What Is Childhood Trauma?

Childhood trauma refers to traumatic experiences that happen between the ages of 0–17.

These traumas can be the result of intentional violence—such as physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence—or the result of a natural disaster, accident or war.¹

When a trauma happens, the child is overwhelmed by terror and can experience a prolonged heightened state of alertness, stress or persistent fear for his or her safety.
Childhood trauma is more prevalent than many people realize and often has long-lasting effects.

- **26%** of children in the U.S. witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four years old.²
- **60%** of adults say they experienced abuse or other traumatic family events in their own childhoods.²
- **11%** of girls ages 14 to 17 reported experiencing sexual assault or abuse during the past year.³
- **41%** of youth under 18 reported experiencing a physical assault in the last year.³
- **14%** of children have experienced abuse by a caregiver.³
- **70%** of children living in poor inner-city neighborhoods are exposed to trauma.⁴
Childhood trauma can negatively impact learning and behavior because of the way terror and fear create changes in the brain. Following exposure to a traumatic experience, survivors may become frozen in a heightened state of alertness or a persistent fear for their safety.

Without trauma intervention, research has shown that these emotional states alter brain function and the student’s ability to process information.

This leads to difficulty in:

- Processing verbal information
- Following teacher directions
- Recalling what was heard
- Focusing
- Retaining information
Additionally, these cognitive deficits may result in:

- Low self-esteem
- Poor problem solving
- Increased truancy
- Behavior issues
- Hopelessness
- Increased peer conflict
- Increased dropout rates
How to recognize if a child may have experienced trauma

Watch for these signs:

- Loss of appetite
- Easily startled
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
  - Frequent headaches or stomachaches
  - Constant state of alert
- Diminished interest in school & activities
- Inability to experience pleasure or joy
  - Self-blame or shame
- Feeling of detachment from others
- Recurrent conflicts with classmates
  - Irritability or outbursts of anger
  - Trouble focusing on classwork
- Acting as if the traumatic event were recurring

What happened? Where’s the happy, confident student we knew?
Don’t assume a child showing signs of trauma will be OK if left alone. Being an advocate for the child is vital. Without treatment, the damage done by childhood trauma can last a lifetime—with consequences as serious as a risk of suicide that is 15 times higher than the general population.

The goal is to help move the children who have experienced trauma from “victim thinking” to “survivor thinking,” which leads to empowerment, choice, active involvement in their own healing process and a renewed sense of safety and hope.

Educators and school professionals are encouraged to learn about how trauma impacts learning so that they are able to provide trauma-specific intervention. This will help minimize the learning and behavioral difficulties that can result when the needs of trauma victims go unrecognized or ignored.

If you don’t think what I think ... feel what I feel ... see what I see when I look at myself ... how can you help me?
The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC) was founded in 1990 and has been changing the lives of children and their families ever since. Our mission is to provide services to traumatized children and their families.

We also strive to give school professionals, crisis intervention teams, medical and mental health professionals, childcare professionals and others the training and resources needed to help children, parents, families and schools thrive.

TLC’s certification programs, conferences, books and online courses provide world-class training to thousands of professionals every year.

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