

When Trauma Shows Up as Anger: Guidelines for Parents and Caregivers

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It is normal to feel abnormal after abnormal events. Trauma throws all of us out of the normal realm of functioning. For children, this may take on many forms. It's a bit easier to hold on to our compassion as parents when children show their distress through tears, worry, clinginess, or increased need for reassurance. It's harder, however, if the effects of trauma show up in the form of anger. Not only is it hard for parents to hold onto our compassion at these times, but it is also hard to remember that tantrums, defiance, or meltdowns are because of the trauma. Instead, we can start to personalize our child's behavior, become dysregulated ourselves, and disconnect from our empathy for what our child has endured. When trauma causes our child to seem angry, we have to remember that, under that anger, our child is suffering. Our child feels afraid, dysregulated, on guard for the next scary event, and our child's brain is stuck in survival mode. As much as we tell ourselves that they need tenderness, it's hard to hug a porcupine. Trauma in the form of anger can feel much like the persistent pokes of porcupine quills.

For those children affected by early trauma (ages 0-3), loss or separation from a parent or caregiver, there are other variables at play as well. It's a myth that early trauma does not have as much of an impact if children are too young to remember the trauma. In fact, it is the opposite. Early trauma takes a greater toll on children because it occurs at a time when children's brains are vulnerable and growing at exponential speed. Early trauma literally causes brain damage. It can impact a child's ability to assess risk versus safety, and to regulate their emotions for years to come. It can also impact a child's brain development, compromising future learning, memory, language, and ability to sustain attention. Loss of an attachment figure as a result of events like foster care or death of a parent can also impact a child's beliefs about relationships and affect their ability to trust in future attachment caregivers for years to come as well. The reader is encouraged to read the additional handout *Parenting Practices for Children with Early Trauma or Attachment Problems* to learn more about the impact of early trauma and attachment disruptions as well as how to parent a child with lingering challenges.

The good news is that we are resilient, and this is particularly true for children. In fact, all of us will experience some type of trauma eventually in our life. Yet, we do not all go on to develop a trauma disorder such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For the majority of life traumas, we are able to return to a normal level of functioning within a couple of months. However, there are certain types of trauma and vulnerability factors that place us at risk for more problems after a trauma. Children and adolescents who had previous mental health challenges, who already struggled with healthy coping skills, who lack supportive relationships to buffer the trauma effects, or who are continuing to face high levels of situational stress in their lives are most vulnerable. In addition, children and teens who experienced interpersonal trauma (e.g., sexual

abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence) are more likely to struggle long-term. Children who also are exposed to multiple traumas or losses, who are exposed to trauma for an extended time, or who witness high levels of violence are also at greater risk for adjustment problems. Finally, children exposed to early trauma, particularly if they do not have a consistent loving caregiver to protect them, are most at risk for long-term problems.

The most important takeaways from this handout are that 1) children need high levels of reassurance that they are indeed safe, and 2) children heal through relationships with sensitive, responsive caregivers. Even though we know that they are safe after the trauma is over, they may not feel safe in their bodies for a long time. They will need to be reminded of this safety over and over again, possibly for years. Children need a parent who can project an energy and a vibe of “We’ve got this.” They need a parent who can model regulation and resilience themselves. Parents will need to look under the behavior and see the child’s needs underneath. Parents will need to not get emotionally hooked by the child’s negative behavior and to see the hurt child under the behavior. This is not to say that parents should abdicate limits. In fact, children need routine, predictability, and consistent limits to feel safe, while also receiving high levels of nurturance and empathy to heal.

If trauma is showing up in the form of anger with your child, here are some strategies that might help.

1. Maintain a consistent routine with familiar activities by having your child return to school and regular activities as soon as possible.
2. Use family rituals to reestablish a sense of safety and connection such as family dinners or reading together.
3. Control your own anger. This is the most important strategy of all! Model healthy coping and calming skills, take a break if needed, or ask another adult to step in for you while you regroup.
4. Name your child’s anger and underlying feelings to show them that you get it. “You’re angry. Your whole world has been turned upside down.... It doesn’t feel fair,” Keep in mind that acknowledging and validating a child’s feeling does not mean you are agreeing with their narrative. For example, if they have a loved one killed in a car accident by a drunk driver, they may share revenge fantasies about the driver. You can validate the anger or rage your child feels without agreeing that they should go out and hurt the driver who caused the accident.
5. Focus on the behavior that’s not acceptable and expect your child to make repairs if their behavior was hurtful to others. Separate your child from the behavior. Kids do well when they can. Your child is hurting.
6. Remember that your child is not capable of reasoning when they are flooded. Skip the lecture. Don’t pile on consequences or keep ratcheting up threats of consequences when your child is upset. You are most likely stoking the fire, and they are not capable of reasoning. Stick to short mantras or phrases like “You’re okay. Right now, we just need to calm down. I’m right here.” Wait until the storm is over instead. Ensure that your child is calm and you are calm before going back to repair the situation or enforce

consequences. If your child has thrown food, they may have a kitchen to clean up. If your child has slammed doors, they may have some practice time later of showing that they can remember to go to their room and close doors softly over and over. If your child has called names or made threats or used other forms of “shock talk,” they may have certain acts of repair like apology letters, doing chores for others in the family, and so on.

7. Always go back to connection after an angry outburst and reassure your child of your love and your continued presence.
8. Know your child’s trauma cues or reminders. What causes your child to panic or flare? Do your detective work. Are there some trauma reminders you can avoid for now such as exposure to media/news or revisiting the neighborhood where the trauma occurred? Help your child plan for the unavoidable trauma reminders and to also identify supports or coping strategies that will help them navigate these situations.
9. In time, your child’s anger will fade as they learn to express the more vulnerable feelings underneath, their needs for support, and as they make meaning of the traumatic experience. This may happen through therapy, retelling the traumatic event, or processing the trauma through play or art. As they begin to make sense of the trauma, help them by gently correcting any false beliefs they are still holding onto. For example, they may blame themselves for the trauma. They may have false assumptions that other benign situations are dangerous because of the trauma. Your teen may assume all men are dangerous after a sexual assault. Note the distortions or over-generalizations and gently help them to correct these false beliefs over time.
10. If your child has trauma that has impacted normal developmental progression, they may have lagging skills (e.g, ability to focus, to read social cues, to perspective-take, to control impulses) that are impacting their ability to have emotional control, resulting in angry outbursts. Look for opportunities in calm times to build the skills and to catch the successes.
11. Finally, be gentle with yourself. Odds are that you also are affected by the trauma that your child endured. Healing takes moments of restored joy, reassurance of safety, replenishment, connection, and lots and lots of time.

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