

Identifying trauma risk in small children early after an accident

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Small children also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders after a serious accident. With the aid of a new test, children with an increased risk can already be identified in the space of a few days. The test devised by scientists from the University of Zurich and the University Children's Hospital Zurich helps to treat traumatized small children at an early stage.

Accidents also traumatize [small children](#). Around one in ten children still suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder a year after a [road accident](#) or burn injury, reliving aspects of the [traumatic experience](#) in the form of flashbacks or nightmares. In doing so, young children keep replaying the stressful memories while avoiding anything that might remind them of the accident in any way. As a result of this constant alertness to threatening memories, the children can develop sleeping disorders, concentration problems or [aggressive behavior](#).

Assessing the risk of illness accurately

Researchers from the University of Zurich and the University Children's Hospital Zurich have now devised and evaluated a systematic questionnaire, which can be used to identify pre-school children with an increased risk of long-term post-traumatic disorders within a few days of an accident. For the first time, it is now possible for [first responders](#) such as pediatricians, nursing staff or emergency psychologists to assess small children accurately with regard to their risk of illness. "Children

with an increased risk can thus be identified early and referred to an emergency psychologist for treatment," explains Professor Markus Landolt. This prevents an [acute stress](#) response from developing into chronic mental illness that causes the child to suffer and spells a lengthy and expensive course of treatment.

For the study, Professor Landolt's doctoral student Didier Kramer interviewed a total of 134 parents of two to six-year-old children seven days after a road accident or burn injury. The screening instrument used comprised 21 questions on changes in the child's behavior after the accident and recorded a high degree of accuracy: 85 percent of the children examined who suffered from a post-traumatic stress disorder after six months had already been identified correctly a week after the accident with the aid of the questionnaire.

Markus Landolt is now planning an app for Smartphones in collaboration with IT scientists: "This app will enable the screening to be conducted even more easily and quickly, and above all implemented broadly."

More information: Didier N. Kramer, Matthias B. Hertli, & Markus A. Landolt. Evaluation of an early risk screener for PTSD in preschool children after accidental injury. *Pediatrics*. September 23, 2013. [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2013-0713](#)

Provided by University of Zurich

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