

# TRAUMA – CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Children represent a specific population to which care providers need to give special attention. Below are some statistics related to rates of PTSD in children.

## Statistics

- In adults: Studies for general estimates of lifetime PTSD range from 3% to 14%.
- In adolescents: Similar general estimate studies show between 2% and 5%.

## With Children Who Are Exposed to Traumatic Events the Figures Greatly Increase

- In controlled studies, between 15% to 90% of children exposed to traumatic events develop PTSD.
- 35% of adolescents diagnosed with cancer met the criteria for lifetime PTSD.
- 15% of children surviving cancer met the criteria for PTSD.
- 93% of children witnessing domestic violence.
- 80% of Kuwait children exposed to violence had PTSD.
- 73% of adolescent male rape victims.
- 34% of children who experienced sexual or physical abuse.
- 58% of children who experienced sexual *and* physical abuse.

In all of the above studies, those children who did not meet the criteria for PTSD still had noticeable adverse effects following the traumatic events.

Misdiagnosis is common due to professionals being unaware of other dynamics present in the child's life (e.g., domestic abuse). Misdiagnosis can also happen when a caregiver brings a child to services because of problems in school, social problems, etc., yet fails to make the connection to a traumatic event (e.g., death of a relative).

## What We Know Today

- Universally, the rate of children developing PTSD following traumatic events is higher than is reported for adults.
- It appears that childhood increases risk of, rather than protects against, later psychopathology or the effects of trauma.
- Clearly, children are more vulnerable than adults.

*Perry, B. D., MD. PhD. (2002) Stress, trauma and post traumatic stress disorders in children: An introduction. [www.ChildTrauma.org](http://www.ChildTrauma.org)*

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## Threats to a Child

Perceived and tangible threats to children are different than adults. Briefly, here are some of the factors that are more relevant to the impact of trauma on children.

- Abandonment
- Unavailable parent (emotionally, physically)
- Instability and unpredictability, stress
- Being abused or witnessing abuse
- Fear of the above

## Additional Threats That Are Relevant to Trauma

- Children are dependent and live in a world where adults look after their needs.
  - To live in a world where adults are NOT able to look after their needs (physical, emotional, social) is the same as death or could literally lead to death.
  - Repeated neglect of needs and exposure to “threats,” or fear of neglect or threats, can have a negative cumulative impact on children.
  - Children need to attach to a caregiver in order to feel secure.
- Children need to feel the world is a safe place to explore and understand.
- Children lack insight – they look toward adults to *verify* their experiences and to learn.
  - Children need accurate information about their environment in order to feel secure and safe.  
Example: “Can I go pet the lion?” “No, it’s not safe.”
  - Also, if a parent struggles with alcohol (for example) and a child asks, “Why does Mommy act funny at night?” If the response is “Mommy doesn’t act funny,” a child learns to dismiss their perceptions and not trust themselves or others.
- Children are vulnerable, dependent and lack the insight to accurately make sense of the world.

*For more information on age-related symptoms see Appendix, page 55.*

*For more information on the effects of neglect and abuse and how it alters brain development refer to the work of Bruce D Perry, M.D., Ph.D., from The Child Trauma Academy. [www.ChildTrauma.org](http://www.ChildTrauma.org).*

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