

MEDIUM TO LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

TIP SHEET #5 APRIL 2009

Observe children for continuing reactions

Traumatic reactions not resolved in the middle to later term (2 to 8 months) can:

1. interact with the child's pre-existing vulnerabilities;
2. interact with personality style and current contextual issues;
3. become fused with the developmental progress of the child, and
4. impact on developmental process.

Two manifestations of traumatic reactions in children seen in the middle to longer term

Children may be seen at this stage with:

1. Persisting short-term reactions, such as sleep disturbance and nightmares, which have their own impact on the physiological, cognitive, social, and psychological development of the child.
2. Loss of developmental pathways as the child does not fully engage with new age specific and age appropriate demands.

Ruth Wraith, recently retired as Head of Child Psychotherapy at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, is an internationally recognised expert in child psychotherapy and trauma. Ruth, a Past-President of the Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, commenced her disaster work with the Ash Wednesday Fires. Ruth has been a psychosocial consultant to the Victorian State Emergency Recovery Unit and the Medical Dis-plan for many years. Ruth is a member of the National Mental Health Disaster Task Force and the Child Task Force.

Symptoms of traumatic reactions in children 2 to 8 months post event

Symptoms indicating traumatic reactions at this stage can include:

- Poor social functioning / performance;
- Personality changes;
- Struggling with the demands of every day life;
- Emergence of chronic peer problems;
- Preoccupation with other traumas;
- Identity changes;
- Poor concentration;
- Being on hyperalert;
- Disinterest in joining in new activities.

Furthermore, the experience of a major event, such as bushfire, can contribute to the development of children's:

- Philosophy about life;
- Understanding of people's attitudes to one another; and
- Value systems

"It is very important to take a trauma history"

Ruth Wraith, 2009

Treatment goals - Medium to longer term

1. Find ways to resolve the high arousal affects.
2. Understand the factors contributing to the maintenance of these reactions and to any problems arising as a consequence from the disaster experience.
3. Maintain the: (1) developmental trajectory, (2) developmental progression, and (3) engagement with the developmental tasks.
4. Catch up with any developmental tasks that have been missed.