

USU Extension Researchers Identify Ways to Recognize Youth Trauma and Stress

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Jill's sixth-grade teacher noticed that she had been missing assignments and acting out in class more than usual since returning from summer vacation. After speaking with her, the teacher learned that Jill's parents had divorced in July, which was likely the cause of her behavioral change. This is one example of an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that can create stress and challenges for young people.

Utah State University Extension faculty Cara Murray, Anna Gilliam, Jared Hawkins, and Christina Pay recently released [Understanding and Supporting Youth Affected by Trauma and Stress](#). The fact sheet explains that ACEs may include family instability, loss, bullying, and exposure to violence. These can affect brain development, emotional regulation, behavior, attention, relationships, and the ability to manage further stress.

Adults who work with young people can play an important role in helping youth cope with trauma, adversity, and stress. Signs of ACEs may include trouble concentrating, withdrawing from others, strong reactions to seemingly small problems, or testing boundaries. Adults can learn to recognize these behaviors as stress responses rather than intentional misbehavior.

The authors emphasize that adults do not need to be mental health professionals to make a difference. Simply providing safe, predictable, and supportive environments can help young people build trust and resilience.

They recommend several strategies:

- Create predictable routines. Knowing what to expect can help young people feel safer and provide

stability when other areas of their lives may be unpredictable.

- Simplify choices. Even small decisions, such as choosing an activity or deciding where to sit, can give youth a greater sense of control.
- Remain calm and consistent. A steady adult response can help de-escalate difficult situations and model healthy ways to manage strong emotions.
- Listen before correcting. Youth are more receptive to guidance when they feel heard and understood, not judged.
- Recognize strengths and effort. Acknowledging progress and positive choices helps young people see themselves as capable and resilient.
- Encourage healthy relationships. Connections with peers and trusted adults can strengthen self-worth, trust, and the ability to navigate challenges.

Adults should also know how to respond when a young person discusses self-harm, suicide, abuse, or other safety concerns. The fact sheet recommends staying calm, taking the concern seriously, and following appropriate reporting procedures. Adults should not promise confidentiality when safety is at stake and should contact emergency services if there is immediate danger.

Supporting young people can also take an emotional toll on adults. Caregivers, educators, and adult volunteers should protect their own well-being by maintaining healthy work-life boundaries and seeking support from colleagues or supervisors.

The authors emphasize that caring adults are not expected to be a substitute for therapists. Their role is to provide consistency, empathy, and connection while helping youth access professional assistance when necessary.

For help in Utah, download the SafeUT app and call or text the Utah Crisis Line at 988. National resources include the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the Crisis Text Line by texting HOME to 741741.

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