

PTSD Assessment Feedback (Example)

Normalizing:

We know about the kinds of ways kids and adults may act and feel after very scary or overwhelming things, like what your child has experienced. The way that your child is feeling and acting is very normal following a scary event.

Survival in the moment:

Our brain's most important job is to keep us alive and safe, and it'll try to keep us alive even without us thinking about it. Kind of like how you don't have to think about making your heart beat right now. We don't actually get to choose how our brain will respond. Some people fight, some run away, and some freeze.

How trauma reminders develop:

When we are going through these incredibly overwhelming, confusing, and scary events our brain automatically thinks, "If I don't die right here right now, I want to be sure this doesn't happen again, so I am going to record as much as I can of what is happening right now." Then our brain starts to record lots of things about what is happening in that scary moment. It's often what we see, hear, taste, smell, feel, the position of our bodies, and the feelings in all the different parts of our bodies. That way if our brain comes across any of those things again in the future, it might tell us there is danger--that something bad (like the scary thing that happened before) is going to happen again. Imagine you were walking through the park...(snakes and sticks)

How trauma reminders get in the way:

These things our brain does can be really helpful if we are in danger, but if we are safe, like in school or home where you are right now, these automatic brain reactions can really get in the way. What happens is, our brains are confusing us and making us feel like something awful is going to happen just around the corner! So when our brains are in this kind of survival mode, it can make it hard to do a lot of the other things our brains should be doing like sleeping, playing, concentrating, and handling our emotions. If you put all your energy into controlling these symptoms, you can usually keep them in check, but just like trying to hold a beach ball under the water, if you get distracted, those things will pop back up.

How trauma symptoms are functional:

This might be a good place to add in the winter coat/life jacket analogy – it makes sense to wear the life jacket on the boat (i.e. when in danger) but once you are on land that life jacket starts getting in the way.

Description of PTSD symptoms:

When kids are having these kinds of reactions and it's getting in the way of their functioning, we call this "traumatic stress" or symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Some kids have all these kinds of symptoms and actually have this thing called PTSD. Sometimes kids don't get all of the symptoms, but the ones they have are really bothering them and getting in the way of them living their life. The good news is we can help kids feel better and function

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better pretty quickly. In your child's case, we can help him to not have as many of those angry outbursts as he's having.

Let me tell you about the four main types of PTSD symptoms. The first is "intrusions in daily life", next is "avoidance." Then there are "changes in thoughts and mood" and "changes in physiological arousal level and reactivity." (Write these down as you say them.)

- For "intrusions in daily life" what happens is that all the bad scary things that have happened keep popping up in your head (like a jack in the box) This happens in the day and night, through memories and nightmares, and you feel really upset or overwhelmed with emotions, and sensations in your body. You don't want this to happen, but your brain does this on its own. It's like how your child said, "I'll just be sitting at my desk and keep seeing him grab me and I'll get really mad and want to hurt someone."
- For "avoidance" what happens is your brain's also trying to stay away from things that are similar to bad scary things. We are also trying not to think about the bad scary things because it makes us feel bad and scared. It's like how some people won't talk about what happened to them, or why a kid will wrap themselves up in tons of blankets at night—that kid is trying to avoid her body being something someone could get to easily. Other kids might avoid cars if they were in a car accident since you can't have another car accident if you don't get in a car!
- For "changes in thoughts and mood," this is when after the bad scary thing or things have happened that we start thinking very negative things about ourselves, about others—even the people who are now really taking care of us—or about the world in general. This can be like people feeling deep down inside that everything that happened was really their fault or that they can't trust people or the world is just really dangerous.
- For "changes in physiological arousal level and reactivity," the most complicated sounding one, this is when your body has been scared so much that it stays on alert to protect yourself in the future. Or when people's bodies get so wired up because their brain is looking for danger. So people might get startled easily or always feel very nervous and can't concentrate or sleep well.

Based upon what you and your child have told me, here are some of the trauma symptoms that your child is struggling with right now...