

Part 2, Course 5T

Study Guide 2



ABOUT CHILD TRAUMA

[Home](#) > [What is Child Trauma?](#) > [About Child Trauma](#)

What Is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic. This is particularly important for young children as their sense of safety depends on the perceived safety of their attachment

figures.

Traumatic experiences can initiate strong emotions and physical reactions that can persist long after the event. Children may feel terror, helplessness, or fear, as well as physiological reactions such as heart pounding, vomiting, or loss of bowel or bladder control. Children who experience an inability to protect themselves or who lacked protection from others to avoid the consequences of the traumatic experience may also feel overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Even though adults work hard to keep children safe, dangerous events still happen. This danger can come from outside of the family (such as a natural disaster, car accident, school shooting, or community violence) or from within the family, such as domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one.

What Experiences Might Be Traumatic?

- Physical, sexual, or psychological abuse and neglect (including trafficking)
- Natural and technological disasters or terrorism
- Family or community violence
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- Substance use disorder (personal or familial)
- Refugee and war experiences (including torture)
- Serious accidents or life-threatening illness
- Military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury)

When children have been in situations where they feared for their lives, believed that they would be injured, witnessed violence, or tragically lost a loved one, they may show signs of child traumatic stress.

What Is Child Traumatic Stress?

Children who suffer from child traumatic stress are those who have been exposed to one or more traumas over the course of their lives and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the events have ended. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, such as intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.

Children who suffer from traumatic stress often have these types of symptoms when reminded in some way of the traumatic event. Although many of us may experience reactions to stress from time to time, when a child is experiencing traumatic stress, these reactions interfere with the child's daily life and ability to function and interact with others. At no age are children immune to the effects of traumatic experiences. Even infants and toddlers can experience traumatic

stress. The way that traumatic stress manifests will vary from child to child and will depend on the child's age and developmental level.

Without treatment, repeated childhood exposure to traumatic events can affect the brain and nervous system and increase health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, eating disorders, substance use, and high-risk activities). Research shows that child trauma survivors can be more likely to have long-term health problems (e.g., diabetes and heart disease) or to die at an earlier age. Traumatic stress can also lead to increased use of health and mental health services and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Adult survivors of traumatic events may also have difficulty in establishing fulfilling relationships and maintaining employment.

Reminders and Adversities

Traumatic experiences can set in motion a cascade of changes in children's lives that can be challenging and difficult. These can include changes in where they live, where they attend school, who they're living with, and their daily routines. They may now be living with injury or disability to themselves or others. There may be ongoing criminal or civil proceedings.

Traumatic experiences leave a legacy of reminders that may persist for years. These reminders are linked to aspects of the traumatic experience, its circumstances, and its aftermath. Children may be reminded by persons, places, things, situations, anniversaries, or by feelings such as renewed fear or sadness. Physical reactions can also serve as reminders, for example, increased heart rate or bodily sensations. Identifying children's responses to trauma and loss reminders is an important tool for understanding how and why children's distress, behavior, and functioning often fluctuate over time. Trauma and loss reminders can reverberate within families, among friends, in schools, and across communities in ways that can powerfully influence the ability of children, families, and communities to recover. Addressing trauma and loss reminders is critical to enhancing ongoing adjustment.

Risk and Protective Factors

Fortunately, even when children experience a traumatic event, they don't always develop traumatic stress. Many factors contribute to symptoms, including whether the child has experienced trauma in the past, and protective factors at the child, family, and community levels can reduce the adverse impact of trauma. Some factors to consider include:

- **Severity of the event.** How serious was the event? How badly was the child or someone she loves physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die?
- **Proximity to the event.** Was the child actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did the child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened?
- **Caregivers' reactions.** Did the child's family believe that he or she was telling the truth? Did caregivers take the

child's reactions seriously? How did caregivers respond to the child's needs, and how did they cope with the event themselves?

- **Prior history of trauma.** Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions.
- **Family and community factors.** The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and or resources that help buffer against the harmful effects of traumatic experiences and their aftermath. One of these protective factors can be the child's cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, experiences of racism and discrimination can increase a child's risk for traumatic stress symptoms.

[Printer-friendly version](#)

CONTACT US

ABOUT THIS WEBSITE

[SITE MAP](#)

[PRIVACY](#)

[DISCLAIMER](#)

THE LEARNING CENTER

Offers FREE continuing education (CE) credits and e-learning resources.

The NCTSN is funded by the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA),



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and jointly coordinated by UCLA and Duke University.

STOP.

CEU By Net participants, please note the following:

There are seven chapters or Study Guides in this CEU By Net Course 5T (i.e., Parts 1 through 7). You have finished reading Study Guide 2 (i.e., Part 2). Some of this information is reviewed in subsequent Study Guides, but each Study Guide has a different primary focus. There is a short quiz for each of the seven Study Guides.

If you have enrolled in this course, Quiz 2 is available for you to take now or later, inside your account. To take Quiz 2, log in to your My Home Page, click the name of this course (Course 5T), and then click the number of the quiz you wish to take (i.e., Quiz 2).

You must pass all seven of the short quizzes for this course, and then complete and submit the Feedback Form, in order to download your certificate.

If you don't want to take Quiz 2 now, you may continue reading the course material (Study Guide 3, i.e., Part 3) and take Quiz 2 later.

**Thank you,
CEU By Net**