

TRAUMA AND FAMILIES/CAREGIVERS

QRTP Infosheet: Issue Six

What is family/caregiver trauma?

Most families/caregivers have experienced trauma at one time or another. Although family members experience trauma collectively, they can also experience it individually. Trauma always contains a sudden and surprising element and most often follows an event that is scary, threatening, dangerous or violent. This is what overwhelms people and affects their abilities to deal with it. Individuals experience family trauma in different ways, depending on many variables. These can include an individual's age, sex, role within the family, the family's culture and ethnicity, and the role they played in the trauma itself.

How does trauma impact the family?

Research demonstrates that trauma impacts all levels of the family:¹

- **Families** that “come together” after traumatic experiences can strengthen bonds and hasten recovery. Families dealing with high stress, limited resources, and multiple trauma exposures often find their coping resources depleted. Their efforts to plan or problem solve are not effective, resulting in ongoing crises and discord.
- **Foster care and family separation** may have huge behavioral and health impacts associated with separation, so compassion can go a long way to support kids and their families in the child welfare system. Deportation, refugee resettlement, deployment, divorce, incarceration, and entry into foster care are just some of the ways in which families may be separated, but there may be many more reasons why individuals no longer reside together. Family separation has much broader implications and ultimately affects us all.
- **Children, adolescents, and adult family members** can experience mild, moderate, or severe posttraumatic stress symptoms. After traumatic exposure, some people grow stronger and develop a new appreciation for life. Others may struggle with continuing trauma-related problems that disrupt functioning in many areas of their lives.
- **Extended family** relationships can offer sustaining resources in the form of family rituals and traditions, emotional support, and care giving. Some families who have had significant trauma across generations may experience current problems in functioning, and they risk transmitting the effects of trauma to the next generation.
- **Parent-child relationships** have a central role in parents' and children's adjustment after trauma exposure. Protective, nurturing, and effective parental responses are positively associated with reduced symptoms in children. At the same time, parental stress, isolation, and burden can make parents less emotionally available to their children and less able to help them recover from trauma.
- **Adult intimate relationships** can be a source of strength in coping with a traumatic experience. However, many intimate partners struggle with communication and have

¹ Adapted from National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network; *Trauma and Families: Fact Sheet for Providers*

difficulty expressing emotion or maintaining intimacy, which make them less available to each other and increases the risk of separation, conflict, or interpersonal violence.

- **Sibling relationships** that are close and supportive can offer a buffer against the negative effect of trauma, but siblings who feel disconnected or unprotected can have high conflict. Siblings not directly exposed to trauma can suffer secondary or vicarious traumatic stress; these symptoms mirror posttraumatic stress and interfere with functioning at home or school.
- **Family members frequently experience the traumatic stress reactions of the individual family member who was traumatized** (e.g., angry outbursts, nightmares, avoidant behavior, other symptoms of anxiety). These repetitive experiences can increase the risk of secondary trauma and symptoms of mental illness among the family, heighten the risk for unhealthy and unsafe behavior among children and youth (e.g., bullying others, problems in social relationships, health-damaging behaviors). It can also increase children/youth's risk for developing posttraumatic stress later in life, leading to a greater propensity for traumatic stress reactions across generations of the family.

Generational Trauma

Generational trauma refers to a type of trauma that does not end with the individual or one part of a family. Instead, it lingers and gnaws through one generation to the next. Families with a history of unresolved trauma, depression, anxiety, and addiction may continue to pass maladaptive coping strategies and distrustful views of life onto future generations. In this way, one can repeat the same patterns and attitudes of former generations, regardless of whether they are healthy or not. While generational trauma can affect us all, those at the highest risk are in families that have experienced significant forms of abuse, neglect, torture, oppression, and racial disparities.



How can providers support families after trauma?

- Promote safety for all family members and prevent exposure to further traumas.
- Growing awareness of trauma's impact on families—including the important roles families play in helping children recover—highlights the importance of putting families at the center of trauma services.
- When families carry out routines, rituals, and traditions, they strengthen their connections and grow stronger together.

- Talking, laughing, sharing memories and feelings, as well as working together to solve problems, manage stress, and plan for each day and the future are necessary for resilience and recovery from traumatic stress.
- If families experience numerous or ongoing traumas, resources diminish and the “wear-and-tear” effect on health and well-being may call for family-informed trauma services in addition to resources for recovery and ongoing healing.
- Providers who actively engage primary, biological, extended, kinship, birth, and foster families and work with professionals in other child- and family-serving systems are better partners in the delivery of family-centered, trauma-informed services.

Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children’s Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events. This unique network of frontline providers, family members, researchers, and national partners is committed to changing the course of children’s lives by improving their care and moving scientific gains quickly into practice across the U.S. [Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that family members may have different reactions to the same traumatic event.](#) Reactions will differ depending on each family member's age, developmental level, trauma history, as well as his or her relationship with the child, and personal exposure to the event. For example, one family member may have shared the child’s experience, another may have witnessed it, and another may have heard about it after the fact. While all family members may be upset, only some will have traumatic stress reactions, and each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience.

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families by connecting child welfare, adoption, and related professionals as well as the public to information, resources, and tools covering topics on child welfare, child abuse and neglect, out-of-home care, adoption, and more. Many children in the child welfare system have experienced complex and family trauma. The Information Gateway provides [Resources on Trauma for Caregivers and Families](#)

UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center

The UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center has extensive experience working with families and family systems. The staff work collaboratively, both with each other and with other providers, to ensure that the families in our community receive the highest level of services available. They offer a wide array of services to families, all with the aim of recognizing families’ strengths and building on them. [Trauma influences the whole family.](#)