

Recognizing and Reacting to Trauma Triggers

Have you ever parented a child who would have an extremely over-the-top response to the littlest thing? Whose response was so disproportionate to the activity that you had to ask yourself, “what is going on?” Many times, responses such as these, that don’t match the event, are a response to what is known as a “trauma trigger.”

Simply put, trauma triggers are reminders about traumatic events that cause people to want to protect themselves. Triggers make people think they are in danger and should quickly get safety. The triggers are related to a trauma memory and can be things we hear, see, feel, or even smell. Our brain recognizes these triggers because when, in the past, we saw, heard, or felt that way, it meant we needed to act quickly in response to a danger or threat.



There are many ways children who have experienced trauma might be triggered. Sometimes the triggers are easy to identify and, as caregivers, we can connect the trigger to the traumatic memory. Other times, the trigger may seem completely unrelated to the traumatic memory, leading us to wonder how the two are connected.

Here are a few examples of responses that may be related to a trauma trigger:

- You and the child in your care are walking down the street when a car backfires. The loud crack may startle you and cause you to look around curiously. But then you notice that the child you are with has fallen to the sidewalk, curled into a ball as tight as he can make himself, and is covering his head with his arms. As a caregiver, the response to a trigger may not make any sense, because the same alarm is not going off for you. You hear a car backfire and can very quickly assess that you are in no danger; but the loud crack triggered a painful and traumatic memory for the child and he instantly moved to protect himself. This trigger response is relatively easy to identify by the loud sound of a car backfiring.
- You’ve decided to serve green beans for dinner. When you put the green beans on the table, the child has a total meltdown—yelling, crying, and rolling on the ground. The response seems over the top and out of the norm. You later find out that green beans were often served for dinner in a home where the

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A quick note about PTSD

Very often, we hear about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that could develop months or perhaps years after a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic event. Some examples of traumatic events include, but are certainly not limited to, military combat and interpersonal (one-on-one) violence. It is important to note that not every person who experiences trauma will develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

child was mistreated and uncared for.

- You and the child in your care visit a friend with an energetic puppy that is eager to play. The child becomes terrified, clingy, and will not let you put him down. While this could be a normal fearful response, it may also be related to a trigger related to a bad experience with a dog. Sometimes, it just isn't easy to tell what the cause is.

Triggers, while they may be confusing and disruptive, do serve a purpose and are helpful to prepare children to deal with danger.

When a real danger or threat is present, it helps them to know that they need to protect themselves. When the danger or threat is a false alarm, children are left with a lot of bottled-up energy and emotion with nowhere for it to go. The children we are caring for who have experienced repeated trauma may be triggered like this and may have a behavioral response to the trigger.



Is This a Trauma Response?

When children come into our homes, we want them to feel and be safe. Sometimes it takes a child's brain and body a long time to make the shift to feeling safe and knowing they are in a safe place. For many children who experience triggers, their responses can be pretty strong; after all, they may have been used quite a lot. As caregivers, it's important that we have a lot of patience and understanding with the children in our care while they are adjusting to being in a safe environment.

“Parenting a traumatized child may require a shift from seeing a ‘bad kid’ to seeing a kid who has had bad things happen.”
from Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma, Child Welfare Information Gateway November 2014

Many times as caregivers we must put on our detective hat to try and understand if a behavior is a trauma response due to a trigger or something else. Here are a few suggestions to help in your detective work:

- *Is the response proportionate to the event?* Many times, trauma responses are exaggerated and over the top. So much so, that caregivers may ask themselves, “what is that about?” Exaggerated responses may be a red flag that you are dealing with a trauma response that has been triggered.
- *Think about what was happening just before the behavior.* You can often gather clues on what might have caused the behavior if you stop and think about the events leading up to it.
- *Ask the child.* While children may not be able to articulate exactly why they are doing what they are doing, they may be able to tell you what it is *not*.
- *Try to learn as much as possible about the child's history.* Talking with the child's social worker, therapist, or birth family may help shed some light on what might be possible triggers.

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- *Talk to a mental health professional.* There are many techniques and strategies for managing trauma responses and triggers. Mental health professionals may be able to help you identify ones that may work best for the child in your care.
- *Talk with other caregivers who are caring for children with trauma histories and triggers.* Often times, explaining a child's behavior to someone else helps shed light on possible triggers.

Caring for Yourself to Care for the Child

Caring for a child with trauma triggers can feel like a lonely place and can be emotionally taxing. Sometimes, caregivers can experience secondary trauma or emotional pressure that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experience of another. Just as children may have trauma triggers, adults can, too. Many times the trauma histories of the children we are caring for can be triggers for us, as well. Knowing ourselves and seeking the healing support we need can help us be better caregivers for the children entrusted to our care.

To learn more about trauma and triggers, see the resources at right or call the Coalition; we are here to help!



Coalition Tip Sheets

- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Working with Children Who Have Been Traumatized](#)

Sources/Resources

- [The National Children's Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Child Trauma Academy](#)
- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)
- [Parenting after Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs](#)
A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents
- [Responding to Trauma Triggers](#)



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