

Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals

Part 2

Helping Children with Traumatic Separation

Here are tips for working with children experiencing traumatic separation:

Guide caregivers on how to talk to children:

Caregivers struggling with how to talk to children affected by traumatic separation can begin by asking the child what he or she believe happened with respect to the separation, and explore what he or she believes will happen in the future. Caregivers help children when they provide honest, age-appropriate information about the separation, to the extent that they know what occurred. As the situation evolves, caregivers can update children as appropriate. At times, the truth includes saying, “I don’t know the answer to that, but when I do, I will tell you.” Encourage caregivers to listen to the child’s questions and correct any misinformation or confusion.

Address related traumatic experiences:

When children have experienced traumatic separation due to suspected endangerment (e.g., removal from a situation of abuse or neglect; domestic violence; fleeing a warzone), clinicians need to address not only the separation from the caregiver, but also the traumatic experiences leading to the separation (e.g., the child abuse or neglect; domestic violence; war experiences). Children often need specific guidance during therapy to recognize and process these experiences.

Help child gain mastery over trauma related symptoms:

Although mental health treatment involves helping the child adjust to the separation, it is crucial also to address the child’s related trauma reactions. Help the child gain mastery over his or her trauma-related symptoms through teaching trauma-focused interventions—coping strategies and identifying trauma reminders that may lead to trauma responses—and, ultimately, re-gaining a sense of control.

Suggest ways for the child to maintain connections:

It may help the child to have memorabilia (e.g., pictures, objects from a previous home, a scrapbook) to preserve positive memories of and stay connected to the absent caregiver. Help the current caregiver with his/her feelings about having such reminders available. When

visitation is appropriate and allowed, work with the caregiver to determine the best time, place, and way for the child to meet with the person and be available for follow-up.

Coordinate outside resources and referrals:

Due to transitions in living situations, ongoing and longstanding supports may have changed. Review available support systems and people; identify adults at school and at home to whom the child can turn when needing comfort. If the child needs to build and strengthen relationships with peers, consider referring the caregiver for additional help to identify activities or sources of potential friendships. Keep in mind any specific needs that the caregiver indicates.



Monitor the Impact on you:

Take time to consider how working with cases of traumatic separation is affecting you, as a clinician. These can be challenging cases. These children need support, patience, and understanding—and so do you.

Help is available for children with traumatic loss. For more information on helping children with traumatic loss go to www.NCTSN.org