



# Facing Tough Times

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Supporting your family through  
life's tough times



Australian Child & Adolescent  
Trauma, Loss & Grief Network



Australian  
National  
University



The *Trauma & Grief Network: Supporting Families* is part of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network, based at the Australian National University and funded by the Australian Government.

For more information about the impacts of adversity and trauma on children and families, visit [tgn.anu.edu.au](http://tgn.anu.edu.au)

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Every year in Australia, thousands of kids go through tough times. Studies have shown us that about two thirds of Australian kids will experience a traumatic event or deal with adversity before they are 16 years old and around 20% of kids will have to cope with 3 or more adversities.

We used to think that trauma and adversity didn't have much of an impact on kids, but now we know that it can have a pretty big impact.

The good news is, we also know more about what helps kids who have been through tough times.

This booklet is designed to give you some information about how experiences of trauma and adversity may impact on your child. It is not designed to take the place of advice from a health practitioner, a counsellor or a psychologist. If you have concerns about how your child is going, you should always speak to your GP, a school counsellor, a child and family worker or another health expert.



Jenny, Tom and their three kids had been going through tough times. Tom had lost his job six months ago and Jenny had only been able to find part-time work. The financial strain on the family meant they had to sell their house and move into a cheaper rental place further from school and the support of extended family and friends.

Tom hadn't been able to find work and had become withdrawn, no longer wanting to do fun things with the kids like he used to. Jenny had become depressed, often worried or upset. Together they had begun to argue more often.

Though they tried to shield the kids from the worst of the stress, the kids still knew what was going on. Their youngest had started to have difficulty with her friends at school and school work. Often going to school without enough food to eat and with lots of worry and stress herself, she was getting into more fights with friends, not paying attention in class and getting in trouble from her teacher.

Feeling ashamed and embarrassed, Jenny and Tom had not spoken to the school about the pressures they were under. They didn't know how to have the conversation.

# What is adversity and trauma?

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**Trauma and adversity are two names that cover a range of difficult experiences that can impact on the lives of all of us, especially kids. Other names for these experiences include: tough times; stressful life events; potentially traumatic events; and adverse childhood experiences. For the purposes of this booklet, we will stick to the terms tough times, adversity and trauma.**

It is common for children in Australia to experience some form of adversity. Adversities include experiences such as:

- living in poverty;
- parents separating or divorcing;
- having a parent or carer in jail;
- a parent or carer having a drug and alcohol problem;
- a parent or carer with a mental health difficulty;
- being bullied;
- losing a loved one;
- witnessing violence in the community;
- having a parent or a sibling with a disability.

Adversities generally put a lot of stress on people (adults and kids), but most people are able to get through adversities with the help of people around them and with their own strengths.

Adversities can become really difficult for kids to deal with when they have to face lots of them and they don't have much help or support from others.

Trauma refers to an experience that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. A traumatic experience is often one that threatens someone's life or physical safety, or the life or physical safety of a loved one. This often includes ongoing experiences such as:

- witnessing domestic violence;
- being physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected;
- being exposed to war and conflict;
- other 'one-off' traumatic experiences such as being in a car accident, a house fire or a disaster.

Ongoing experiences such as witnessing domestic violence and experiencing abuse and neglect can have a bigger traumatic impact on children because they are most often repeated events that start early in a child's life.

# When does adversity and trauma start to have an impact on kids?

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Babies in the womb can be impacted by the adversity and trauma that their mothers experience, so the impact can start before they are even born. This is because the stress mums feel when pregnant can be transferred to their baby.

When mums are under lots of stress, they produce bigger amounts of stress hormones called cortisol, and this is passed on to baby. Studies have shown babies born to mums who have experienced domestic violence when they are pregnant have greater levels of cortisol in their blood when they are born. We know that cortisol can impact on the ways that babies feel ie. they may feel more stressed and irritable, and it can also interfere with the way their brains develop.

Babies and toddlers who grow up in households with lots of adversities, or experience trauma at a young age, are also impacted by this, even if they are too young to remember or talk about what happened. This is because babies need to feel safe and secure from the start and rely on their primary caregivers to be there for them, meet their needs and give them lots of opportunities for healthy development.

Sometimes, in households where there are lots of adversities, parents and carers can be dealing with their own difficulties and are not always able to be there for their kids.





# Why are we talking about the impact of adversity and trauma on kids?

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Over the last few years there has been lots of research on how experiences of adversity and trauma can impact on kids. It is important to remember that not all kids will be negatively impacted. Lots of kids will be resilient, depending on what their experience is and who is there to support them. Some kids may have a few difficulties that get better with support and others may show greater impacts over a longer time. Some of these impacts include:

- emotional difficulties;
- problems at school;
- behavioural difficulties;
- mental health difficulties;
- problems with friends and other relationships;
- learning difficulties.

Some of these impacts can get in the way of a kid's ability to learn while they are at school and can lead to them having big problems in their friendships and at school. Some kids may 'act out' at school, because of the impact of stress coming from the adversity and trauma they have experienced, and this can lead to them falling behind, missing out on learning and sometimes getting into trouble.



# What might you see if your child is affected by tough times?

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Each child will respond differently, so it is important to see the signs below as indicators and not necessarily signs that will be present for every child. If you have any concerns about how your child is coping, you should always seek extra support and help from your GP, school counselor or other health worker.

## Babies:

- Can become more irritable or 'fussy'
- Can have more difficulties with feeding or with sleep than usual
- May cry more often than usual
- May want to be held and comforted
- May want to be close to parents and carers

## Toddlers / preschool age children:

- May have more difficulties with eating and sleeping than usual
- Can act clingy and want to stay close to parents and carers
- Can develop separation anxiety or other worries
- Can have more 'tantrums' or difficulty managing their emotions and calming down when upset
- May lose interest in activities they enjoyed and stop playing with friends when previously sociable
- Can 'act out' through play or draw about difficult things going on in their life
- Can go back to earlier developmental stages eg. might start sucking their thumb again for comfort or have problems with toileting when already toilet trained







#### **Primary school aged children:**

- May develop separation anxiety and other worries and anxieties
- Can have difficulty with friends at school, may play less with friends or may become more irritable with friends
- Can have difficulty falling asleep, wake more frequently during the night or have nightmares
- May lose interest in activities that were once enjoyed such as school or sport
- Can have troubles managing their emotions, they may get upset more easily or become angry or irritable
- Can have troubles calming down
- May start to fall behind at school

#### **High school aged children:**

- Can become withdrawn from friends and family
- May lose interest in activities they once enjoyed
- Can become more 'defiant', irritable or easily upset
- May fall behind with school work
- Can start to do more risky behaviours
- Can have difficulties with falling asleep and waking up during the night
- May have more worries and anxieties than usual

# Why should you talk to someone at your child's school?

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If your family is going through tough times, it can be really important to speak to someone at your child's school, even if you don't think that what is happening at home is having an impact on their behaviour at school. You can try approaching your child's teacher, the school counselor, the principal or other executive staff.

Talking to someone at your child's school about difficulties at home can help teachers understand any changes they may be seeing in your child at school. It gives staff a chance to understand what your child is going through, and that they aren't necessarily being lazy or difficult with their schoolwork, but are having a tough time focusing because they are worried about what is happening at home.

Teachers can then provide extra support to your child, which may be through checking in with them more regularly, and getting them more involved in school activities.

Also, often schools have links with other support agencies and can help you find support within the community.

**Speaking to someone at your child's school will help staff understand any changes in your child's behaviour and allow them to provide extra support.**

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# What helps kids get through tough times?

There are lots of things that families and other adults can do to support kids going through tough times.

You can:

- Think about the impact on your child. Think about how they are coping. Have you noticed that there has been a change in them?
  - Talk to your child about the impact on them. Help them to understand that you are there to help them get through.
  - Believe a child who tells you that something bad has happened to them, and get help for them. Sometimes children who have experienced trauma such as abuse or neglect try to tell an adult about it and are not believed. This can be just as damaging for them as experiencing the trauma itself.
- Spend time with your child and let them know that they are important to you.
  - Try and stay optimistic about the future. Children need to feel that the difficult times they are going through will get better.
  - Focus on your child's strengths and promote the success they have.
  - Seek lots of support for yourself. We can all benefit from learning new strategies to help us get through difficult times.
  - Think about how well you handle stress and problems yourself and use healthy ways to deal with stress. Kids watch the adults around them to learn how to get through tough times.



# Who can you talk to if you are going through tough times?

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If you and your family are going through tough times, it is really important to get some support. This will be good for you but will also help your kids now and in the future.

Some people don't get help because they think they should be able to handle problems themselves, or they feel ashamed or embarrassed of the situation that they are in.

Getting help early can stop problems from getting bigger and it is important to remember that nearly everyone needs help and support at times.

There are lots of people that you can turn to if you are going through tough times. These can include:

- Your GP
- A community health worker
- Community support groups
- Lifeline — 13 11 14

Remember, nearly every family goes through tough times at one stage or another. Being aware of the impact that this may have on your child is really important and getting help and support to get through can help your child to become stronger in facing tough times in the future.







For more information about how adversity  
and trauma can impact on your child,  
visit our website.

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