

UNDERSTAND DISSOCIATION IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

A GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS

WHAT IS DISSOCIATION?

Dissociation is a natural survival response to overwhelming stress or trauma. When the stress or situation is too much to cope with, dissociation helps protect children by allowing them to mentally "check out" until they are ready again. Some children only dissociate briefly after trauma. For others, it can happen more often - especially if they still feel unsafe or overwhelmed.



WHAT DOES DISSOCIATION LOOK LIKE?

Stare into space, seem "spaced out", or have glazed eyes.

Forget things they said or did.

Say they feel like their mind is far away or like they are watching themselves from outside their body.

Talk to imaginary friends or describe "parts" inside them who take over or talk to them.

Suddenly change their mood or behavior.

Seem unaware of their surrounding or not respond to their name.

Say that the world feels blurry, dream-like, or unreal (derealisation).



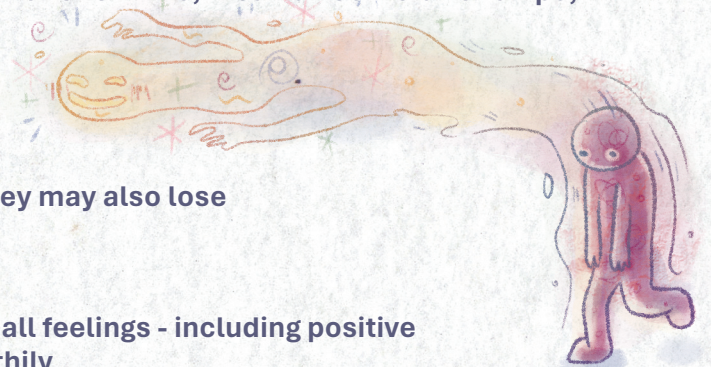
WHY DOES DISSOCIATION HAPPEN?

Dissociation helps children cope with scary or overwhelming events like abuse, neglect, family violence, bullying, grief, or medical trauma. For some, it becomes a habit that stops them from learning how to feel and manage emotions. Over time, it can affect relationships, schoolwork, and emotional development.

HOW DOES IT AFFECT CHILDREN?

When children disconnect from strong emotions, they may also lose touch with positive feelings. This can lead to:

- **Reliance on dissociation** to disconnect and ignore all feelings - including positive ones - instead of learning to cope with feelings healthily
- **Low self-esteem**
- **Appearing 'spaced out'**, defiant or rude
- **Trouble connecting** with others, including confusing behaviour where they are close to you one minute and then angry or distant the next.
- **Poor or fluctuating school performance**, including getting in trouble from teachers or increased peer conflict
- **Risky behaviours or emotional outbursts**
- **Difficulty repairing relationships**
- **Suicidal thoughts** or wishing they weren't alive



HOW CAN YOU HELP?

DO NOT:

- **Walk away** if they're dissociating. Stay with them unless they ask for space. Your steady presence can help guide them back.
- **Tell them to "snap out of it"** or say they're "being dramatic". This can increase shame and disconnection.
- **Dismiss or downplay** their feelings, even if it doesn't seem like a big deal to you.
- **Punish or shame behaviours** that come from trauma (e.g. zoning out, mood shifts).
- **Expect quick fixes.** Healing takes time, safety, and support.
- **Assume they're fully aware** or in control during dissociative episodes. Check in gently instead.



DO:

- Understand that dissociation isn't intentional defiance; it's a response to feeling overwhelmed.
- **Stay calm and present** when your child is distressed. Your grounded presence can help them feel safe.
- **Describe what might be happening** in a kind, validating way (e.g. "It makes sense you're feeling overwhelmed right now").
- **Help your child feel safe** at home, school, and in relationships by being predictable, gentle, and consistent.
- **Support healthy routines.** Regular sleep, meals, movement, and downtime help with emotional regulation.
- **Learn about your child's trauma** and what triggers dissociation.
- **Create a plan together** for what to do when dissociation happens (e.g. 'grounding' strategies, such as asking them to describe what they see and hear around them, or sensory strategies such as giving them something interesting to touch like a squishy toy).
- **Give choices.** Ask what they need in the moment, and really listen to the answer.
- If they mention parts or imaginary friends, respond gently: "That sounds like a really upset part of you."



WHEN TO SEEK HELP?

Talk to a GP or mental health professional early if you feel concerned. Look for someone trained in trauma and dissociation, such as a psychologist, child psychiatrist, or mental health social worker. Early support can make a big difference.

TREATMENT OPTIONS.

- **Psychotherapy:** trauma-focused therapy (e.g. TF-CBT, play therapy, parent-child therapy)
- **Medication:** in some cases, medications may help with anxiety, depression, or other mental health symptoms

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF.

Supporting a child who dissociates can be hard. It's important to take care of your own wellbeing. If you're experiencing trauma, mental health difficulties, or substance use, reach out for support.



HELPFUL RESOURCES.

- Raising Children Network: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/connecting-communicating/coping-with-trauma/trauma-first-response>
- Phoenix Australia: <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/your-recovery/helping-children-and-teens/>
- Better Health Victoria - Trauma and Teenagers: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/trauma-and-teenagers-common-reactions>
- Dissociation Toolbox: <https://www.oohctoolbox.org.au/dissociation>

