

A Quick Guide for Child Care Providers on Understanding Childhood Trauma

What is trauma?

Trauma is when something scary or upsetting happens, and it's too much for a child to handle. It can be:

- Seeing or feeling something violent
- Living in an unsafe place or with unsafe people
- Being hurt or ignored
- Not getting the love or care they need

Trauma looks different for every child.

Signs of trauma in children

Feelings



All people experience a wide range of feelings and emotions. For children who have experienced trauma, these emotions may feel stronger or more overwhelming. Common feelings in children who have experienced trauma include:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Fear
- Worry

Body



Common body signs among children who have experienced trauma include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite changes, such as eating more or less than usual
- Stomach aches
- Headaches

Behaviors



Children who have experienced trauma might act:

- More clingy than usual
- Quiet or withdrawn
- Distracted or uninterested in taking part in activities
- Upset by certain people or places

You might also notice that children:



- Change the way they play, or their play shows scary things
- Don't trust others or they trust too quickly
- Lose a skill they had, such as no longer using the toilet when they had been using the toilet independently, or wanting to be fed instead of feeding themselves

Fight, flight, freeze



The human brain protects itself when it feels a threat or danger. In children, this may look like:

- **Fight:** hitting, yelling
- **Flight:** running away, hiding
- **Freeze:** zoning out, not moving

Why behavior might not match the moment

Sometimes children act out because something reminds them of a scary time. Often, you may not know what a child has gone through.

EXAMPLE:

Behavior: A child hits and yells at pickup time.

Reason: The child might be scared to go home because it's not safe.

When a behavior seems out of place, ask yourself: "What happened to this child?" instead of "What's wrong with this child?"

How to help children heal

Create safety by:

- Keeping routines
- Being calm and predictable

Build trust by:

- Being kind and consistent
- Showing you care through words and actions

Let them express feelings by:

- Offering chances for children to talk, play, draw, or act

Meet basic needs by:

- Offering food, shelter, and emotional support
- Referring to therapy, as needed

Model healthy coping by:

- Taking care of yourself
- Practicing deep breathing and other mindfulness activities
- Expressing yourself through drawing or movement

Be patient and remember:

- Healing takes time.
- Small wins are worth celebrating.
- Joy and play should be a part of every day.