

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.



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# How common is it?

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.<sup>2</sup>

**60%** of adults say they experienced abuse or other traumatic family events in their own childhoods.<sup>2</sup>

**11%** of girls ages 14 to 17 reported experiencing sexual assault or abuse during the past year.<sup>3</sup>

**41%** of youth under 18 reported experiencing a physical assault in the last year.<sup>3</sup>

**14%** of children have experienced abuse by a caregiver.<sup>3</sup>

**70%** of children living in poor inner-city neighborhoods are exposed to trauma.<sup>4</sup>

# How is learning affected?

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

Focusing

Following teacher directions

Recalling what was heard

Retaining information

**Additionally, these cognitive deficits may result in:**

A dark silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is centered in the image. The silhouette is filled with a list of cognitive deficits. The background consists of horizontal stripes in shades of blue, yellow, and green.

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<sup>5</sup>

What happened?  
Where's the happy,  
confident student we  
knew?

# What you can do

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?** ”

# TLC can help

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.

## Want to know more?



Visit [starr.org/tlc](http://starr.org/tlc)  
Email [TLC@starrtraining.org](mailto:TLC@starrtraining.org)  
Call 877.306.5256

<sup>1</sup> National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Early Childhood Trauma" (<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma>)

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, "Childhood Trauma and Its Effect on Healthy Development," July 2012 ([http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/childhood%20trauma\\_brief\\_in\\_final.pdf](http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/childhood%20trauma_brief_in_final.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> JAMA Pediatrics, "Violence, Crime, and Abuse Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth," May 2013 (<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/05-13%20PED%20childhood%20exposure%20to%20violence.pdf>)

<sup>4</sup> Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center, "Understanding the Impact of Trauma and Urban Poverty on Family Systems: Risks, Resilience and Interventions" ([http://www.nctsn.net/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/understanding\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_trauma.pdf](http://www.nctsn.net/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/understanding_the_impact_of_trauma.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> Starr Commonwealth, "Common Trauma Reactions," Oct. 2013 (<https://www.starr.org/research/common-trauma-reactions>)



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