



After the Storm: Tips to Help Restore Calm

As parents and caregivers, we strive to create a safe and calming environment for all our family members. However, no matter how prepared we think we are to prevent internal family conflicts from happening, trauma storms or conflicts can and will happen within all families from time to time. Research informs us that children who have experienced trauma, or complex trauma, are continually alert to any signs of potential threats. Sometimes, there are warning signs akin to the whine of an ambulance or the attention-grabbing tornado siren; other times, trauma storms can occur unexpectedly.

Trauma Trigger

A trauma trigger is some aspect of a traumatic event that occurs in a completely different situation but reminds the child of the original traumatic event. Examples may include sounds, smells, feelings, songs, places, scenes from a movie, postures, tones of voice, or even emotions. Youth who have experienced traumatic events may reenact past patterns when they feel unsafe or encounter a trigger.

Trauma responses can cause a “fight, flight, or freeze” response for children and youth in care, resulting in changes in their bodies—such as faster heart rates and higher blood pressure—as well as changes in how their brains perceive and respond to the world.

Trauma has the unique ability to rewire the brain. What may seem like ordinary, simple, everyday situations can become huge triggers for children who have experienced early trauma.

Understanding Trauma Responses in Children

Children who have experienced trauma may react strongly when they feel unsafe or are reminded of past experiences. These reactions are not intentional misbehavior. Instead, they are the body and brain’s attempt to protect the child from perceived danger.

When a child encounters a trauma trigger, their stress response system may activate automatically. This can happen quickly and sometimes without warning. During or after a trauma response, a child may have difficulty thinking clearly, communicating needs, or regulating emotions and behavior. Even once the immediate reaction has passed, the child’s body may remain on high alert for some time.

What Trauma Responses May Look Like

Trauma responses can vary widely from child to child and may change over time. Common trauma-related reactions include:

- Intense emotional distress (fear, anger, sadness, or panic)
- Anxiety or depressive symptoms
- Changes in behavior or mood

- Difficulty with self-regulation or impulse control
- Withdrawal or challenges connecting with others
- Trouble focusing or paying attention
- Regression or loss of previously learned skills
- Academic or learning difficulties
- Sleep disruptions or nightmares
- Changes in eating or appetite

These responses may occur **during** a triggering event or **afterward**, when the child’s body begins to release stress. For some children, exhaustion, emotional shutdown, or heightened sensitivity can follow a trauma response.

Why This Matters for Caregivers

Understanding trauma responses helps caregivers respond with empathy rather than correction. When a child is dysregulated or overwhelmed, their brain is focused on survival—not learning or problem-solving. Restoring calm, safety, and connection must come first. Conversations about behavior, expectations, or problem-solving are most effective once the child’s body and emotions have fully settled.

Recognizing these trauma responses allows caregivers to better support healing, strengthen relationships, and help children gradually build the skills they need to manage stress and feel safe again.

What Children Need From Caregivers

When a child is experiencing a trauma response—or shortly afterward—their ability to reason, communicate, and regulate emotions is limited. Even well-intended conversations or requests can feel overwhelming during this time. Before addressing behavior or problem-solving, children need help feeling safe, connected, and calm in their bodies.

The following suggestions focus on how caregivers can support regulation and restore a sense of calm after a trauma response has occurred, helping lay the groundwork for healing, learning, and connection

Restoring Calm

As parents and caregivers, it can be challenging to create a safe and calming environment after a trauma storm passes, but it can be done. Dr. Ross Greene, Harvard Psychology professor and author of *The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*, stressed that it is crucial for parents of children exposed to trauma to realize that “Kids want to do well, and if they are struggling it is likely because they are lacking a specific skill needed to succeed.” Your ability to remain calm before, during, and after the storm will be a powerful asset in helping the child in your care. The following are some tips to help restore calm after a trauma

storm.

Create a safe place and a safe space to talk

- Be fully present and available
- Children need to feel emotionally and physically safe
- Seek input from the child on how you can best support them
- Share self-soothing strategies that work for you

Debrief but be brief

Ask open-ended questions such as:

- If “X, Y, and Z” happen again, how could I respond helpfully?
- What ideas do you have on how to better meet your needs?
- What lessons did we learn?

Take great care of yourself and everyone in your family

An outburst has an emotional impact on everyone in your household. It can be helpful to decompress by taking a deep breath, going for a walk, listening to calming music, practicing mindfulness, reading, or journaling. Whatever brings you peace and joy—do more of that! Practicing self-care after a stressful event (and even regularly) also sets a great example for the children in your care. They will see you making self-care a priority and will learn that valuable life skill.

Reach out for support

- Call or connect with a friend. Can’t get together in person? Connect virtually.
- Consider participating in a support group. The resources section of this tip sheet includes a link to support groups.
- Talk with your worker about respite care or other resources that may be able to help.
- Call the Wisconsin Family Connections Center. We are here to help!

As parents, it can be helpful to remind yourself that teaching these essential life skills will take time, practice, repetition, and patience. After all, parenting is a marathon, not a sprint.

By increasing your understanding of child traumatic stress, you can support the child’s healing, your relationship with the child, and your family. You will be able to help the child in your care develop effective coping mechanisms. You will also help them build emotional and behavioral skills to keep from feeling overwhelmed by reminders of past traumas. Children change, grow, and heal within healing and nurturing relationships. If you have questions or need resources, the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to support you.

Traumatic Reactions

The effects of trauma vary depending on the child and the type and intensity of traumatic events they experienced. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, including some of the examples listed here:

- Intense and ongoing emotional pain
- Depressive symptoms or anxiety
- Behavioral changes
- Difficulties with self-regulation
- Problems relating to others or forming attachments
- Challenges with focusing
- Regression or loss of previously acquired skills
- Attention and academic difficulties
- Nightmares
- Difficulties associated with sleeping and eating

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Supporting the Emotional Healing of Youth in Your Care](#)
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [On Trauma](#)
- Partners Newsletter: [On Trauma](#)
- *131 Creative Strategies for Reaching Children with Anger Problems*, by Tom Carr, M.S., L.P.C.
- *Anger Management Games for Children*, by Deborah Plummer

Tip Sheets

- [What Grief Looks Like for Children & Youth in Care](#)
- [Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma](#)
- [Positive Parenting for Kids From Hard Places](#)
- [The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Children](#)
- [Recognizing Trauma Triggers](#)

Training From [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Strategies for Challenging Behaviors](#)
- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)
- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)
- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Hope, Healing and Connection: A Trauma-Responsive Journey for Families](#)
- [Inherited Wounds: The Legacy of Trauma and Adoption Across Generations](#)
- [Building Strong Relationships with Felt Safety](#)

Inspiration & Hope from [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Love Them Through It](#)
- [What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Ask "What Happened To You", Not "What's Wrong With You"](#)

Additional Resources

- [Understanding Trauma](#)
- [The Child Trauma Academy](#)