



## Quick Tips for Providers: *Educating Families about Traumatic Stress*

Traumatic stress may occur when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or situations, and when this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope. Examples of events that may be experienced as traumatic include:

- Automobile accidents
- Neglect or abandonment
- Life-threatening disasters
- Hospitalization
- Serious injury
- Unexpected death of a loved one
- Acts of physical or sexual abuse
- Invasive medical procedures
- Violent acts
- Separation from primary caregiver

Just because someone has experienced one of these events, does not mean they will have symptoms of traumatic stress. A child's temperament, prior exposure to traumatic events, and the kind of support the child has from caring adults, also influences whether a child will experience ongoing difficulties following a traumatic event. Children who are experiencing traumatic stress, may show the following signs:

- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- Refusing to go to school
- Lack of appetite
- Bedwetting or other behavior regressions (e.g. acting younger than their age)
- Delayed developmental milestones, such as potty training, language, motor, or social development
- Anger
- Difficulty with concentration
- Avoiding scary situations
- Withdrawal from friends or activities they typically enjoy
- Nervousness or jumpiness
- Intrusive memories of what happened

There is no exact timetable for healing – some children with traumatic stress may recover quickly while others may take more time and others may need outside help to recover. It is important that providers and caregivers do not “push” kids to talk about the event and their traumatic stress before they are ready; instead, providers and caregivers can create a safe space, but allow the child to decide when and at what speed to talk about the event. Additionally, if a child shows any behavioral regressions (e.g., toileting accidents), they should not be punished for these behaviors, and instead, be addressed in a supportive way.

### **What to do if your child is experiencing traumatic stress:**

There are several treatments available to help with traumatic stress:

- **Therapy:** Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is the gold-standard psychotherapy for youth with traumatic stress. This treatment includes education about the impact of trauma, re-establishing a sense of safety, coping skills for overwhelming feelings, and providing an opportunity to talk about the event in a safe and accepting environment when the child is ready. Additionally, caregivers will be involved, when possible, to support the child's healing.
- **Medication:** There are some medications that may help lessen some of the symptoms of trauma (like anxiety and sleep), but no medication will “cure” the traumatic stress.
- **Combination of therapy and medication:** The combination of TF-CBT to address the traumatic event and medication to help with symptoms may be helpful for some youth.