



Child Mind  
Institute

2022 Children's Mental Health Report | Summary

# Treating Symptoms of Trauma in Children and Teenagers

Traumatic experiences can upend kids' lives. But increasing awareness of the effects of trauma and the best ways to treat it can foster kids' resilience and give them and their families the support they need to thrive.

The term trauma is often used to describe both an individual's experience and their emotional and behavioral response to that experience. As trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk puts it: "Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body."

It's also common to hear programs and organizations described as "trauma-informed." However, there is little agreement about what exactly makes a system trauma-informed, and only limited evidence about how trauma-informed practices work, how effective they are, and how to implement and evaluate them.

## Common Trauma Responses

### POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

PTSD is defined as a response to a wide range of disturbing and/or life-threatening events, including interpersonal or sexual violence, abuse, war, natural disasters, and serious accidents. People who develop PTSD may have experienced these events themselves or witnessed or heard about them happening to someone close to them.

Kids with PTSD show behavioral and emotional changes that include:

- Frequently thinking about, dreaming about, or acting out the traumatic event
- Feeling numb, having trouble focusing, and struggling to connect with other people
- Being irritable, constantly anxious or hypervigilant, having trouble sleeping

A diagnosis of PTSD requires the symptoms to continue for at least a few months after the event, since it's normal to be upset immediately after a very frightening or life-threatening experience.

Experiencing trauma as a child is linked to a heightened risk for developing mental health disorders later in life, as well as impairments in cognitive functioning.

### Treating the Symptoms of Trauma

Overall, psychotherapies that focus specifically on children's traumatic experiences show stronger outcomes than more general forms of therapy. Current research indicates that variations on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) consistently help reduce children's trauma symptoms, often more quickly or more thoroughly than other psychotherapies.

Leading treatments for symptoms of trauma in kids include TF-CBT (details at right), the ARC framework for complex trauma, and child-parent psychotherapy. Adaptations of some treatments originally designed for adults (including eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, prolonged exposure therapy, and cognitive processing therapy) have also been shown to be helpful for kids dealing with trauma.

### COMPLEX TRAUMA

There is also an increasingly popular understanding of trauma that takes into account chronic, ongoing negative experiences as opposed to single, extreme events. This kind of trauma is often known as "complex trauma." It involves ongoing negative experiences (such as abuse, poverty, or stress due to experiencing racism) that can affect a child's ability to relate to others and build trusting relationships with caregivers and other authority figures. Although the evidence isn't conclusive, complex trauma may affect children of color more often than their white peers.

Complex trauma is not yet linked to a formal mental health diagnosis, but children who have gone through complex trauma often experience the following symptoms:

- Challenges with attachment and relationships
- Difficulty regulating emotions and behavior
- Changes in attention span and cognition
- Dissociation from reality
- Low self-esteem
- Overall negative outlook on the world

### TRAUMA-FOCUSED COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (TF-CBT)

TF-CBT is the leading trauma treatment for kids. It includes practice in the basic skills of CBT: distinguishing between thoughts, feelings, and actions, and learning how to manage the interactions between them. Children also create what's known as a trauma narrative, which is an account of their traumatic experience that helps them make meaning out of their experience and practice managing the upsetting emotions that memories of it bring up.

## SCHOOL-BASED GROUP INTERVENTIONS

Trauma interventions designed specifically for schools are usually in a group format and meet during the regular school day. This may be especially helpful for children and teenagers who lack access to reliable, affordable mental health care. The most common intervention is cognitive-behavioral intervention for trauma in schools (CBITS), which focuses on skills drawn from CBT.

## MEDICATION TREATMENT FOR TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

While trauma-focused psychotherapies are the evidence-based choice for treatment of PTSD in children, medications also play a role, in combination with therapy. There is very little research on the effectiveness of these medications for children, and kids often do not respond in the same way adults with PTSD do. But clinicians report using medications — including antidepressants, adrenergic agonists, and antipsychotics — to help kids struggling with anxiety, hyper-arousal, sleep disturbances, and aggression.

## Looking Ahead

Trauma is a common challenge for children and families, but its effects are treatable. Research across the field is encouraging, with multiple interventions showing promise for reducing the impacts of traumatic experiences. At the same time, there is still so much that we don't know. More work is needed to identify practical strategies for preventing and treating trauma, and in particular to better understand complex trauma.

As we continue to develop guiding principles and practices for trauma treatments and trauma-informed care, it's essential to work toward reducing the incidence of traumatic events themselves. Violence, abuse, neglect, and other traumatic experiences are intertwined with the public policies and broader sociocultural systems that so often fail to meet families' material and psychological needs. We must commit to making sure that all families and communities have the resources and support they need to raise healthy, thriving children.

## Learn More

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Visit [childmind.org/2022report](https://childmind.org/2022report) to download the full 2022 Children's Mental Health Report, read insights from our new national survey on families' experiences of trauma, and find practical resources for parents and educators.

### SPONSORING PARTNER

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