

Your Child and Gangs: What You Need to Know about Trauma - Tips for Parents

Has your son or daughter ever experienced a life-threatening event? Feared for his/her safety? Witnessed a violent crime? Tragically lost a loved one? Traumatic stress reactions to events like these can seriously affect your child's life.



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Yolanda's Story

Late one evening as 15-year-old Yolanda was walking home from a friend's house, she was attacked at knife point and raped by two men she did not know. They threatened to kill her if she told anyone what had happened. Stumbling home in a daze, Yolanda cleaned herself up and went to bed. Ashamed of getting herself into the situation and terrified that the men might come back, she never told her parents about the attack.

Soon afterwards, she started having nightmares and trouble sleeping. During the day, reminders of what had happened to her – such as seeing boys who resembled the rapists, or even talking to the friend she'd been visiting – would cause her to have flashbacks where she re-experienced the events of that awful night.

Yolanda began having trouble paying attention in class and soon lost interest in school. She found herself getting irritated at her friends and having angry outbursts, particularly when she felt threatened or disrespected. She started hanging out with a group of girls known for their toughness because they made her feel safer and more in control. She frequently skipped school to be with her new friends, where she learned to shoplift and fight. Yolanda spent less time at home, argued with her family when she was there, and refused to follow family rules. She was eventually jumped into the gang and accepted as a member.

Potential Traumatic Events

- Physical/sexual abuse
- Witnessing community or domestic violence
- Neglect or abandonment by a parent or caregiver
- Automobile or other types of accidents
- Physical violence, including bullying
- Witnessing police activity or having someone close arrested
- Witnessing another person being killed or seriously injured
- Death or loss of someone close, especially in an unexpected or violent manner

What is Traumatic Stress?

Situations like those listed above can result in a child's suffering from traumatic stress. Symptoms of traumatic stress occur when a child or teen experiences an event that threatens life or physical well-being in such a way that it overwhelms his/her ability to cope. Witnessing such a threat to another person can also be traumatic.

Typically, traumatic events result in feelings of extreme fear, horror, and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The physical reactions that happen in the face of trauma – racing heart, clammy hands and feet, loss of bowel or bladder control – can also be extremely distressing to youth.

Immediately after a traumatic event, many children and teens will have some or all of these reactions: 1) nervousness, jumpiness, and a heightened startle response to any loud noise, sudden movement, or other surprise; 2) experiencing the event over and over through disturbing memories, images, and/or sensory impressions such as smells or sounds; 3) trouble sleeping or nightmares; 4) staying away from others and stopping normal activities as a way of avoiding trauma reminders that can bring back distressing images and memories; 5) feeling numb or “zoning out”; and 6) difficulty concentrating or paying attention in school. For many youth, these symptoms get better over time. For others, these symptoms remain or worsen, and professional help is needed. Untreated traumatic stress can frequently result in behavior problems, and can also take the form of depression, a sense of despair about the future, and withdrawal from ordinary activities.

Other common traumatic stress reactions include:

- *Excessive worry about the safety of self and others*
- *Angry outbursts, aggression and/or self-protective behaviors*
- *Indifference or acting as if nothing matters or has no emotional impact*
- *Defiance of authority or rules*
- *Change in school performance*
- *Constantly checking out surroundings for danger or threat*
- *Repeated discussion of the event and its details*
- *Increased impulsive and risk-taking behaviors*
- *Attempts to alter feelings through substance abuse*

Mitchell's Story

The gang had always been a visible part of Mitchell's neighborhood, so it seemed only natural that he join as soon as he could. He started to get into trouble with the police by age 16, but managed to stay out of jail. When he was 17, he attended a party put on by several members of his gang. Around 10 o'clock, a couple of older youth showed up uninvited and began arguing. Mitchell and the rest of the party soon spilled out into the yard as the argument became more heated. Suddenly, one of the uninvited youth pulled a gun and began shooting into the crowd. Mitchell was standing right next to one of his friends who was hit in the head and died almost instantly. People began to scream and run for cover as other guns came out and multiple shots were fired. By the time it was over, three others were seriously hurt.

Within a few days, Mitchell began to experience changes in his behavior. He jumped whenever he heard a loud noise, and couldn't stop looking over his shoulder to check out his surroundings. He started to avoid places and activities that reminded him of the party and became very nervous in large groups. He started carrying a gun whenever he went out and was eventually arrested for carrying a weapon.

Gangs and trauma go together. Research shows that traumatic experiences can increase the risk of your child's becoming involved in a gang. And once in a gang, your child is likely to experience more life-changing traumatic events than peers who stay out of gangs.

Why do gangs appeal to traumatized youth?

While traumatic stress is certainly not the sole cause for gang involvement and delinquency, it can make gangs more appealing. Gangs can offer a sense of safety, control, and rules often missing in the lives of traumatized youth. Gangs can also provide a place for youth to stand up for themselves through behaviors such as aggression and violence. Faced with school failure and a lack of positive options, traumatized youth may find some feeling of success, belonging, and self-worth through gang involvement. Gangs may also provide these young people with an outlet for their often negative beliefs that their parents, adults, or society in general cannot keep them safe or provide for their needs.

How will my son or daughter respond to trauma?

Individual reactions to trauma vary dramatically. What is devastating to one child may be less so for another. A youth's subjective response to a traumatic event depends upon a number of factors, such as individual personality, coping style, previous trauma, cultural background, and environment. Social and family support can be very important in helping a youth to overcome the impact of a traumatic event.

What can I do to help my son or daughter?

It's important to let children know that you are open to hearing about their feelings, and that you appreciate the seriousness of their traumatic experiences. You can also reassure them that their reactions, no matter how severe, are normal, and can get better. Here are some other ways you can help your child:

- Show a genuine interest in and be protective of your son/daughter.
- Create safe environments for him/her that include normal routines and predictable outcomes where your child knows what will happen next.
- Provide choices that give a sense of control and personal responsibility.
- Instill a sense of hope and optimism about the future and help your youth set and achieve personal goals.
- Set clear, firm limits that describe and reward positive behavior, rather than punishing "bad" behavior.
- Recognize that even the most disruptive behaviors are often the result of fear and anxiety caused by the trauma.

- Help him/her become re-engaged with school and provide supports to improve school success.
- Anticipate reminders such as anniversaries or the recurrence of traumatic events that could increase stress and provide additional support.
- Teach skills, such as deep breathing or counting to 10, to help manage overwhelming emotional reactions.
- Get him/her involved in a positive community cause or social justice issue.
- Be patient. There is no specific timetable for the healing process. Some youth recover more quickly than others. Let your youth heal in his/her own time and don't pressure him/her "to get over it."

When do I seek professional help?

Effective mental health treatments can help youth overcome the impact of traumatic stress. If your child experiences symptoms which significantly interfere with his/her ability to function over a period of several months, you should seek an evaluation from a mental health professional experienced in treating trauma. You should also consider treatment if your child's symptoms are getting worse or if your child is very depressed, extremely nervous, or is engaging in self-destructive behavior.



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What can I expect from trauma-focused treatment?

Most effective mental health treatments include at least some of the following:

- Education about the impact of trauma.
- Approaches to help youth and their parents establish or re-establish a sense of safety.
- Techniques for dealing with overwhelming feelings.
- Opportunities to talk about, and come to grips with, the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment.
- Involvement, when possible, of primary caregivers in the healing process.

For more information, please go to www.nctsn.org

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Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.