# WHEN CHILDREN EXPERIENCE TRAUMA:

### A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

All parents and caregivers try to protect their children from experiences that cause trauma, but unfortunately, in today's world this can be difficult to do. Whether on the television, in the schoolyard, or at home, children are likely to be exposed to some level of violence and other kinds of trauma in their early years. However there are many things that parents and families can do to lessen the impact of such experiences. How does trauma affect children? What can parents and families do to lessen the impact of such experiences? Please read on.



### WHAT IS "TRAUMA?"

Trauma can refer to a physical injury or a wound, but it also refers to an emotional shock that makes a lasting impression on one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Psychological trauma can occur with or without physical injury, and it can last long after the medical problems heal. Psychological trauma often follows an emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking experience—a traumatic event. Examples include assault, domestic or gang violence, physical or sexual abuse, a loved one's death, natural disasters (tornado, hurricane, flood, etc.), fire, acts of war, and terrorist events.

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A TRAUMATIC EVENT OCCURS?

Psychologists and other scientists have studied how children have been affected by traumatic events, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, and natural disasters, like hurricanes and floods. They find that the anxiety and fear that many people experience after a traumatic event can be especially strong for children. The responses to trauma may be strong even for children who have been exposed to the event but were not direct victims, for example, if a child's loved one was injured in a disaster or his or her school was damaged.

A violent or intensely disturbing event may be the first time a child's sense of security and safety is threatened. Consequently, the child may experience it as a loss, resulting in feelings of grief, fear, isolation, anger, and/or loss of control.

A child's behavior may change after a traumatic event. Some children may return to habits or behaviors that you thought they had outgrown, such as thumb sucking or bedwetting. Others may not want to sleep alone at night, may have trouble falling asleep, or may have nightmares. You may also notice personality changes—a child may become more irritable or difficult to manage, showing an increase in temper tantrums. Some children become more withdrawn from others.

Young children who are unable to put their emotions into words may act out their fears or concerns in play. Some children may talk or ask questions about the event repeatedly, and some will express their thoughts and feelings in artwork. After a disturbing event, it is not unusual for a child's appetite or sleeping habits to change. Somatic problems, such as headaches, stomach aches, or, in extreme cases, vomiting, may occur.

## WHAT CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS DO?

- Reassure children that they are safe and that trustworthy people are in control. As in all things, parents and caregivers are important role models. Your reactions and responses to traumatic events will affect how your children deal with those same events. It is okay to let children know that you are sad or hurt by an event, but, it is important that they see you in control and feel your sense of security and resolve to protect them.
- Spend extra time with the children and help them return to their normal routines as quickly as possible. To help increase a sense of security, try to maintain family schedules for daily activities such as eating, playing, and sleeping. If a child needs more physical contact with you for a period of time, be available. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma. If possible, avoid unnecessary separations from your children immediately following a traumatic event. Build extra family time into your daily schedule and delay extended time away, such as travel, if at all possible.
- Talk to the children, answer their questions. They may ask or may be wondering—"Is that going to happen to me?" Or "Is that going to happen to Mommy or Daddy?" These children should be reassured with information about the steps that the adults in their lives are taking to keep them safe. Children may also have questions about death and dying. You should answer their questions as truthfully as possible at a level they can understand.
- Give children the amount of information that you believe they can understand. This often involves turning off news reports of the event and significantly controlling or limiting their exposure to threatening images on TV. In the days after September 11, many families appropriately turned off the television news because the repeated videos of airplanes flying into the World Trade Center towers and horrific scenes around plane crashes were too upsetting for their children. Furthermore, children may not understand what they are viewing. For example, very young children believe re-runs of the event are more events happening around them. In addition to monitoring media images, monitor your conversations about the event, as conversations, too, may be troubling for your children.

• Help children express their feelings. Immediately after a traumatic event, help your child calm down by showing that you can calm yourself. Suggest that the child draw a picture of his or her feelings or use a doll or stuffed animal to talk to, with you, about the event. Listen to the child's description of events and talk to him or her in a calm, loving way. Sometimes helping your children find a positive way to cope with what has happened can help in the healing process. Examples include sending a special picture to a helper (police, fire, rescue), sending a card or drawing to a child touched by the event, or making something special for the daycare center/classroom.

# WHAT ABOUT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL?

Increased communication between home and school is particularly important after a traumatic event. Teachers need to know what has happened in a child's life, and parents should be informed of sudden changes in a child's behavior or performance at school. Students with special needs may have increased difficulties in the aftermath of trauma. Other children may not want to go to school or may express fears about school that they never had before.

A child's school performance and interactions with friends may suffer after a traumatic event. It is important that families maintain communication with their children's schools so that family members and school personnel can work together to help children deal with their feelings and cope with the consequences of the event.

If the trauma has an impact on the school or community, it is important for school personnel to communicate to families how they will be handling the aftermath. Effective preparedness planning needs to include school administrators, teachers, and parents.

### SHOULD I SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Try to be sensitive to your child's emotional state, even if he or she cannot talk effectively about feelings. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can be signs of a child's grief, fear, or discomfort. Many children who witness or experience a traumatic event show short-term changes in behavior and emotional control, and, with your reassurance and support, most will cope well and resume their usual activities. Others, however, may show long-lasting psychological difficulties. You should seek professional help if your child continues to be depressed or angry, seems "numb," avoids particular situations or places, or remains focused on the event for over 1 month. Immediate help may be needed if your child's reactions are significantly interfering with daily functioning.

# WHEN WILL THINGS GET BACK TO NORMAL?

It is important to realize that there is no one standard response to traumatic events. Children will react to and recover from such events on their own timetables. The same is true for the adults in the children's lives who may also be suffering from the aftereffects of violence or some other traumatic event.

Remember, traumatic events are difficult for all of us, especially for children. They can have a lasting emotional impact. If you or your children have experienced a recent trauma, try to understand these strong yet normal reactions and allow time for healing. It is a time when you need extra patience with yourself and with your children. Find ways to emphasize how you keep your children safe and secure. Most importantly, show them they are loved.

This brochure was developed by the American Psychological Association as part of the ACT Against Violence project.

It was supported by generous funding from the MetLife Foundation.





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### **MetLife Foundation**

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### **RESOURCES**

### American Psychological Association (APA)

750 First Street, NE

Washington, DC 20002-4242

Phone: 202-336-5500

Web site: http://www.apa.org

### **Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS)**

Emergency Services and Disaster Relief Branch 5600 Fishers Lane, Room17C-20

Rockville, MD 20857 Phone: 301-443-4735

E-mail: ken@mentalheatlh.org

Web site: http://www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/ emergencyservices/index.htm

#### **National Center for Victims of Crime**

2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300

Arlington, VA 22201 Phone: 703-276-2880 E-mail: mail@ncvc.org

Web site: http://www.nvc.org

### National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Information Resources and Inquiries Branch 6001 Executive Boulevard, Rm. 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892–9663 Phone: 301-443-8431 E-mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov

Web site: http://www.nimh.nih.gov

### Federal Emergency Management Agency

500 C Street, SW Washington, DC 20472 202-566-1600

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Web site: http://www.fema.gov