

# WHAT IS CHILD TRAUMA?



NCTSN  
The National Child  
Traumatic Stress Network

Every child reacts to trauma in their own way. What feels scary or overwhelming to one child might not affect another in the same way. Trauma can come from a single upsetting event, ongoing stress, or at the hands of those children trust. It's important to recognize the kinds of experiences that can be traumatic to understand their impact and better support children. To understand the impact of trauma on children, youth, and families, it's helpful to understand the difference between acute, chronic, and complex trauma.

## ACUTE

Experience of a single distressing event that occurs over a short period of time.

- Natural disaster
- Serious accident
- Loss of a loved one
- Assault
- Dog bite
- Medical emergency
- Hate-based violence
- School shooting

## CHRONIC

Experience of repeated or ongoing exposure to distressing events.

- Experiencing bullying
- Being in a war or combat zone
- Repeated exposure to racism
- Enduring community violence
- Experiencing homelessness

## COMPLEX

Experience of repeated or multiple distressing events over an extended period, often interpersonal in nature beginning early in life.

- Child neglect
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Impaired caregiving
- Trafficking
- Witnessing intimate partner violence

**ACUTE, CHRONIC, & COMPLEX** trauma can overlap and are not always clearly distinct. Experiencing multiple types of trauma can intensify their effects and make the healing process more challenging. Recognizing the interconnected nature of these forms of trauma is essential for delivering effective, trauma-informed care.