



Parenting after trauma

A guide for parents and caregivers

Anthem 
HealthKeepers Plus
Offered by HealthKeepers, Inc.

Supporting your child

Feeling safe and loved is important for a child's health and well-being. Children who have experienced trauma often spend a lifetime trying to forget or overcome these moments of their childhood. By better understanding the effects of trauma, you can help yourself and your child navigate these issues with success.

Inside this guide, you will learn about:

- What trauma is.
- The effects of trauma on children.
- Ways to understand your child's behavior.
- How to help your child.
- When it is time to ask for help.
- Important phone numbers and resources.



Trauma

Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm. The harm can be physical or emotional. It can threaten the child or someone close to them. Trauma can result from a single event, or a series of events over time.

Traumatic events for a child may be:

- Abuse, including emotional, physical, or sexual.
- Neglect.
- Effects of poverty, such as homelessness, or not having enough to eat.
- Being separated from loved ones.
- Bullying.
- Witnessing harm to a loved one or pet, such as domestic or community violence.
- Natural disasters or accidents.
- Dating violence.
- Unpredictable parental behavior due to substance use or mental illness.

Being involved in the child welfare system becomes another traumatic event. Being suddenly taken from their home and parents can add more trauma. So can entering a new home with an unfamiliar family. We want to help you feel educated and prepared to help support the child in your care as best as possible.

The effects of trauma on children

Certain stress in a child's life helps them grow and develop new skills, like learning how to ride a bike, or feeling nervous before a test. However, trauma occurs when a stressful experience overwhelms the child's natural ability to cope. These events cause changes in the body — such as sweating or a faster heart rate — as well as changes in how the brain perceives and responds to the world.

In many cases, a child's body and brain bounce back to normal with no lasting harm. For some children, these experiences can interfere with their development and have long-lasting effects. The possible effects of trauma vary depending on the child and the type of traumatic events they have experienced.

Possible effects include:

- Difficulty thinking, learning, and concentrating.
- Low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.
- Difficulty making friends and maintaining relationships.
- Fighting, aggression, and difficulty managing emotions.
- Feeling unsafe or more distrustful of others.



Long-term impacts

Exposure to long-term trauma can increase the risk of:

- Adolescent pregnancy.
- Alcohol and drug abuse.
- Asthma.
- Depression.
- Intimate partner violence.
- Learning problems, including lower grades and higher rates of suspensions or expulsions.
- Liver disease.
- Long-term health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease.
- Sexually transmitted infections.
- Smoking.
- Suicide.

With the right kind of help, children can heal. Many of these negative outcomes can be reduced or eliminated.

Understanding your child’s behavior

The signs of traumatic stress may be different in each child. Keep in mind your child’s behavior may be a learned response to stress. It will take time and patience for their brain and body to learn and respond more appropriately to their new, safe environment.

When children have experienced trauma, particularly multiple traumatic events over an

extended period of time, their bodies, brains, and nervous systems adapt in an effort to protect them. This might result in behaviors, such as:

- Increased aggression.
- Self-harm.
- Distrusting or disobeying adults.
- Dissociation, or feeling disconnected from reality.

Signs of trauma in children of different ages:

Young children (ages 0–5)

- Easily startled, or difficult to calm down
- Irritability or fussiness
- Frequent tantrums
- Clinginess
- Activity levels much higher or lower than peers
- Reenacting traumatic experience in play or conversation
- Delays in reaching physical, language, or other milestones

- Eating more or less than peers
- Getting into trouble at school or home
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches with no apparent cause

Teens (ages 13–18)

- Oversharing about the trauma or denying it happened
- Refusal to follow rules or talking back
- Sleeping much more or less than peers
- Risky behaviors
- Physical or verbal fighting
- Retreating from friends and classmates
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Getting in trouble with law enforcement

These signs alone do not necessarily mean a child has experienced trauma. You should seek help if symptoms:

- Last more than a few weeks.
- Become more severe.
- Interfere in your child’s or your family’s daily life.



Helping your child

Trying to understand the best treatment plan for your child can be overwhelming. Many children recover and thrive with the right treatment and trauma-informed support. A critical part of a child’s recovery is having a supportive caregiving system. That is where you come in.

Consider the following tips:

- **Identify what triggers your child.** Watch for patterns of behavior or reactions that do not seem to fit a situation. Help your child avoid situations that trigger traumatic memories. These triggers may lessen or go away as more healing occurs.
- **Be emotionally and physically available.** Many times, children just want to feel attention, comfort, and encouragement.

Follow their lead and be patient if your child seems needy.

- **Avoid physical punishment.** This may trigger a child who has been physically or verbally abused. This can make things worse.
- **Listen.** Do not avoid hard topics or uncomfortable conversations, but do not force it before they are ready. Let them know it is OK to have many feelings after an experience. Reassure them that what happened was not their fault.
- **Be patient.** Everyone heals from trauma differently, and it does not happen overnight. Give your child, and yourself, grace as they work toward healing.
- **Encourage self-esteem.** Positive experiences and encouragement can help a child recover and increase resilience.



Triggers

When your child is behaving in a way that seems irrational or extreme, they may be experiencing a trauma trigger. A trigger is an aspect of a traumatic event that occurs in a different situation, but reminds the child of the original event. Examples may be sounds, smells, feelings, places, postures, tones of voice, or even emotions.



Secondary trauma



Being affected by someone else’s trauma is sometimes called “secondary trauma.” Parenting a child who has experienced trauma can be difficult. The best cure for secondary trauma is prevention. To take care of your child, you have to take good care of yourself. Make time for things you enjoy doing. Do things that support your physical and emotional well-being. If your child’s trauma is overwhelming, talk with a caring friend, family member, or professional.

When it is time to ask for help

If your child’s symptoms or behaviors last more than a few weeks, or if they become worse, it is time to ask for help. Anthem HealthKeepers Plus Foster Care Specialty Plan is here for you as you decide what treatment options are best for your child. Our network of case managers, providers, and specialists are here to help you and your child manage trauma.

Each child’s treatment depends on the nature, timing, and severity of those traumatic events. Some symptoms of trauma can overlap with a behavioral health diagnosis. Behavioral health counseling or therapy by a professional trained to recognize and treat trauma in children can help address the root cause and promote healing. At times, medication may also be needed to control symptoms and improve your child’s ability to learn new skills. While medications may be helpful for some, it should rarely be the first and only treatment option.

Anthem HealthKeepers Plus is here to help

We have a dedicated team trained to answer your questions about services for children enrolled in the Foster Care Specialty Plan. If you have questions or would like to be connected to your care manager, please call our Foster Care Specialty Plan Support Line: **833-838-2605 (TTY 711)** Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time>.



Questions to ask a behavioral health provider before starting treatment:

- Are you familiar with research about the effects of trauma on children?
- Can you tell me about your experience working with children and youth who have experienced trauma?
- How do you determine whether a child’s symptoms may be caused by trauma?
- How does a child’s trauma history influence your treatment approach?

Important phone numbers

Anthem HealthKeepers Plus Foster Care Specialty Plan Support Line **833-838-2605 (TTY 711)**, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time.

My care manager's name: _____

My care manager's phone number: _____

My behavioral (mental) health provider's name: _____

My behavioral health provider's phone number: _____



If your child is in crisis ...

Call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at **988** or chat at 988lifeline.org. If a situation is life-threatening, always call **911**.

Sources:

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anthem.com/va/medicaid/foster-care-adoption

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