

# Emerging Minds.

## Understanding and supporting children's responses to trauma and adversity: 2-4 years

Facilitator's Handbook:  
Workshop 3

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health



# Introduction

## Note to facilitators

It is recommended that you **prepare before leading** this workshop by:

1. Reading through these facilitator notes and reviewing the accompanying slides
2. Highlighting the most relevant reflection questions for your audience
3. Identifying and photocopying any relevant additional resources to provide to each participant.

## Introduction to the workshop

Professionals and volunteers working with children and families have a unique role to play in promoting resilience, wellbeing and recovery in children (0–12 years) who have experienced adversity or traumatic events. Workshop 3 is designed to:

1. Support participants' understanding and awareness of:
  - trauma responses in children aged 2–4 years
  - ways to support children aged 2–4 years who have experienced trauma.
2. Support participants to:
  - reflect on their experiences of working with children who have experienced trauma or adversity
  - consider how they might alter their approach based on knowledge of how children might be affected by trauma and adversity.

## Audience

This workshop is designed for professionals and volunteers working with children and/or their families.

It can be completed individually or with a group of workers.

## Time

Workshop 3 is an additional optional workshop with a focus on children 2–4 years. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Please note: It is required that **ALL** participants complete Workshop 1 – An introduction to trauma and adversity **before** completing this workshop.

## Participant resources

Workshop 3 contains:

- slide presentation
- facilitator notes
- printable resources
- additional resources.

## Note to facilitator:

The following facilitator notes are provided as a guide. We encourage you to tailor the presentation to suit the needs of your group. Various reflection activities are included throughout the workshop; we suggest you consider these in the context of your group and use only those that are applicable.

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# The Presentation

## Workshop 3 – Understanding and supporting children’s responses to trauma and adversity: 2-4 years.

### Slide 1

Welcome to this workshop series from the Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health.

#### Facilitator’s notes:

Commence by introducing topic and self, then before anything else, do the ‘acknowledgement of country’ (slide 2).

### Slide 2

#### Acknowledgement of country

#### Facilitator’s notes:

Amend the wording to acknowledge the Country you are meeting on – i.e. Kurna Country. It shows a commitment to respectful practice in the acknowledgement of the many diverse Nations and a respect for cultural protocols.

For more examples/further information, see Reconciliation Australia’s resource: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Welcome-to-and-Acknowledgement-of-Country.pdf>

I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting today on the traditional Lands of the [Aboriginal nation] people and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge the deep connection the [Aboriginal nation] people have with the land and the waters of this country and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are here today.

### Slide 3

#### Understanding and supporting children’s responses to trauma and adversity: 2-4 years

The content for this workshop has been drawn from the Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit. Additional resources will be provided at the end of this workshop, but the toolkit can also be accessed for free via the Emerging Minds website at [www.emergingminds.com.au](http://www.emergingminds.com.au).

#### Audience

This workshop is designed for professionals and volunteers working with children and/or their families.

It can be completed individually or with a group of workers.

#### Time

Workshops 3 is an additional optional workshop with a focus on children 2-4 years. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

It is required that **ALL** participants complete Workshop 1 – *An introduction to trauma and adversity* **before** completing this workshop.

Topics covered include:

- Trauma responses in children aged 2-4 years.
- Supporting children aged 2-4 years who have experienced trauma.
- Reflection on practice.

A handout containing additional resources will be provided at the end of the workshop.

## Slide 4

### Workshop objectives

1. Support participants' understanding and awareness of:
  - trauma responses in children aged 2-4 years
  - ways to support children aged 2-4 years who have experienced trauma.
2. Support participants to:
  - reflect on their experiences of working with children who have experienced trauma or adversity
  - consider how they might alter their approach based on knowledge of how children might be affected by trauma and adversity.

## Slide 5

### Being mindful

#### Facilitator's notes:

You are welcome to set the pace in completing the workshop. Be aware of your own emotions, as well as the emotional and sensory responses of participants, and take a break if needed.

It is important to recognise that we all bring our experiences of adversity and feeling overwhelmed into the workshop today. Speaking about traumatic events may be triggering for some, and it is important to be aware of how you are feeling as you go through the workshop. Remember to practice self-care and to seek help if needed.

During this workshop:

- Be aware of your emotional and sensory responses and take a break if needed. The following services also offer support.

If you find you are struggling, please talk with your supervisor, seek help, or call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or 1800RESPECT, or visit the [1800RESPECT website](https://www.1800respect.org.au).

## Slide 6

### Considering trauma and adversity for children under the age of 5

**Key message 1:** Children under the age of 5 are NOT immune to the effects of trauma. In fact, they may be the most vulnerable group as they are currently undergoing rapid changes in emotional and physiological development, have limited coping skills and are very dependent on their primary caregiver to protect them physically and emotionally.

**Key message 2:** Pre-school children are particularly at risk of adverse outcomes if they witnessed threat to their parent, were separated from their parent or if their parent reports significant psychological distress.

**Key message 3:** There is enormous variability in trauma responses. Some children will be quiet and withdrawn, while others will exhibit more obvious behavioural problems. These problems are not necessarily just 'bad behaviour'; they may actually be behavioural manifestations of the traumatic event.

Children who experience trauma may use behaviours to try to protect themselves, or to influence their environment in order to feel safe. These behaviours can continue well after

the trauma event has passed, because the child may still feel or respond as though the stress or threat is imminent.

#### **Internalising and externalising behaviours:**

Some children may become aggressive towards others, called 'externalising behaviours'; while some may avoid any perceived aggression, conflict or fearful situations. Some children may become withdrawn, quiet, or more introverted, known as 'internalising behaviours'. These children can be overlooked, or thought to be 'doing well', when they may not be – internalising behaviours are often mistaken as signs a child is calm and settled.

**Key Message 4:** Early intervention is recommended to ensure that behaviours do not become ingrained and the child maximises their development.

## Slide 7

### Toddlers and pre-schoolers (2-4 years)

Children 2-4 years:

- depend on caregivers to feel safe and secure and to help them understand and cope
- have a growing awareness of how others think and feel and therefore are likely to notice and be sensitive to how family members are responding to a traumatic event.
- may develop false assumptions about cause of event.
- may have difficulty understanding loss, such as a death, is permanent.
- may often remember negative images of the traumatic event during quiet times/rest times/bedtimes.
- may seek to avoid unsettling memories by 'misbehaving', protesting separations and/or seeking additional closeness with caregivers.
- will often seek reassurance and/or try to make sense of what happened by asking lots of questions.

Remember:

- Toddlers lack the ability to protect themselves due to their limited physical, cognitive and emotional skills, and can feel helpless and powerless in traumatic situations.
- Young children will also often recreate parts of the traumatic event through their play or drawing. They may also experience increased physical symptoms (e.g. tummy pains) and often remember negative images of the event during quiet times, rest times and bedtimes. They often seek to avoid unsettling memories by 'misbehaving' at these times, protesting separations and/or seeking out additional closeness with their caregivers.
- Preschoolers are particularly vulnerable following a traumatic event, as they are more likely to develop false assumptions about the cause of the event. For example, because they are egocentric, preschool children are more likely to think, 'My mummy is sick because I was bad'. Preschoolers are also more likely to over-generalise or catastrophise based on the facts they have available. For example, they might think, 'Our house blew away, so that means there must be no houses left at all'.
- An adversity or traumatic event such as the death of a loved one can be particularly difficult for young children as they may not yet understand that death is permanent. At this age, young children may often wonder and ask repeatedly when their loved one is returning.

**Key message:** Due to their limited communication skills, preschoolers may not be able to explain what is upsetting them or understand why their parents are distressed. Therefore, younger children's responses to traumatic events tend to be more behavioral.

Given that some of these behaviours are 'normal' during this stage and can be mistaken for the 'terrible twos', it is extra important to observe these behaviours closely to determine

if they are within normal limits for the child's age, or are new and indicate signs of distress.

### Facilitator's notes:

Fact sheet – [Trauma responses in children aged 2-4 years](#)

Refer to table of resources at the conclusion of the Workshop 2 handbook.

## Slide 8

### Psychological reactions to trauma (2-4 years)

### Facilitator's notes:

1. Invite participants to think of a family or child they have been working with in this age bracket.
2. Play video.

**\*Please note: Playing this video will require an internet connection when presenting.**

Link to video:  
<https://youtu.be/nBOWEG7v2so>

From the video:

Responses to trauma include:

- Heightened arousal (e.g. disturbed sleep, jumpy or easily startled by loud noises, difficulties concentrating, hard to settle or soothe).
- Changes in appetite (e.g. fussy eating, no appetite).

- Regression in developmental skills (e.g. walking, crawling, toileting skills, talking like a baby, thumb-sucking)
- Loss of confidence.
- Sad and withdrawn appearance.
- Withdrawing or disconnecting from important relationships
- Increased physical complaints (e.g. tummy aches, headaches).
- Behavioural changes (e.g. increased irritability, extreme temper tantrums, fussiness, attention-seeking, defiance, aggressive behaviour).
- Difficulty in concentrating and paying attention.
- Aggression and angry behaviours toward themselves or others (e.g. head banging, hitting, biting).
- Reliving the trauma (e.g. traumatic play or drawing, nightmares, repeatedly talking about the event, asking questions repeatedly).

**Early intervention is recommended.**

### Psychological reactions to trauma (2-4 years)

#### Additional information

There can be tremendous individual variability in trauma responses. It is important to understand that some of these signs are common for many children immediately following exposure to a traumatic event. If they persist or worsen over time however, they can be more serious. If the signs are still present after a month, the child may require additional assistance to manage their difficulties.

**Key Message 1:** Children aged 2-4 years are vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma.

**Key Message 2:** Early intervention is recommended to ensure that behaviours do not become ingrained and the child maximises their development.

## Slide 9

### Reflecting on experience and practice

#### Facilitator's notes:

##### Reflection Activity

**Aim:** To encourage participant engagement and sharing of experience.

Invite participants to reflect on their experience of working with infants who have experienced trauma. As if anyone is willing to share their experience confidentially. Stress the need to deidentify information so that the child cannot be identified by others.

- *What reactions did you notice in the video that you have encountered in your practice with children?*
- *How did you respond to the child and/or their family? What did you say or do?*
- *Reflecting on these encounters what practices might you continue individually or as a team, and what might you change?*

- Most children recover well after a traumatic event; however, a small minority will experience long-term impacts requiring additional support.
- Children can be active agents for positive preparation and recovery in their families and communities.
- Children need adults to help them recognise and voice their feelings.
- Basic foundational knowledge about trauma can be helpful for everybody.

## Slide 12

### What next?

#### Facilitator's notes

##### Additional resources

- Fact sheet – [Trauma responses in children aged 2-4 years](#)

This fact sheet highlights some of the common trauma reactions that may be seen in children aged 2-4 years, as well as outlining signs that may indicate further assistance is required.

Age: 2-4 years

- Fact sheet – [Common severe stress reactions to traumatic events](#)

Following a traumatic event, children may experience a variety of reactions, ranging from mild to severe. It is important for adults to watch for any severe reactions from children as this may indicate that additional help is required.

Age: 0-12 years

## Slides 10 and 11

### Summary - Children and trauma

#### Key messages:

- Self-care is vital for any professional to support others, particularly children.
- Children aged 2-4 years are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma.
- Early intervention is recommended to ensure that behaviours do not become ingrained and the child maximises their development.
- A stable and familiar routine and boundaries help children to recover after trauma.



## Facilitator's notes (continued):

- Fact sheet – Childhood trauma reactions: How and when to get help

This fact sheet outlines how educators can understand when children might require additional help following a traumatic event, as well as what they can do to arrange help for students.

Age: 0-12 years

- Video – Infant and perinatal wellbeing: Risk and resilience factors

This video, featuring Dr. Andrea Baldwin from the Queensland Centre for Perinatal & Infant Mental Health, outlines some of the things children need to get the best start in life. It also discusses some of the strengths and vulnerabilities that can affect children's responses to disaster.

Age: 0-4 years

- Video – Re-establishing routines and rules following a disaster or traumatic event

This video, featuring child psychotherapist Ruth Wraith, outlines how important it is for families to re-establish school and home routines after a disaster. Children need stability and familiarity to help them recover.

Age: 5-12 years

- e-learning course – The Impact of Trauma on the child

This course explores a trauma-informed approach to understanding the prevalence of trauma, and its impacts on the child and family. It briefly explores the implications of this approach to caring for, or working with, young people. It does not explore trauma-specific therapies.

Age: 0-12 years

- Toolkit – Community Trauma Toolkit

This toolkit contains resources to help and support adults and children before, during, and after a disaster or traumatic event. It will help you to understand some of the impacts of disaster and how you can help to lessen these impacts.

Age: 0-12 years

## Slide 13

Thank you.