

LONG LIVE CHILDHOOD

At CHOC Children's, we believe mental health conditions shouldn't put childhood on pause. We understand identifying post-traumatic stress disorder isn't as obvious as a broken bone, but our pediatric mental health specialists provide resources to families who seek the best help, so their children can have a better chance to lead full and healthy lives. We want to teach our families and communities how PTSD presents by age and how you can help preserve childhood.

WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

A traumatic event is a shocking, scary or dangerous experience that affects someone emotionally. Examples include car accidents, serious illness, hospitalization, death of a loved one or pet, physical assault, witnessing violence, or natural disasters.



MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

1120 W. La Veta Ave.
Orange, CA 92868
714.509.8481

If you are struggling to help your child process a traumatic event, or if you feel your child is experiencing PTSD and could benefit from additional support, ask your pediatrician for a referral to a pediatric psychologist or psychiatrist. You may also refer to your insurance card for the Mental Health Services phone number for assistance.

If your child is experiencing thoughts of self-harm, or harming others, seek medical attention immediately.

CHOC Children's is exclusively committed to improving the health and well-being of children through clinical expertise, advocacy, outreach, education and research. Our growing health care community includes two state-of-the-art pediatric hospitals in Orange and Mission Viejo, many primary and specialty care clinics, a mental health inpatient center, and four clinical centers of excellence — the CHOC Children's Heart, Neuroscience, Orthopaedic and Hyundai Cancer Institutes.



PEDIATRIC PTSD

UNDERSTANDING PEDIATRIC
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

PEDIATRIC POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER



WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

PTSD is a mental health condition that is caused by a traumatic, or terrifying event. Responses to traumatic events are different for everyone. Some people experience distress immediately after the event, and others may experience it months or years later. The duration of symptoms varies. General symptoms include:

- Re-experiencing bad memories of the traumatic event (i.e., nightmares, flashbacks)
- Experiencing fear or anxiety when reminded of the event
- Hyperarousal (i.e., jittery, irritable, trouble concentrating, easily frightened and angered)
- Avoiding situations or people that are a reminder of the trauma, or avoiding talking about the event
- Negative thoughts and mood (i.e., depression, anxiety, guilt, self-blame)
- Isolating oneself, lack of participation in normal activities

COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA IN CHILDREN

Preschool and young children:

- Tantrums – more frequent or severe than usual
- Poor appetite
- Difficulty sleeping

- Separation anxiety
- Regressive behaviors (i.e., bed wetting)
- Physical complaints (i.e., headache, stomachache)

School-age children:

- Worries about their safety and the safety of others
- Separation anxiety (i.e., clingy behavior)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decline in academic performance
- Aggressive behavior
- Physical complaints (i.e., headache, stomachache)
- Easily startled

Adolescents:

- Depression, loneliness, self-blame
- Anxiety, excessive worry, panic
- Engaging in risky behaviors (i.e., substance use, self-harm)
- Aggressive behavior
- Avoiding school
- Trouble sleeping
- Physical complaints (i.e., headache, stomachache)

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Explore what your child already knows in a gentle and calm manner. Allow your child to express their feelings about the event when they are ready through speaking, writing or drawing.

Explain what has happened in a way that your child can understand, based on their age.

- Address any wrong information your child may have heard and validate that a scary thing did happen. Reassure their sense of safety.
- Avoid overwhelming your child by providing only answers to the questions they ask.
- Provide examples of ways that you and your community keep children safe every day (i.e., police officers, firemen, crossing guards, teachers, nurses, doctors, etc.).

Emotionally model healthy expressions of feelings, as children take their cues from their parents. Describe how you cope with your upsetting emotions (i.e., “When something bad happens to me or I feel scared, I talk about it with someone who makes me feel safe”).

Express to your child that their feelings are normal and let them know it is okay to feel scared, sad, mad or angry. Reassure your child that s/he is not at fault.

Ensure stability by continuing your child’s daily routine. This will provide them with a sense of reassurance and safety. Maintaining a daily routine is not meant to ignore what has happened, but rather to provide the child with structure, stability and predictability.