

TRAUMA IN CHILDREN 6 YEARS AND BELOW

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This month's article is the first of a two-part series on trauma in very young children. The information in this article was obtained from a book chapter written by Dr. Alex De Young and Dr. Michael Scheeringa, in a book on Trauma- and Stressor-related Disorders.

1. Young children are vulnerable to trauma exposure

Children between the ages of 0 to 6 years old are extremely vulnerable to experiencing events that may be potentially traumatic to them. These include sexual and physical abuse, unintentional injury, and witnessing of domestic violence (U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2009).

Furthermore, children in this age group have a unique set of developmental considerations that may put them at significantly greater risk. The stage of a child's neurobiological development (i.e., brain development), their limited ability to regulate emotions on their own, and the availability of a protective caregiver with whom they have a secure attachment with, are factors that can influence the impact of a traumatic event on the child's subsequent development and well-being.

2. Do young children experience trauma?

There has been ongoing scepticism about the existence of post-trauma psycho-emotional difficulties among young children, for the following reasons: (1) young children are less verbally expressive due to their limited language abilities, (2) a common misconception that *all* young children are resilient to the impact of trauma. There may also be differing perceptions between parent and child about the threat and danger associated with the traumatic event, with the possibility of the parent underestimating the impact a potentially traumatic has had on their child.

However, current research shows that even very young children can retain, encode, and remember traumatic events for many years (Howe, Toth, & Cicchetti, 2006). Though, the amount and type of information a child actually retains in their memory and what they are able to verbally report to others, are dependent on previous knowledge and language skills (Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

3. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in very young children

An age-related subtype of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for preschool children, *Posttraumatic stress disorder children 6 years and younger*, was proposed and published in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013), after strong empirical evidence from multiple studies demonstrated that young children can develop PTSD.

Multiple factors contribute to the difficulty in determining whether a very young child has been exposed to, and becomes affected, by a traumatic event. These factors include: (1) limited verbal skills to explain what happened to caregivers, (2) communicating the trauma and its impact only through behaviours or play, (3) avoidance in talking about the trauma as the traumatic memory may be scary and unpleasant to the child.

Hence, developmental considerations and modifications were made in all three of the main clusters of PTSD symptoms in the DSM-5 (i.e., intrusion/re-experiencing, avoidance/numbing, and increased arousal), to account for the different ways that PTSD manifests in very young children.

Stay tuned for the next issue of our newsletter, which will highlight red flags of post-traumatic stress reactions in young children.

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Trauma Network
for Children



The Stay Prepared – Trauma Network for Children (TNC) programme is a joint collaboration between KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and Temasek Foundation. It aims to enhance the psychosocial capability of the Singapore community to support children and youth after crises or traumatic events.