

There is hope

Reactions to trauma are normal responses to a very abnormal experience, not an indicator of weakness. Trauma survivors gain strength from believing the smallest victories are significant, thus sustaining hope and giving courage to persevere. Helping traumatized children achieve resiliency can assist in their cognitive, social and emotional development which helps meeting life's challenges with a sense of self-determination, mastery and hope.

Tip Sheet for Strengthening Your Child's Resiliency

Understanding the child's emotional and behavioral responses to traumatic stress

- Appreciate the child's difficulty in transitioning and changing routines, rigid or repetitive behaviors
- Recognize the child may present impulsive, disorganized, aggressive or other acting-out behaviors
- Remember traumatized children often re-enact painful circumstances and relationships, demonstrating disruptive behaviors which are often misunderstood as disrespect and defiance
- Traumatized children often respond to real or perceived threats or angry confrontations with overly reactive behavior which can inadvertently escalate the child's problems. Caregivers will be more effective if they respond to behavior problems with supportive limit-setting and reassuring responses.
- Trauma can elicit intense emotion, such as fear, anger, shame and helplessness that the child feels overwhelmed.
- Labeling reactive behaviors as "good" or "bad" overlooks the children's behavior as a reflection of their experience.
- Caregivers do not have to "fix" their child's feelings. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and cope with his/her experiences.

Restoring the child's routine and sense of security

- Maximize the child's sense of security
- Do positive and fun activities to restore a sense of normalcy in their lives
- Reassure the child that he/she is safe and talk about how you are working to restore their level of security
- Limit media exposure involving graphic material (news stories, horror films, sexual content in movies/television shows, etc). Children may develop a strong attraction to violent, sexual or other graphic material which may re-traumatize them
- Develop a safety plan for future incidents
- Stick to family routines

Helping the child regain emotional and behavioral stability

- Assist the child in reducing overwhelming emotion and maladaptive behaviors
- Help the child safely vent frustration, anger and anxiety
- Listen and acknowledge the child's traumatic memories and fears.
- Have a bedtime routine. Tell the child their routine daily so they know what to expect.
- Understand the child is not being difficult on purpose
- Avoid criticism and threats
- Respond to tantrums with supportive limit-setting and non-threatening actions. It's important to have clear expectations and respond in a firm and consistent, yet supportive manner.
- Encourage the child to share their feelings and talk about the traumatic experience(s). Children may be more comfortable expressing their feelings through art, play, writing and other creative outlets.
- Convey to the child the traumatic experience(s) was not his/her fault
- If your child has physical complaints or ailments (repeated and unexplainable stomachaches, headaches, muscle aches, etc.) seek out medical advice if there is a medical concern. Comfort and assurances should be provided, as this is a normal reaction.
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities

What to do if problems continue or worsen

- Seek professional help
- Join a support group either for caregivers or for children
- Be available to your child as much as possible to provide reassurance and comfort
- If your child repeatedly refers to the traumatic event(s), be patient and listen
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Inform other caring adults in your child's life and elicit their support
- Note sudden changes or increases in acting-out or withdrawal behaviors