

Your Child and Gangs: What You Need to Know about Trauma - Tips for Parents

If your son or daughter has ever experienced an event where they feared for their life or safety, witnessed violence towards another person, or tragically lost a loved one, they could show signs of traumatic stress.



Stock Photo

Yolanda's Story

Late one evening as 15-year-old Yolanda was walking home from a friend's house, she was attacked at knife point and raped by two men she did not know. They threatened to kill her if she told anyone what had happened. Stumbling home in a daze, Yolanda cleaned herself up and went to bed. Ashamed of getting herself into the situation and terrified that the men might come back, she never told her parents about the attack.

Soon afterwards, she started having trouble sleeping and nightmares. During the day reminders of what had happened to her – such as seeing boys who resembled the rapists, or even talking to the friend she'd been visiting, would cause her to have flashbacks where she re-experienced the events of that awful night.

Yolanda began to have trouble paying attention in class and so lost interest in school. She found herself getting irritated at her friends and having angry outbursts, particularly when she felt threatened or disrespected. She began to hang out with a group of girls known for their toughness because they made her feel safer and more in control. She frequently skipped school to be with her new friends who taught her to shoplift and fight. Yolanda spent less time at home, argued with her family when she was there, and refused to follow family rules. She was eventually jumped into the gang and accepted as a member.

Another example is Mitchell

The gang had always been a visible part of Mitchell's neighborhood, so it seemed only natural that he join as soon as he could. By age 16, already a gang member, he had gotten into trouble with the police a few times but had managed to stay out of jail. Then when he was 17, he attended a party put on by several members of his gang. Around 10 o'clock, a couple of older youth showed up uninvited and began arguing. Mitchell and the rest of the party soon spilled out into the yard as the argument became more heated. Suddenly, one of the uninvited youth pulled a gun and began shooting into the crowd. Mitchell was standing right next of one of his friends who was hit in the head and died almost instantly. People began to scream and run for cover as other guns came out and multiple shots were fired. By the time it was over, three others were seriously hurt.

Within a few days, Mitchell began to experience changes in his behavior. He jumped whenever he hears a loud noise, and couldn't stop looking over his shoulder, checking out his surroundings. He started to avoid places and activities that reminded him of the party and became very nervous in large groups. He started carrying a gun whenever he went out and was eventually arrested for carrying a weapon.

Gangs and trauma go together. Research shows that traumatic experiences can increase the risk of your child becoming involved in a gang. And once in a gang, your child is likely to experience more life-changing traumatic events than their peers who stay out of gangs.

Whether the trauma precedes a youth's involvement in gang activity as it did for Yolanda, or results from direct gang activity as with Mitchell, we know that:

- A high number of delinquent and gang-involved youth have experienced such traumatic events as abuse, neglect, maltreatment, as well as exposure to domestic and community violence.
- Exposure to community violence has been shown to increase the risk of gang involvement.
- Incarcerated youth who profess gang involvement have been exposed to more violence and more severe violence than their non-gang affiliated counterparts.

Why do gangs appeal to traumatized youth?

While traumatic stress is certainly not the sole cause for gang involvement and delinquency, it can make gangs more appealing. Gangs can offer a sense of safety, control, and structure often missing in the lives of traumatized youth. Gangs can also provide a place for youth to repeat learned patterns of behavior such as violence. Faced with school failure and a lack of positive options, traumatized youth may find some semblance of success, belonging, and self-worth through gang involvement. Gangs may also provide these youth with an outlet for their often pessimistic or cynical beliefs that their parents, adults, or society in general cannot keep them safe or provide for their needs.

Here are some examples of potentially traumatic situations:

Physical/sexual abuse
Witnessing community or domestic violence
Neglect or abandonment by a parent or caregiver
Automobile or other types of accidents
Physical violence, including bullying
Witnessing police activity or having someone close arrested
Witnessing another person being killed or seriously injured
Death or loss of someone close

What is Traumatic Stress?

Situations like those listed above can result in a child's suffering from traumatic stress. Symptoms of traumatic stress occur when a child or adolescent experiences an event that threatens life or physical well-being in such a way that it overwhelms his/her ability to cope. Witnessing such a threat to another person can also be traumatic.

Typically, traumatic events evoke feelings of extreme fear, horror, and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The physical reactions that happen in the face of trauma – racing heart, clammy extremities, loss of bowel or bladder control – also can be extremely distressing to youth.

Immediately after a traumatic event, many youth will have some or all of these reactions: 1) nervousness, jumpiness, and a heightened startle response to any loud noise, sudden movement, or other surprise; 2) re-experiencing of the event as disturbing memories, images, and/or sensory impressions; 3) trouble sleeping or nightmares; 4) withdrawal from others and avoidance of activities, partly as a way of avoiding trauma reminders that can bring back distressing images and memories; and 5) difficulty concentrating or paying attention in school. For many youth, these symptoms get better over time. For others, these symptoms remain or worsen, and professional help is needed. Untreated traumatic stress can frequently result in behavior problems, and can also take the form of depression, a sense of despair about the future, and withdrawal from ordinary activities.

Other common traumatic stress reactions include:

- *Excessive worry about the safety of self and others*
- *Angry outbursts, aggression and/or self-protective behaviors*
- *Indifference or emotional numbing – acting as if nothing matters or has no emotional impact*
- *Defiance of authority or rules*
- *Change in academic performance*
- *Hypervigilance – constantly surveying the environment for danger or threat*
- *Repeated discussion of the event and the details of the event*
- *Increased impulsive and risk-taking behaviors*
- *Attempts to alter feelings through substance abuse*

How will my son or daughter respond to trauma?

Individual reactions to trauma vary dramatically. What is devastating to one child may be less so for another. A youth's subjective response to a traumatic event depends upon a number of factors, such as individual temperament, coping style, previous trauma, cultural background, and environment. Social and family support can be very important in helping a youth to overcome the impact of a traumatic event.

What can I do to help my youth?

It's important to let youth know that you are open to hearing about their feelings, and that you appreciate the seriousness of their traumatic experiences. You can also reassure them that their reactions, no matter how severe, are normal, and can get better. Here are some other ways you can help your child:

- Show a genuine interest in and be protective of your son/daughter.
- Create safe environments for him/her that include normal routines and predictable outcomes.
- Provide choices that give him/her a sense of control and personal responsibility.

- Instill a sense of hope and optimism about the future and help him/her set and achieve personal goals.
- Set clear, firm limits on behavior that provide for positive rather than punitive consequences.
- Recognize that even the most disruptive behaviors are often the result of fear and anxiety associated with the trauma.
- Help him/her become re-engaged with school and provide supports to improve school success.
- Anticipate reminders such as anniversaries or the recurrence of events and provide additional support.
- Teach techniques to help manage his/her overwhelming emotional reactions such as deep breathing.
- Get him/her involved in a positive community cause or social justice issue.
- Be patient. There is no specific timetable for the healing process. Some youth recover more quickly than others. Let your youth heal in his/her own time and don't pressure him/her "to get over it."

When do I seek professional help?

Effective mental health treatments can help youth overcome the impact of traumatic stress. If your youth experiences symptoms which significantly interfere with his/her ability to function over a period of several months, you should seek an evaluation from a mental health professional experienced in treating trauma. You should also consider treatment if your child's symptoms are getting worse or if your child is very depressed, extremely nervous, or is engaging in self-destructive behavior.



Stock Photo

What can I expect from treatment?

Most effective mental health treatments include at least some of the following:

- Education about the impact of trauma
- Approaches to help youth and their parents establish or re-establish a sense of safety
- Techniques for dealing with overwhelming feelings
- Opportunities to talk about, and come to grips with, the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment
- Involvement, when possible, of primary caregivers in the healing process

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.