

WHAT HAPPENS TO SOME CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA?

Children may experience difficulties managing their emotions (feelings) and their behaviours.

EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES. Children may experience different moods and emotions when they have been exposed to traumatic events. One of the most common is **fearfulness**. When we are frightened our bodies prepare with a *fight – flight* response. Heart rate increases, our attention becomes focused and we have a sensation of panic. Children who have experienced fear will often have “reminders” of the event and will experience these feelings, perhaps without even realising why they are.

Anxiety is also a common feeling. Children who are anxious as a consequence of trauma will often find lots of reasons not to try anything new. They will be very worried about safety and seem particularly clingy. Children may also experience extreme **sadness** – sometimes this is called depressed mood. They feel hopeless about the world, have a sense of sadness and a belief that the world will not change for the better.

Anger: Sometimes children also feel that the world is an unfair place and that they have been unfairly treated... and that they are **angry** with this. In some ways this seems “fair enough”. They may have tantrums that seem to last for a long time. They may be aggressive towards others.

Withdrawn: Young children, in particular, may seem to be difficult to soothe or settle. In fact they may even appear to not want to be cuddled or held and pull away when approached.

It is understandable that children may have these feelings. However, children need caregivers who are able to help them understand and manage these feelings. You can do a lot to help children manage these very scary emotions.

BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES. To avoid painful feelings children may develop a range of behaviours that look as though they are refusing to do what you ask them to do. These are often referred to as **avoidance behaviours**.

In order to try to escape these difficult and painful feelings, children will often avoid thoughts, feelings, people or places. For example, a child may want to avoid contact with a particular person who was present when they experienced trauma. Seeing the person again may be a reminder of pain and hurt and the child may actually become less responsive in play exchanges. There may be many reminders that unexpectedly cause a child to have a surge of feelings. A particular kind of car may be a trigger, a smell or even a place. All these triggers may result in unexplained behaviours.

And these behaviours are sometimes just dismissed and labelled as “naughty”.