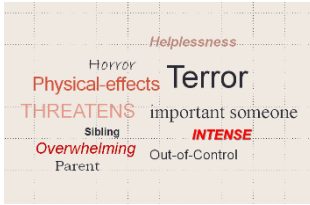




## Understanding Trauma In Children

*What Is Trauma?* A traumatic event is different from a stressful or upsetting event in several ways:



- It threatens the life or physical integrity of a child or someone critically important to them, such as a parent, grandparent or sibling.
- Trauma causes an overwhelming sense of threat, fear and helplessness.
- The body has automatic physical reactions to traumatic situations: increased heart rate, dizziness or faintness, rapid breathing, release of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, and loss of control of bowel or bladder.

The physical responses to trauma can be terrifying in and of themselves. Feeling that the body is out of control, adds to a child's feelings of helplessness and panic. The threat may feel like it is outside and inside all at once.

*One child's response to experiencing a parent being forcefully removed from the home by police was, "My heart was beating so hard I thought it would come out of my chest."*

Let's explore the five different types of trauma that a person can experience.

- **Acute Trauma-** A single event that lasts for limited period of time. Even during a *brief* traumatic event, a child can go through an amazing number of feelings, thoughts, and physical responses as they react to the danger and think of how to find safety.
  - Examples include: *Car Accident, Dog Bite or Attack, Natural Disaster such as Earthquake or House Fire*
- **Chronic Trauma-** Chronic trauma can mean re-occurring traumatic events of the same kind, such as physical or sexual abuse, over a long period of time or experiencing many different traumatic events-.
  - Examples include: *Child who gets hurt in a snow machine accident, is med-evacuated to a hospital out of state and spends weeks in the hospital undergoing frightening medical procedures or children who repeatedly experience domestic violence in their home.*
- **Child Neglect-** A failure to provide for basic needs can be traumatic to children. For a child who is dependent on adults for care, being left alone in crib in a wet, dirty diaper, suffering from the pain of hunger, and exhausted from hours of crying, neglect feels like a threat to survival. For older children, not having proper care, attention, and supervision often opens the door to trauma such as accidents, child trafficking, sexual abuse and community violence. Neglect can also make children feel abandoned and worthless, and reduce their ability to recover from traumatic events.
  - Examples include: *A young child who is left home alone tries to make soup and drops the hot pan of liquid on themselves which causes burns.*
- **Complex Trauma-** Complex trauma describes the compounding effects when trauma is caused by the very same people that children depend upon on for survival and safety. Complex trauma occurs when children are exposed to chronic trauma from a very young age (typically younger than age five), as a result of the actions of parents or other adults who should have been caring for and protecting them. Not surprisingly, many children in the child welfare system have experienced complex trauma.
  - Examples include: *Chronic physical and sexual abuse, or neglectful parents committing such acts as confining a child to a closet, tying a child to a bed, refusing food or water, or drugging a child to keep them quiet.*
- **Generational and Historical Trauma-** Historical refers to cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, extending over an individual lifespan and across generations, caused by traumatic experiences to groups of people. **Generational** is chronic trauma not dealt with adequately in one generation that gets passed down unwittingly in a family's behaviors and thought systems and studies are showing, even in their DNA.
  - Examples include: *the impact of over 200 years of slavery on African-Americans to this day; the generational effects on Jewish immigrants whose relatives were in German concentration camps; and Japanese-Americans kept in holding camps during World War II. Specifically for Alaska, the impact on Alaska Native populations from the colonization of Alaska, the Spanish flu epidemic during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the impact of an entire generation being sent to boarding schools in the 1950s and 1960s.*