



A CHILD'S REACTION TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS BY AGE

Below are common reactions in children and adolescents following a crisis event.

Birth through 2 years:

When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. They can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. The biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents cope. As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.

Preschool - 3 through 6 years:

Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They can see consequences as being reversible or permanent. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may reenact the incident over and over again. Preschoolers may also express physical rather than emotional symptoms (e.g., stomach aches).

School age - 7 through 10 years:

The school age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss. When speaking about death to children, use simple, direct language, avoiding euphemisms (e.g., "passed away") that can be confusing or anxiety-provoking. Younger children with no previous experience with death may have more questions, think in terms of familiar experiences (e.g., the person is asleep), and have difficulty grasping key features (e.g., that death is irreversible). Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. Children may also hear inaccurate information from peers. They may display a wide range of reactions, from sadness to specific fears.

Pre-adolescence to adolescence - 11 through 18 years:

As children grow older, they develop a more sophisticated understanding of the event. Responses are more similar to those of adults. Teenagers may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors (e.g., alcohol or drug use). Others can become fearful of leaving home and avoid previous levels of activities. After a trauma, the view of the world can seem more dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet be unable to discuss them with others.

NOTE: Contact Child and Protective Services without delay if you suspect child abuse or neglect. In the event of an immediate danger to self or others, contact 911 or 988 right away.