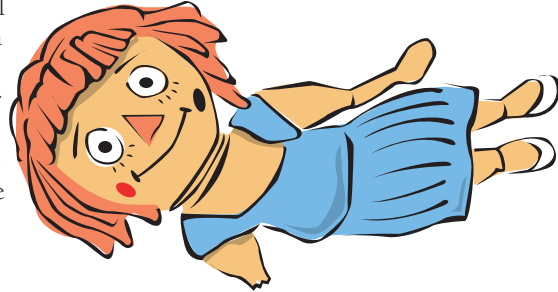


# Helping Children Cope With Violence

When children experience or witness a traumatic or violent event, they may not react to it immediately. In fact, in some cases it may be days or even weeks later that emotional reactions such as fear, anger, depression, or withdrawal appear. Some may overcome their worries and bad memories with the passage of time and with emotional support.

Others may experience long-term effects from the **emotional trauma**—



serious emotional distress caused by such things as experiencing or witnessing a violent event or natural disaster, losing a friend or family member, or being separated from

parents at an early age.

The August 2, 2000, issue of JAMA includes an article about adult women who experience

stress as the result of sexual or physical abuse they experienced when they were children.

## REACTIONS TO TRAUMA:

Reactions to trauma may appear immediately after the traumatic event, but in some cases these reactions may appear days or weeks later. Everyone, including children and adolescents, reacts to stress in different ways. The following are just some examples of possible reactions:

*Children 5 years old and younger may:*

- Have a persistent fear of being separated from parents or caregivers or be excessively clingy
- Cry, whimper, or scream
- Have problems sleeping or have nightmares
- Have **regressive behavior** (children return to behavior that is not appropriate for their age, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or being afraid of the dark)

*Along with the reactions above, children 6 to 11 years old may also:*

- Withdraw from other people and everyday activities
- Act out with disruptive behavior, such as misbehaving at home and school in ways that are not typical for the child
- Have difficulty concentrating and paying attention
- Have irrational fears
- Be irritable
- Have outbursts of anger and fighting
- Become depressed, anxious, have feelings of guilt, or become emotionally numb
- Get lower grades at school

*Along with the reactions above, adolescents 12 to 17 years old may also:*

- Have flashbacks
- Avoid any reminders of the traumatic event
- Abuse drugs such as alcohol
- Have suicidal thoughts

*Additional Sources:* National Institute of Mental Health, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Pediatrics, *The AMA Complete Guide to Your Children's Health*

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## HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE:

Explain the traumatic event as best you can and allow the child to ask any questions

- Comfort your children and let them know that you love them and will take care of them
- Encourage your children to talk about the traumatic event and their feelings connected with the experience; listen to their responses without judging them
- Allow children to express their emotions and vulnerabilities; do not expect them to be brave or "tough"
- Do not criticize regressive behavior or shame children for the emotions or behavior they have returned to in order to cope
- Let children know that the traumatic event was not their fault
- Let children sleep with a light on, in a room with a sibling, or in your room for a limited time if it is comforting to them
- Gradually return to everyday routine; this can be comforting for many children

If your child continues to have difficulty, seek professional help. Your doctor or your child's pediatrician can refer you to a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute of Mental Health 800/421-4211 or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Web site [www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm)
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Public Information 3615 Wisconsin Ave NW Washington, DC 20016 202-966-7300 or [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

