

Helping Children Cope After Trauma

For Parents, Caregivers,
and Educators



You can make a difference in a child's life.

Traumatic events may include:

- Serious accidents or life-threatening illness
- Loss of a loved one
- Natural disasters such as floods, wildfires, or earthquakes
- Acts of terrorism
- Neglect or psychological, physical, or sexual abuse
- Witnessing or experiencing violence
- Infectious disease outbreaks
- Refugee and war experiences

The effects of youth trauma can last beyond childhood. Child trauma survivors whose needs remain unaddressed can have long term physical, behavioral, learning, and emotional consequences.

The good news is that children can demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. A key protective factor is when the adults in their environment (parents, caregivers, teachers) identify and address their trauma reactions. By better understanding how children of different ages react to trauma, you can help them manage their fears to feel safe and secure again.

For more than 30 years, Ohel has been a leader in providing trauma services — community-wide intervention, crisis intervention, training, school-based services, and bereavement counseling.

Traumatic Events Hit Hard

Experiencing trauma during childhood can occur when dangerous, violent, or upsetting events overwhelm a child's ability to cope.

Traumatic events or circumstances may have lasting adverse effects on emotional health, mental health, physical health, spiritual well-being, and/or social well-being.

During difficult times, young people look to adults to guide them, especially when children feel confused, unsafe, and uncertain about the future.

It's important to learn how traumatic events impact young people and what you can do to help them strengthen healthy coping skills.

You can be better prepared to help young people cope when you understand the reasons for certain behaviors and how to address them.

Reactions by Age Group

Pre-School (0–5)

Most children in this age group don't have the words to express their fears. They often learn from the behavior of the adults around them. For example, if a parent, caregiver, or teacher seems worried, they may become worried, too.



Typical Reactions Include

- Acting like a younger child, thumb-sucking, bedwetting, or clinging to parents
- Becoming afraid of the dark
- Refusing to sleep alone
- Crying more often and more easily
- Developing fears of being left alone or of strangers
- Stuttering or not speaking clearly
- Showing signs of anxiety, fear, or sadness
- Thinking that something they did caused the traumatic event or circumstance
- Impulsive or aggressive behavior

How You Can Help

- Provide reassurance
- Offer physical comfort by giving more hugs
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Keep to basic routines, such as family meals and reading bedtime stories
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings
- Allow children to express their feelings through play
- Limit media exposure about the traumatic event
- Allow your children to sleep in your room temporarily, or preferably stay in their room, but do so with a pre-established time limit
- When reassuring children be particularly cognizant of your voice, tone, and body language — which is often more attended to at this age than your words

School Age (5–11)

School-age children have a better understanding of loss or lasting change. Feelings of fear and anxiety are common at this age, and they may act out to get attention from parents, caregivers, and teachers. Children who had direct exposure to a traumatic event are at a higher risk of suffering from stress.



Typical Reactions Include

- Whining, clinging, or acting like a younger child
- Displaying aggressive behavior, such as hitting and kicking
- Losing interest in schoolwork
- Wanting to stay home and skip school
- Getting into trouble with classmates
- Sleeping poorly or having bad dreams
- Expressing more medical complaints, such as stomach-aches and headaches
- Worrying or talking nonstop about their safety or the traumatic event

How You Can Help

- Provide reassurance. Children this age understand the concept of a “rare” occurrence, if applicable to the event
- Be patient and develop a tolerant attitude
- Encourage talking and playing out thoughts and feelings
- Acknowledge that you have your own feelings of sadness and loss
- Don’t dismiss their physical complaints, even if there is no apparent medical basis
- Provide creative outlets to help relieve tension (drawing, modeling clay, writing in a diary, etc.)
- Explain that the reaction is normal. For example, say, “Anyone experiencing this would be upset”
- Listen to repeated telling or questioning of the traumatic event
- While a child who experienced trauma is upset, relax expectations at home and in school
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting-out behaviors
- Discuss and rehearse safety measures for the future. Be clear not to imply blame in the present circumstance

Adolescents (12–18)

Peer reactions are especially significant in this age group since teenagers tend to copy each other. Adolescents may demonstrate a combination of child-like and adult reactions to trauma. Teenagers may act out by courting danger in an attempt to gain control over an event that is out of their control. This age group may have trouble controlling their emotions or opening up to their families.



Typical Reactions Include

- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Rebelling at home or in school
- Becoming easily upset, agitated, or irritable
- Withdrawing or losing interest in usual activities
- Showing signs of sadness or depression
- Having feelings of inadequacy or helplessness
- Increasing use of social media or technology
- Increasing risk-taking behavior
- Using a substance in excess to avoid the pain associated with their trauma while not caring about consequences or no longer caring for life

How You Can Help

- Make additional time for the child and allow for open exchanges
- Provide structure but don't make excessive demands,

easing up on chores or responsibilities at home and in school

- Encourage discussion of experiences during or after the traumatic event with peers and adults
- If an adolescent doesn't want to talk, don't force the issue. Allow for the expression of questions, doubts, and feelings, such as "It's not fair"
- Offer opportunities to take part in social activities or peer group activities
- Encourage helping in community rebuilding or other actionable responses
- Monitor changes in your teen's behavior, eating, and sleep patterns
- Discuss and practice safety measures
- It is very typical for teens to seek out guidance and direction from adults outside of the family. This can be utilized to help the child through teachers, therapists, and the like

More Ways Parents, Caregivers, and Educators Can Help

Regulate your emotions.

Children are good at sensing the emotional reactions of the adults around them. Be prepared to work through your own response before responding to your child.

Acknowledge your feelings

of fear, anxiety, and sadness. This helps children identify and label their feelings.

Let your children know how you are managing your feelings.

For example, share, “When I am feeling scared/stressed/uneasy, it helps me to _____.”

Provide accurate information

to children. If they ask about what happened, what is happening now, and what is expected to occur in the future, share details in age-appropriate language.

Validate their feelings. Say, “I can see that you are upset. How can I help you feel better?” Try to avoid telling children not to be upset.

Help children recall earlier situations when they had to be brave. Ask, “Remember when you worried about _____? What did you do then that made you feel better?”

Gently suggest trying something together. Ask, “What if we try _____?”

Help them talk about their concerns. Some children may become frightened by the reactions of their caregivers, who may not be coping well after a traumatic event. Help them find caring adults they can turn to with their worries. Reassure them that things may be hard for many people, including adults now but, with time, it will get better.

Reassure them. For children who talk about their fears, tell them, “We are all working hard to keep you safe.” You may need to explain what steps you, the child’s school, the government, and others are taking to keep the child and the community safe.

Introduce ways to highlight meaning or mastery over the trauma. Provide at-home or classroom activities that discuss ways in which children are now stronger or facilitate collage making that highlights their gains.

Ohel Trauma Services

- Community-wide response
- Crisis intervention
- Training
- School-based services
- Private bereavement counseling

What do Ohel's Trauma Services teams provide?

Leveraging decades of specialized trauma treatment services in many communities, Ohel meets the immediate needs of individuals, families, and communities affected by trauma through three umbrella programs.

The **Zachter Family National Trauma Center** team provides essential support after a crisis, including bereavement counseling for individuals and families; grief and trauma groups; continued support, counsel, and case management; and training for first responders, workplaces, synagogues, and schools.

The **Kestenbaum Family International Children's Services** team provides extensive services for schools and children, including resilience training for both students and educators, a teacher support helpline, and curriculum development.

The **Brecher Family South Florida Trauma Services** team provides a local trauma team for critical support after a crisis, short-term counseling for individuals experiencing trauma, a teacher support helpline, and resilience resources for educators and families.

Individual Trauma Counseling
Ohel provides emotional support to individuals seeking to understand their responses to trauma, to manage stress, and to identify and develop healthy coping strategies. We're here to help children and adults through the many stages of recovery and grief for as long as our services are needed.



Group Trauma Counseling

Ohel offers support groups following traumatic events for family members and friends of those impacted, youth groups, older adults, teachers, administrators, and others in the community.

Educational Programs and Presentations

Ohel offers lectures and discussions on a range of responses to trauma in order to strengthen healthy coping skills and to place a focus on wellness, stress management, and resilience. Ohel presents at organizations, schools, community centers, and houses of worship on topics related to the impact of trauma.

Outreach and Education Services

Ohel participates in community events and a variety of programs, welcoming discussions with individuals interested in our services.



About Ohel

For more than 50 years, Ohel has provided transformative social services and mental health services. Today, Ohel cares for thousands of individuals across the country through a broad range of programs including mental health services, trauma services and programs, housing and day programs for people with disabilities, older adult services, foster care, and outpatient counseling for everyday people with everyday problems. Ohel's Camp Kaylie welcomes children of all abilities to a summer of inclusive fun.



**For more information about Ohel Trauma Services,
please contact Ohel Access at 1-800-603-OHEL.**

www.ohelfamily.org | access@ohelfamily.org