



What is trauma?

A traumatic experience is when a person's life or wellbeing has been, or is perceived to be, threatened. It can occur due to a car accident, a natural disaster like a bushfire or cyclone, or being the victim of, or witness to, violence such as physical and sexual abuse.

Trauma occurs when an event creates a feeling of being overwhelmed and impacts on a person's ability to cope. A trauma might happen once, or it might be experienced over a period of time. A person doesn't need to be injured to experience trauma; feeling threatened or witnessing upsetting events is enough for a person to experience trauma.

Sometimes the effects of trauma are immediate and more obvious and other times they take some time to appear. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, trauma is often experienced throughout the community. For example, if a family member is suffering, the extended family often experiences the effects of the trauma too.



Information about other types of trauma is available in the KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 4 information sheet: “When times get tough: Managing trauma and ways to recover”.

Children and trauma

Sometimes people think that children don't experience trauma, or if they do, they aren't affected by it or they don't remember it. This is incorrect. Children of all ages, even infants, can be affected by trauma.

Traumatic experiences during childhood come about after children experience an event that is so frightening that they feel helpless and are pushed way beyond their ability to cope. Children's reactions to trauma tend to vary with their age, personality and past experience. Traumatic experiences can change the way that children understand their world, their relationships with the important people in their lives (like friends and family) and where they feel they belong. Experiencing trauma can also affect children's learning and behaviour.

Children can often show resilience following traumatic experiences, particularly when they receive support from their friends, relatives and the adults around them. The effects of trauma can be reduced as healing occurs over time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders may also suggest time out on their country can assist in the healing process.

What happens when children experience trauma?

Experiencing trauma can have both short-term and long-term effects for children. In the short term, experiencing trauma causes children to have a stress response. Usually children's brain and nervous systems work together to help them make sense of incoming information from their senses, such as sight and sound. When they experience trauma, chemicals like adrenaline rush around a child's body, affecting how well their brain and nervous systems work together. Having a stress response after trauma might make it harder for children to process information, to remember things, to concentrate, and to manage their feelings. It might also take children who have experienced trauma a long time to calm down after having a stress response.

Taking care of yourself

When reading this resource, remember it is important to take care of yourself. Tune into how you're feeling and reacting to the content, and identify a place you can get support if you need to.



In the long term, trauma can affect children in lots of different ways that are not always obvious to others. Sometimes things like sights, sounds, smells and movements that remind children of trauma can trigger stress responses again, even though the actual event happened a long time ago. It can be difficult for others such as school staff to understand what is upsetting to a child when the trigger is not known to them.

Different types of trauma

One way to look at and understand trauma is to consider different types of events and stressors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities can experience. While they can experience a range of traumatic events like non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families do, there are some events and experiences that are specific to them. Knowing about the complex nature of these experiences will enable school staff to become more culturally aware and in turn better support children and families in their school community.

Intergenerational trauma

Intergenerational trauma is trauma from the past that has not been resolved and gets passed from generation to generation. People don't have to experience trauma first hand to be affected by it. The Stolen Generations, or the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, are examples of intergenerational trauma that many children, families and communities have experienced and continue to be affected by today.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities experience trauma, it can cause a kind of 'ripple effect' for the next generation and those after that, until a journey of healing is begun. Intergenerational trauma can take a lot of time and culturally appropriate support to heal. This is because so many people have been affected by it and it has become a part of cultural memory of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Some ways of healing from intergenerational trauma can involve connection to culture through activities like traditional dance, art and kinship ceremonies¹; and returning to country (the land of their ancestors) to renew the spiritual and physical ties and relationships Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with the place that they are from.¹

¹ Healing Foundation, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, & Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Ltd. (2013). *Our children, our dreaming: A call for a more just approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families*. Canberra: Authors. Accessed January 2014 from http://www.snaicc.org.au/_uploads/rsfil/02994.pdf

Life stressors

Life stressors are life experiences or events that have a negative impact on a person's social and emotional wellbeing. Research has shown that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are exposed to multiple life stressors on an ongoing basis—more so than non-Indigenous Australians.² Some communities also experience difficulties with drug and alcohol issues which can lead to a range of concerns for children, including exposure to violence and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Experiencing multiple life stressors over long periods of time can cause significant trauma because they may overwhelm a person's ability to cope and affect their wellbeing. Some of the specific life stressors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities may experience are described on the following page.

² Zubrick, S.R., Dudgeon, P., Gee, G., Glaskin, B., Kelly K., Paradies, Y., Scrine, C. & Walker, R. Social determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. (2010). In N. Purdie, P. Dudgeon & R. Walker (Eds), *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (pp. 75–90). Barton: Commonwealth of Australia.

LIFE STRESSORS

Loss and grief

Loss and grief can be significant issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Research has shown that the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is significantly lower than the national average. This means that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families mourn the loss of community members so regularly that it may be classed as continuous grief. Sometimes the deaths of children or young people are sudden, unexpected and preventable, which adds to the trauma the community experiences.² The loss of many community members in a short period of time can have a significant, long-term impact on communities.

Some people, families and communities also continue to be affected by the trauma experienced from past cultural losses, such as loss of their culture, land, language and identity. Many survivors of the Stolen Generations face identity issues when trying to learn about their origin. Grief for a lost way of life can cause trauma that affects entire communities, and may flow onto children.

Racism and stigma

Stigma is a characteristic or feature used to set one person apart from another.³ Misunderstandings and negative stereotypes and attitudes can result in stigma. Racism is discriminatory, offensive or aggressive behaviour towards a group of people, based on a belief that the group is inferior because of certain characteristics the group shares (for example, skin colour or cultural beliefs).

The trauma caused by stigma and racism that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities have experienced is significant. Because of the effects of colonisation and forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, many communities have witnessed, or experienced firsthand, harassment, discrimination and violence.⁴ If there has been no opportunity to heal from the trauma, the impact of these experiences can be passed on to the next generations, as intergenerational trauma.⁵⁻⁶ For more information, please see the Healing Foundation's *Growing up our children strong and deadly: Healing for children and young people*.



Socioeconomic disadvantage

Struggles from socioeconomic disadvantage are also something that some Aboriginal children, families and communities have experienced in the past and continue to face today.⁷ Socioeconomic disadvantage can mean that children, families and communities sometimes don't have access to the resources they need to grow up healthy and strong. For more information, please see the *Closing the Gap Clearinghouse*: www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/

3 Government of Western Australia, Mental Health Commission. *What is stigma?* Accessed January 2014 from http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/mental_illness_and_health/mh_stigma.aspx

4 Healing Foundation, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, & Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak Ltd. (2013). *Our children, our dreaming: A call for a more just approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families*. Canberra: Authors. Accessed January 2014 from http://www.snaicc.org.au/_uploads/rsfil/02994.pdf

5 NSW Government, Education and Communities. *Racism: No Way*. Accessed January 2014 from <http://www.racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/factsheets/9.html>

6 Healing Foundation website, <http://healingfoundation.org.au/>

7 Closing the Gap Clearinghouse: www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/



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