

Understanding Trauma

Childhood trauma is common. That means if you serve in kids ministry then you are already serving people who have been through trauma. The best way to help them is to learn more.

What Is Trauma, Exactly?

Trauma is the response to a distressing event(s) that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It comes in many forms, including:

- **Acute Trauma** - These are the big things, like losing a loved one, that can impact a person's life, even if they only happen once. This is sometimes referred to as Big T trauma.
- **Chronic Trauma** - This is prolonged or repeated exposure to distressing events, such as abuse, repeated medical procedures and more. This type of trauma is not always as easy to recognize, but it is just as harmful. This is sometimes referred to as Little T trauma.
- **Complex Trauma** - This is exposure to varied and repeated traumatic events, often in childhood, and often of an interpersonal nature.
- **Implicit Trauma** - This type of trauma may come from a distressing event that a person may be too young to remember, but the impact of the trauma is still there.

The impact of trauma differs from person to person. What may not feel traumatic to one person may feel traumatic for someone else. Also, the effects of trauma last longer than the event. This means that if a child has been removed from a stressful environment and is now in a loving environment, they will still be dealing with the impact of past trauma, and still need extra support and understanding. Therefore, it is important that each person who is hurting is met right where they are and cared for without judgement.

How Might Trauma Show Up In The Church Classroom?

Sometimes the effects of trauma can show up as challenging behavior. Often we mistake this for a child being "bad", but really the child is struggling inside. Behaviors may look like:

Overreacting, Hypervigilance, Trouble Focusing, Anxiousness, Anxiety, Defiance, Defensiveness, Anger, Sadness, Avoidance, Withdrawal, Not Forming Attachments, Oversharing, Physical Ailments, Regression, and More

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Why Does Trauma Cause These Responses?

There are many reasons why trauma can trigger challenging behavior, such as:

Unhelpful Coping Mechanism - A coping mechanism that was helpful for survival when a child was in a distressing environment may still be used when the child is in a safe environment. For example, hypervigilance may have been helpful in a dangerous home, but is distracting in a safe church classroom. Emotional withdrawal may have been protective in an emotionally abusive relationship, but is isolating in a supportive relationship.

Lack of Support or Readiness - Sometimes children lack the proper adult support and resources to process the trauma in a healthy way. Or the child simply may not be ready to process the trauma yet. This can lead to unhealthy ways of dealing with trauma's impact.

Triggers - Sometimes things in the present can trigger traumatic feelings from the past. This can lead to the fight, flight, or freeze response, or other challenging behaviors.

How Should We Respond?

Remember that behavior is communication. If a child is struggling this means that they are having a hard time inside. Always approach with empathy and use calm, warm, body language and tone of voice to help the child feel safe. Then meet them where they are.

Why Does This Matter?

Trauma leaves an impact on kids, but so does love. Be the difference in a child's life.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5