

What is Childhood Trauma?

Every child will experience different trials and tribulations growing up. So, what makes childhood trauma distinct from everyday childhood experiences? And how is child abuse different from childhood trauma?

A potentially traumatic event/s can be defined as an event/s in which a threat or the perception of threat overwhelms our capacity to cope. It causes a biological stress response, known as the fight, flight and freeze response (Cozolino, 2002). The human stress response is highly attuned. This means that our brain and our body are biologically wired to respond to many situations as though they were life-threatening.

Such threats could include tripping in the street, something falling near us, or seeing a garden hose that we instantaneously mistake for a snake! Because humans are social creatures who rely on other humans to survive, we might also respond to stressful social events as life-threatening. For example, news that a loved one is sick, public speaking where we are voicing our ideas in front of others, or someone yelling at us.

With everyday childhood events the child recovers from the threat whereas with traumatic events they do not. This means that potentially traumatic events may remain traumatic if there is no opportunity to recover from them i.e. they are not "resolved." In this case resolution does not mean that there is a reasonable outcome (the "snake" is really a garden hose, the speech goes well, the person yelling at us apologises). Resolution means that our body and brain do not store the trauma, or that we are no longer distressed (either consciously or subconsciously) by it.

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Childhood trauma is trauma experienced under the age of 18. The impacts of childhood trauma are often more extreme and diverse than adult trauma. This is because a child's brain is still developing; they are physically and psychologically dependent on adults, and they are in different stages of development to adults (which means they process information about the world, other people, and themselves in a different way) (NSCDC, 2007).

Some factors e.g. secure attachment to caregivers and having emotional and social supports can help build resilience to traumatic events (Hunter, 2012). However other factors can make poor outcomes more likely e.g. socio-economic disadvantage and social isolation. (Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong, 2011).

Childhood trauma can impact a child's memory, their identity, their sense of belonging, and how they understand the world, other people, and themselves (Cashmore & Shakel, 2013).




Child abuse and neglect are specific kinds of childhood trauma. Here, trauma is inflicted upon children by other people intentionally either actively (abuse) or passively (neglect) (Bloomfield, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2009). The people who inflict this abuse and neglect are often adults, who are often responsible for the care of that child. A feature of child abuse and neglect is that it often happens repeatedly.

Child abuse may be physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or sexual. Many children experience more than one type of abuse and victimisation. Adverse experiences in childhood can have a cumulative effect on many aspects of health and well-being in childhood into adulthood (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

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Childhood trauma can occur due to witnessing or experiencing overwhelming negative experiences in early life. Many adverse experiences in childhood can be overwhelming.

Children can experience trauma as a result of something that is done to them by a person, persons or events. Examples include:

-  Sexual, physical or emotional abuse
-  Witnessing or experiencing domestic and family violence
-  Community trauma such as civil unrest or war refugee or asylum seeker trauma

Children can also experience serious trauma because of what does not happen (e.g. lack of nurture via physical and emotional neglect by a caregiver).

Childhood trauma can also occur without abuse or neglect, in situations in which a caregiver has their own trauma. This can limit their capacity to meet their child's emotional needs. Examples include:

-  Parental ill-health
-  A parent who abuses different substances such as alcohol or drugs
-  A parent who is incarcerated
-  Parental separation or divorce

Parents/care-givers with unresolved trauma can unintentionally transmit trauma to their children via impaired styles of relating (disrupted attachment). When a parent has not come to terms with their life it can disrupt the child's secure attachment.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE), a large population study conducted over 15 years of 10 types of adverse experiences has documented the many physical, mental health and other impacts of childhood trauma (Felliti, Anda et al., 1998).

What is Complex Trauma?

What is complex trauma and how is it different to single incident trauma?

It is important to differentiate single-incident trauma (associated with standard PTSD) from complex trauma (Shapiro 2010). (There is now a new diagnosis of Complex PTSD in the ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases): i.e. CPTSD which is different to standard PTSD)

- Single incident trauma refers to one-off events such as experiencing or witnessing single incidents of assault, natural disasters or accidents
- Complex trauma refers to cumulative, underlying, and often interpersonal trauma, commonly from childhood (Courtois and Ford, 2009). It often occurs when the child victim is trapped and under the control and domination of the perpetrator (Herman, 2009).
- Complex trauma can also occur as a result of children's and adults' experience of violence within the community. Examples include: domestic and family violence, civil unrest, war trauma or genocide, ethnic cleansing, refugees and asylum seekers, cultural dislocation, sexual exploitation and trafficking, extreme medical trauma from repeated interventions, inter- and transgenerational and collective trauma and/or re-traumatisation of victims later in life.
- Complex trauma has more substantial long-term impacts on emotional and physical health, relationships and daily functioning than single incident trauma (Banyard et al. 2009; Cahsmore & Shackel, 2013).
- Complex trauma occurs within a social context which permits abuse, violence and exploitation (Herman, 2009). Social marginalisation and oppression can exacerbate the impacts of complex trauma (Briere and Spinazzola, 2009).

It has been established that with the right support trauma can be resolved; people can and do recover (Siegel, 2003, 2010).