Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children

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The unexpected loss of a loved one, a car accident, or exposure to a violent experience is familiar to many of us. Everyone reacts to such events differently, varying from shock and numbness, to withdrawal and depression or anger and agitation. There is no “right” reaction to devastating events. Over time, some people are able to get their life back on track, process their feelings and begin to heal, but for others their responses to trauma are prolonged, intense and interfere with day to day functioning.

As children grow and mature, they are faced with age-specific challenges they must master before moving on to the next stage. At each developmental stage, a child is faced with different tasks that build upon one another: toddlers learn to explore their world; school-aged children are interested in making friends and adolescents try to separate from parents and become more independent. When faced with traumatic stress a child’s energy is diverted into coping and he or she has fewer resources to master developmental challenges. Most children are very resilient and can rebound from traumatic experiences if they have support from caregivers to make them feel safe, and protected. The level of support a child receives from a caregiver is the most significant factor in how well a child recovers after a traumatic event.

When caring for a child who has recently experienced an acute (one time) traumatic event, it is important to recognize the child’s need for safety, stability and support. Caregiver/parents can help children cope with trauma by being a “safe person” to talk to and providing a safe place, by keeping a routine and engaging them in positive distracting activities, and by ensuring children have a healthy diet and plenty of exercise. Love and unconditional acceptance can begin the healing process for hurting children.