

BASIC DEFINITIONS OF TRAUMA AND LOSS



Pathways to
Permanence 2

Parenting
Children
Who Have
Experienced
Trauma
AND LOSS

Session 1

Parenting
Children
with
Extra Needs

Parent's
Toolbox

For the purpose of this series, the word **Trauma** is used to define specific events that may happen to children, including all forms of abuse and neglect, as well as witnessing violence or experiencing threats or fear. We are including in our definition of trauma events that happen before the child is born, such as prenatal drug/alcohol exposure and violence toward the child's mother during pregnancy. Trauma may also occur when there is a break in the primary attachment relationship between a child and caregiver as a result of the death or serious illness of a parent, serious illness of the child requiring lengthy hospitalization, as well as removal of the child from the parent or caregiver.

Attachment trauma is a term that is sometimes used to describe what is occurring for a child when he/she is separated from people who are important to him/her, specifically primary caregivers. These losses are stored in the child's body even if they occur before conscious memory. In general, the more breaks in attachment (i.e., changes in caregivers) a child has, the more extreme the trauma is for that child. Some typical behaviors of children with attachment trauma include clinginess or neediness, or on the other end of the spectrum, indiscriminate attachment to strangers while rejecting the primary caregiver.

Developmental trauma refers to early, chronic and severe trauma and/or multiple types of trauma (including attachment trauma) which impact children in many areas of their lives. It is generally agreed that children who have experienced multiple traumatic events involving abuse, violence, or abandonment react differently than those who may have experienced an acute, single incident of trauma or loss. Some typical behaviors seen in children with developmental trauma include hyper-vigilance, anxiety, impulsivity, cognitive impairment and attention deficits.

Loss is an inherent part of life for children who do not live with their birth parents. Loss occurs whenever there is a separation from a significant person, place, sensory experience (smell, sound, touch), or culture. We frequently refer to loss and trauma separately throughout this series, not because they are unrelated, but in order to emphasize the fact that loss has at least as much impact on a child as abuse or neglect. As described above, these types of losses are a form of trauma, particularly when they occur early in a child's life and/or multiple times during a child's life.

Special needs as used in this series refers to a broad category of children whose emotional or physical disorders, age, race, membership in a sibling group, a history of abuse, or other factors contribute to a lengthy stay in foster care. Guidelines for classifying a child as special needs vary by state. Common special needs conditions and diagnoses include: serious medical conditions; emotional and behavioral disorders; history of abuse or neglect; medical or genetic risk due to familial mental illness or parental substance abuse.