



Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Can Experience Traumatic Stress

A Fact Sheet for Parents and Caregivers

The Intersection of IDD, Trauma, and Mental Wellness

Studies⁴ indicate that children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience trauma and stressful circumstances or events at higher rates than children without these disabilities. For caregivers, including parents, family members, and others who support children with IDD, awareness of the impact of trauma on their children's mental health and wellness can greatly improve a child's opportunities for recovery from a traumatic or stressful experience. This fact sheet is designed to provide an overview of IDD and trauma and to:

- Help caregivers understand issues related to trauma and its impact on children with IDD and their families.
- Provide caregivers with information and resources that can help them improve the well-being of children with IDD who have experienced trauma.
- Help caregivers know the questions they should ask about traumatic stress and the treatments, services, and supports to expect for children and families.
- Promote awareness of the need to address the mental health and wellness of children with IDD.

With this guidance, we hope that caregivers will be able to better access services and advocate for their child.

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What Are Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities?

Intellectual and developmental disabilities is an umbrella term that refers to intellectual disabilities and also other disabilities that are apparent during childhood. Developmental disabilities appear before early adulthood and are likely to impact an individual across the life span. Some developmental disabilities are largely physical conditions, such as cerebral palsy or epilepsy. Some children may have co-occurring physical and intellectual disabilities, for example, Down syndrome or fetal alcohol syndrome.

An intellectual disability is one type of developmental disability that impacts intellectual functioning, often thought of as “intelligence,” and adaptive behavior, or how a person functions in everyday life. Intellectual functioning generally refers to mental abilities such as learning, reasoning, and problem solving. Adaptive behavior relates to the social and life skills that we use in our everyday lives, such as language, time, money management, self-direction, the ability to follow rules, personal care, schedules and routines, safety, occupational skills, and much more.



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How Does Trauma Impact Children with IDD?

Trauma is an upsetting, stressful event or series of events that causes a child to feel at risk for physical or emotional harm. Children respond to traumatic events differently depending on their personal sense of safety. Accordingly, children with IDD may be exposed to the same types of trauma as any other child but may experience and process the trauma differently and therefore may respond differently. Further, due to their dependence on others for assistance and security, children with IDD may also have an increased trauma response to any threat to the safety of caregivers.

Studies show that children with IDD experience childhood adversities and trauma at much higher rates than children without disabilities. In addition to major traumatic events such as physical or sexual abuse, neglect, natural disasters, or witnessing violence, children and youth with IDD are also exposed to everyday life traumatic events like bullying, name calling, social exclusion, lack of attention, abandonment or isolation, rejection, or even the embarrassment of “looking” or feeling different. Repeated exposure to these less visible traumatic events can have deep and lasting impacts.

“When I was in a bad car accident, I never imagined it would traumatize my son. When I returned from my hospitalization my son refused to leave my side, transitions to school and work were difficult, and he started having difficulty sleeping. I didn’t connect the dots about the behavior and the trauma of my absence until I talked to another parent who had a similar experience.”

– Parent of a child with IDD

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Why are Children with IDD at Higher Risk for Trauma Exposure?

Children with IDD have characteristics and experiences that put them at higher risk for trauma. These risk factors include varied cognitive abilities, physical limitations, and reduced communication skills. Specifically,

- Communication and language barriers can make it harder for the child to tell others what is going on. Often, changes in behavior that may be symptoms of trauma can be mistakenly attributed to a child’s disability.

- Children with IDD are more often exposed to repeated medical procedures and hospitalizations. These may entail pain, stress, and fear.
- Children with IDD often have multiple caregivers (home-care workers, residential staff, family members, and school staff, among others), some of whom may exploit them and cause repeated trauma with long-term consequences.
- Children with IDD are less likely to be believed due to their disability.
- Simply being viewed as different may increase the risk for trauma.



Some of these factors can also make it difficult for others to recognize that a child has experienced trauma, or that the child has not processed the trauma. The impacts of trauma on children with IDD can be significant and long-term if trauma is not recognized. The impact may include: changes in behavior (for example, increased irritability, loss of previously acquired skills, new fears, bed-wetting, and avoiding previously enjoyed activities or people) and trauma-related mental health conditions (for example, anxiety, PTSD, and depression). Unfortunately, children with IDD may not be believed when they tell others about traumatic events, may not know how to protect themselves, or may be easily influenced by others. Further, they may not be considered credible witnesses when reporting trauma.

“After my son experienced a traumatic event at school, he began displaying new behaviors with staff. The educators and behavioral specialists insisted that it was simply ‘bad’ and increased ‘typical IDD’ behavior. They missed the connections between the trauma my son experienced and the way he was behaving. They didn’t recognize his need for safety and some control over his life.”
 – Foster parent of a child with IDD

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Caregivers are Partners in Trauma Services

Caregivers know their children best and know when something seems “off.” Caregivers can support their children in healing from trauma by listening to their child and partnering with trauma-informed providers. Caregivers are key in future safety and recovery from trauma. Partnership with trauma-informed providers should include a plan for caregiver wellness and safety.

“Parents and other caregivers need help in understanding the impact of trauma and the resulting mental health needs of our children with IDD. We need to know the right questions to ask and the appropriate treatment and services to expect. It is when our expectations for appropriate supports change, that appropriate mental health and trauma services will become available; the supply will begin to meet the demand.” – Parent of a child with IDD

References

1. Brendli, K.R., Broda, M.D., and Brown, R. (2021). Children with intellectual disability and victimization: A logistic regression analysis. *Child Maltreatment*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559521994177>

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