



# TRAUMA AND THE CHILD BRAIN



Understanding the Impact. Building Compassion. Supporting Healing.

Trauma is an extremely distressing or frightening event that overwhelms a child's ability to cope. It can affect how a child thinks, feels, acts, and learns.

### 1. WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma can be caused by many different experiences. Circle some examples below.

Natural disaster

Loss of loved one

Physical abuse

Domestic violence

Car accident

Bullying

Neglect

War or violence

Can you think of other experiences that might be traumatic?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### 2. THE CHILD BRAIN: BEFORE AND AFTER TRAUMA

Trauma can change how the brain works. It does not mean the brain is broken. It means the brain is trying to protect the child.

#### A. TYPICAL (REGULATED) BRAIN

**Prefrontal Cortex**  
(Thinking, planning, problem-solving, self-control)

**Limbic System**  
(Emotions, memory)

**Brainstem**  
(Survival: fight, flight, freeze)

- Easy to learn and focus
- Able to manage emotions
- Feels safe
- Can think before reacting

#### B. TRAUMA-AFFECTED BRAIN (IN SURVIVAL MODE)

**Prefrontal Cortex**  
(Less active)

**Limbic System**  
(Overactive)

**Brainstem**  
(Overactive: on high alert)

- Hard to focus and learn
- Big emotions feel overwhelming
- Always on guard for danger
- Reacts before thinking

### 3. HOW TRAUMA CAN IMPACT CHILDREN

Read each area below. Then, give an example of how trauma might affect a child in that area.

AREA OF IMPACT	EXAMPLE
<b>Thinking &amp; Learning</b> May have trouble concentrating, remembering, or solving problems.	_____
<b>Emotions</b> May feel worried, scared, angry, or sad more often and have big reactions.	_____
<b>Behavior</b> May act out, shut down, avoid others, or have trouble following rules.	_____
<b>Body</b> May have headaches, stomachaches, trouble sleeping, or feel tired.	_____
<b>Relationships</b> May find it hard to trust others or feel close to friends and family.	_____

### 4. WHAT CAN HELP?

There are many ways to support a child who has experienced trauma. Match each helpful response to how it helps the brain.

HELPFUL RESPONSE	HOW IT HELPS THE BRAIN
1. Offer a calm, safe space.	<input type="radio"/> A. Helps the brain feel safe and lowers stress.
2. Listen without judging.	<input type="radio"/> B. Builds trust and connection.
3. Be patient and consistent.	<input type="radio"/> C. Helps regulate emotions and reduces overwhelm.
4. Encourage movement and play.	<input type="radio"/> D. Helps the brain heal and grow stronger.
5. Teach coping skills (breathing, grounding).	<input type="radio"/> E. Supports learning and emotional control.
6. Celebrate small wins.	<input type="radio"/> F. Builds confidence and hope for the future.

### 5. THINK & REFLECT

- Why do you think a child's brain reacts differently after trauma?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- How can understanding trauma help you be more patient and kind?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What is one way you can help create a safe and supportive environment for yourself or others?  
\_\_\_\_\_

### 6. PRACTICE COMPASSION

Imagine a child at school is having a hard day because of something they have been through. Write or draw one kind thing you could do or say to help.



**REMEMBER:** Trauma changes the brain, but caring relationships, safety, and support can help the brain heal. Every connection matters. Be the safe place.

