

# How first responders and other parents can protect their children from trauma

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When children witness the effects of trauma on their parents, it can change how they see the world. Children of first responders—police, firefighters, EMTs, military personnel, paramedics, and corrections officers—are especially vulnerable, as their parents, by the very nature of their jobs, are routinely exposed to traumatic events that can impact their own mental health.

"In general, children who see the impact of [traumatic events](#) on their parents may become more anxious or fearful about life or feel an intense sense of responsibility to anticipate moods and try to keep their parents happy," says Iris Perlstein, clinical coordinator with First Responder Treatment Services at Penn Medicine Princeton House Behavioral Health. "This secondary exposure can cause considerable suffering in a child's life."

And while [first responders](#) try their best to shield their families from the emotional weight of their work, their children may take notice.

"Even though children might not know what a first responder parent experienced on a given day, they do see the [stress response](#)," Perlstein said. "Children see the depression, the [substance abuse](#), the nightmares and the hypervigilance, and this exposure puts them at risk for second-hand [trauma](#)."

As part of the First Responder Treatment Services at Princeton House, Perlstein counsels first responders on how to protect their children from second-hand trauma. Her suggestions below can be helpful to all parents struggling to shield their children from secondary traumatic stress.

## **An intense emotional cauldron**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that 30% of first responders develop behavioral health conditions such as depression and post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) as compared to 20% of the [general population](#), according to a report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The pandemic and its record-breaking human loss and trauma have likely taken an added toll, Perlstein said.

Although post-traumatic stress in children of first responders is an under-researched area, a study conducted six months after the Sept. 11 [terrorist attacks](#) found that high levels of exposure and occupational stress of first responders may have caused children in first-responder families to become traumatized.

"When children witness their parent experiencing reactions to trauma, they can become embroiled in a shared intense emotional cauldron," said Perlstein, who advises first responders to seek help in coping with the aftereffects of trauma.

"First responders are taught to call for backup in crisis situations, but they also need to apply that to themselves," Perlstein added. "When they seek the help of a behavioral health provider and begin to understand their own trauma, they can start protecting their health and the well-being of their entire family."

The First Responder Treatment Service at Princeton House, which was one of the first of its kind in the United States, provides inpatient mental health and addiction services to address the unique needs of first responders. In addition, Princeton House offers intensive outpatient services for children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral problems that interfere with functioning at school and home.

## **Creating a safe environment**

"Being aware of their own stress and their own secondary traumatization can help first responders better recognize and respond to their child's symptoms," Perlstein said. "These symptoms can include sleep disturbances, clingy behavior, angry outbursts, sadness, tearfulness, and fear that bad things are going to happen."

As part of the process of addressing secondary traumatic stress, Perlstein

recommended parents create an environment in which children feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings and offered these recommendations:

- Pay attention. It's important to tune in to children to show them they have your full attention. Setting aside at least 15 minutes every day can be beneficial.
- Listen reflectively. This involves repeating back what was said and asking if you got it right.
- Read between the lines. A parent can usually sense when something is off. In addition to what is being said, consider what is not being said.
- Be understanding. Telling a child that you understand how they feel goes a long way.
- Acknowledge the valid. Acknowledge that the child's feelings and behavior make sense when there are facts and logic to support it.
- Show equality. Demonstrate that even though children are young, their feelings carry equal weight as part of the family.

"Trauma can have a profound influence on first responders and their [children](#)," Perlstein said. "However, traumatic response is one epidemic that does not benefit from masks. The best prevention and treatment begins by acknowledging the problem, not covering it up."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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