

Understanding Dissociation

Dissociation is commonly described as a response to complex trauma; yet it can be difficult to accurately identify and effectively respond to for both clinical and non-clinical staff in practice. Difficulties with identification and response to dissociation can occur because education and training about dissociation is more limited and there may be less comfort among providers to be able to accurately identify dissociation and effectively intervene. CCTASI's "Understanding Dissociation" resources are designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice for clinicians and their supervisors as well as non-clinical providers including teachers and parents/caregivers.

Resources include (see screenshots starting **next page**):

- Understanding Dissociation for Parents and Caregivers
- Understanding Dissociation for Teachers
- Understanding Dissociation for Clinicians
- Introduction to Dissociation for Clinicians and Supervisors

Click on the link for access to all of the [Understanding Dissociation](#) resources.

Understanding Dissociation

for Parents and Caregivers

Childhood Trauma and Dissociation

Childhood trauma experiences include events such as abuse, neglect, or acts of violence a child experiences or sees. Traumatic experiences can be very scary and overwhelming for children. When faced with these types of scary experiences, children adapt to survive and protect themselves emotionally in many different ways. One way children may react to a traumatic event(s) is through a process called dissociation.^{1,2}



What is Dissociation?

Dissociation can play an important role in how children survive and adapt to trauma. When dissociation occurs, thoughts, feelings, and memories of the event are not connected to each other in the brain. This happens to help the individual limit the overwhelming feelings in the moment and in order to help the person get through the experience. If the memories are not “reconnected” with one another, reminders of the event may unexpectedly emerge and may influence how a child feels or behaves even if the child is not aware. Although dissociation may initially be a helpful coping strategy, when it becomes an individual’s primary way of responding to the world around him/her, dissociation can become problematic and may lead to many emotional and behavioral difficulties at home, school, and with peers.^{1,2} **Questions to ask yourself if you are wondering if your child may be experiencing dissociative responses are:**

Does your child:

- Have big “mood swings” or quickly change his/her behavior?
- “Lie” more than other kids?
- Feel “out of it” a lot?
- Talk about times when things don’t feel real?
- Feel like he/she is going crazy?

Does he or she have:

- Aggressive outbursts or tantrums that seem to happen for no reason?
- Trouble remembering events or experiences?
- Difficulty focusing and paying attention?
- Difficulty with daydreaming/zoning out?
- Difficulty learning from new experiences?
- Difficulty naming or describing feelings?

These are a just a few possible signs of dissociation. If you answered “yes” to several of these questions, ask your therapist or doctor about the possibility of screening and assessing your child for dissociation. Keep in mind, it is also possible for these behaviors to exist without dissociation.

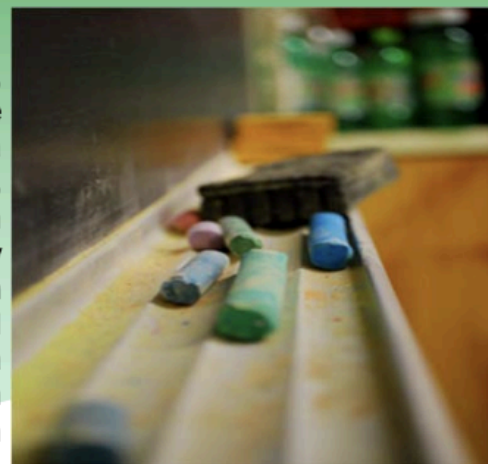
Please see the back of this page for helpful online resources.

Understanding Dissociation

for Teachers

Childhood Trauma and Dissociation

Childhood trauma experiences include events such as abuse, neglect, or acts of violence a child experiences or sees. Exposure to single, multiple, or ongoing traumatic events can have a negative impact on a child's social, physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development.¹ Trauma experiences can also seriously affect the way a child thinks and learns, which may lead to disruptive behavior in the classroom and/or declines in school attendance and achievement.¹ When these learning and behavioral difficulties are correctly identified as stemming from a child experiencing trauma, one may come to understand that a trauma response known as *dissociation* may be playing a role in



What is Dissociation?

Dissociation occurs when certain information, experiences, memories, or feelings are not processed and integrated into one's memory in

the usual way. The information that is not fully organized and stored into memory is then separated from other parts of an individual's consciousness, memory, and personality. When this happens, the parts of experiences and memories that were not appropriately stored continue to influence how an individual thinks, feels, and behaves despite an individual not having conscious awareness of this. In traumatized children, especially those who experienced multiple or chronic traumas, dissociated memories may lead them to alternate between thinking as though the trauma is still occurring and as though it never happened. Dissociation is one response to trauma, but when it becomes a person's primary way of existing and responding, significant emotional and behavioral difficulties may emerge. This may lead to adverse effects on classroom behavior, social interactions, and learning.²

In the classroom, dissociation may be linked to the following responses² :

- Daydreaming/Spacing Out
- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- Forgetfulness
- Rapid shifts in demeanor and academic performance
- Learning issues/inconsistent learning
- Loss of skills that were previously solidified (e.g. memorization of multiplication tables)
- Behavioral outbursts
- Rapid aggressive responses
- Fluctuations in mood
- Regression in age-appropriate behavior

It is important to recognize that these behaviors may exist even when dissociation is not present

Please see the back of this page for helpful resources and to learn how you can respond to these behaviors in your classroom!

Understanding Dissociation

for Clinicians

Childhood Trauma and Dissociation

Child trauma experiences include events such as abuse, neglect, or acts of violence a child experiences or sees. When faced with these types of scary experiences, children adapt to survive and protect themselves emotionally in many different ways. One way children may react to a traumatic event(s) is through a process called dissociation.^{1,2} Dissociation is a psychological process that takes place without conscious awareness. It exists to help an individual manage a direct experience of stress or reminders of overwhelming stress and/or trauma. In the moment, dissociation can serve an adaptive and protective function by attempting to maintain control in the face of threat, but this automatic response can become problematic when it becomes an individual's primary way of coping.²



Understanding Dissociation Dissociation occurs when certain information, experiences, memories, or feelings do not get processed and integrated into one's memory in the usual way. Specifically, aspects of memories (images, sensory experiences, feelings, etc.) are separated from one another and from an individual's awareness to help the individual maintain control in the moment. The separated aspects of memories are then stored in the brain without having a full context or meaning because they are not connected to one another. Over time if this information is "not integrated" or made meaningful by being brought into conscious awareness through connecting aspects of memories, the "dissociated" information may continue to influence how an individual thinks, feels, and behaves despite an individual not having conscious awareness of it. In traumatized children, especially those who experienced multiple or chronic traumas, dissociated memories may lead them to alternate between thinking as though the trauma is still occurring and as though it never happened. Dissociation is one response to trauma, but when it becomes a person's primary way of existing and responding, significant emotional and behavioral difficulties may emerge.

Examples of emotional and behavioral difficulties related to dissociation may include:*

- Flashbacks
- Not knowing how to describe internal states/feelings
- Memory loss
- Black outs
- Other risk behaviors, including: unprovoked aggressive rage, acts of physical or sexual aggression

****It is important to recognize that these symptoms may exist even when dissociation is not present***

For More Information Go To:

International Society for the Study for Trauma and Dissociation: <http://www.isst-d.org/>

David Baldwin's Trauma Information Pages: <http://www.trauma-pages.com/>

Developed by the Center for Child Trauma
Assessment, Services and Interventions
(CCTASI) at Northwestern University

Introduction to Dissociation in Children:

A Resource for Supervisors
and Clinicians

April 2017

