drive-by shooting has a tantrum after a bottle of catsup spills on the kitchen floor.
- A teenager who was abused by her stepfather refuses to go to gym class after meeting the new gym teacher who wears the same aftershave as her stepfather.
- A twelve-year-old boy who'd been molested by a man in a Santa Claus suit runs screaming out of a YMCA Christmas party.

What happens when a child responds to a trauma reminder?

When faced with a trauma reminder, children may feel frightened, jumpy, angry, or shut down. Their hearts may pound or they may freeze in their tracks, just as one might do when confronting an immediate danger. Or they may experience physical symptoms such as nausea or dizziness. They may feel inexplicably guilty or ashamed or experience a sense of dissociation, as if they are in a dream or outside their own bodies.

Children's reactions may vary somewhat by age. Preschool children may:

- Feel vulnerable and helpless
- React very literally and dramatically (e.g., flinching, crying, trying to hide) to concrete reminders such as a raised hand or a facial expression
- Exhibit sudden strong emotional outbursts or tantrums
- Have little memory of the traumatic events that they can put into words
- Act out the traumatic events in play

School-aged children may:

- Exhibit physical symptoms, such as stomachaches or headaches
- Vacillate between being withdrawn and quiet or aggressive and noisy

Teenagers may:

- Respond recklessly, taking more risks or abusing substances
- Limit themselves or withdraw from activities to avoid reminders
- Fear that their strong reactions mean they are "going crazy"
- Feel stigmatized by having gone through traumatic events and may not feel that they can talk about them

Sometimes children are aware of their reaction and its connection to the original event. More often, however, they are unaware of the root cause of their feelings and may even feel frightened by the intensity of their reaction.

How can I help?

Children who have experienced trauma may face so many trauma reminders in the course of an ordinary day that the whole world seems dangerous, and no adult seems deserving of trust. Child welfare workers are in a unique position to help these children recognize safety and begin to trust adults who do indeed deserve their trust.

It's very difficult for children in the midst of a reaction to a trauma reminder to calm themselves, especially if they do not understand why they are experiencing such intense feelings. Despite reassurance, these children may be convinced that danger is imminent or that the "bad thing" is about to happen again. It is therefore critical to create as safe an environment as possible. Children who have experienced trauma need repeated reassurances of their safety. When a child is experiencing a trauma reminder, it is important to state very clearly and specifically the reasons why the child is now safe. Each time a child copes with a trauma reminder and learns once more that he/she is finally safe, the world becomes a little less dangerous, and other people a little more reliable.

Tips for Helping Children Identify and Cope With Trauma Reminders

- **Learn as many specifics as you can of what the child experienced** so that you can identify when the child is reacting to a reminder. Look for patterns (time of day, month, season, activity, location, sounds, sights, smells) that will help you understand when the child is reacting. Help the child to recognize these trauma reminders. Sometimes just realizing where a feeling came from can help to minimize its intensity.

- **Do not force the child into situations that seem to cause unbearable distress.** Allow the child to avoid the most intense reminders, at least initially, until he or she feels safe and trusts you.
- When the child is reacting to a reminder, **help him or her to discriminate between past experiences and the present one**. Calmly point out all the ways in which the current situation is different from the past. Part of the way children learn to overcome their powerful responses is by distinguishing between the past and the present. They learn, on both an emotional (feeling) and cognitive (thinking and understanding) level, that the new experience is different from the old one.
- **Provide tools to manage emotional and physical reactions.** Deep breathing, meditation, or other techniques may help a child to manage emotional and physical reactions to reminders. If you are unfamiliar with such techniques, ask a counselor to help.
- **Recognize the seriousness of what the child went through, and empathize with his or her feelings.** Don't be surprised or impatient if the child continues to react to reminders weeks, months, or even years after the events. Help the child to recognize that reactions to trauma reminders are normal and not a sign of being out of control, crazy, or weak. Shame about reactions can make the experience worse.
- **Anticipate that anniversaries of events, holidays, and birthdays may serve as reminders.**
- **With the child, identify ways that you can best reassure and comfort during a trauma reminder.** These might be a look of support, a reassurance of safety, words of comfort, a physical gesture, or help in distinguishing between the present and the past.
- **Seek professional help if the child's distress is extreme,** or if avoidance of trauma reminders is seriously limiting your child's life or movement forward.
- **Be self-aware.** A child's reaction to a trauma reminder may serve to remind you of something bad that happened in your own past. Work to separate your own reactions from those of the child.

For more information on the impact of trauma on children,
visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at www.NCTSN.org.