

TRAUMA:

By Pieter van Zyl

YOUR KIDS ARE

affected

Advice for parents: how to spot the problem and deal with it

CHILDHOOD trauma. The words invoke upsetting images of cruelty or sexual abuse – which can easily make you overlook lesser problems your child might face.

When a Stellenbosch woman had a miscarriage the last thing on her mind was how it would affect her two-year-old daughter, she says.

“Of course we explained her little brother would not be arriving any more but that he might come later,” she says. “But six months later the play-school called out of the blue. My daughter had started weeping inconsolably that morning, saying her brother had died. We thought she would have forgotten about the miscarriage by then and had no idea it had

affected her so deeply.”

Trauma in childhood isn't always the result of cruelty or abuse, says Manette de Jager, head of the TygerBear Social Work Unit. “Children can also be traumatised by car accidents or the presence of chronic diseases such as diabetes.”

As head of the social work unit at Tygerberg Hospital in Cape Town, the only unit of its kind providing counselling for traumatised children and their families, De Jager deals with the rehabilitation of children who have been through terrible ordeals. Year after year they help thousands of children rebuild their shattered lives but De Jager is nevertheless acutely aware that even common occurrences and unavoidable events in ordinary households can be devastating to a child.

A Cape Town woman for instance believed her three-year-old son was too young for a divorce to affect him on anything but a practical level. “But after we separated he started wetting his bed,” she says.

It's a mistake to think a child is too young to be traumatised or that children forget certain things, cautions Marita Rademeyer, child psychologist at Pretoria's Child Trauma Clinic.

“Even babies can suffer trauma,” she says. “Children don't have the vocabulary to express their feelings but that doesn't mean they're not deeply affected.”

This means parents, caregivers and other supervising adults need guidance to help children to be less exposed and to recognise the signs when a child is in trouble.

Recovery is quicker and more effective the earlier a traumatised child receives help.

ADVICE THAT WORKS

Adults aren't always right. And children are allowed to say no. “We need to foster and strengthen children's desire to assert themselves,” TygerBear therapist Nocawe Frans says.

“Your children are allowed to say so when there's something they want or don't want to do,” therapist Helene Louw says. “And they need someone they trust to talk to when a situation

makes them uncomfortable.”

But you can't expect children to tell you their secrets unless you're open about what's happening in your own life. Secrets are problematic. “And your reaction to your child's behaviour and mistakes can keep the communication channel open between the two of you or close it down,” she warns.

“Children need to be reassured that they can always approach you and talk without being judged.

“In so many of the cases that end up here teenagers have hidden something from their parents for fear of how they might react. They end up here when things start going wrong because they've had to carry secrets around.”

Explain to children that rules create safety. “Kids hate rules but they need them to feel safe,” therapist Sayeeda Dhansay says. “Communication is important.”

In an ideal parent-child relationship the child feels able to talk to either parent about anything that captures their attention on TV or the internet, including sex or violence.

“Parents must handle questions about sex as naturally as possible,” De Jager says. “Parents make the best sex counsellors because they do it with love. No one knows your child better than you do. And kids will keep asking sex questions until they're satisfied with the answer.”

Always ask where your kids are going and with whom, even if it irritates them, Dhansay says. “They have the right to

KNOW YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDS

You should know your child's friends and their parents well enough to be in a position to ask sensitive questions.

“When playmates come over introduce yourself, ask them about themselves and make them feel welcome,” child therapist Nocawe Frans suggests.

“A successful introduction is all about tone of voice and body language. Be at ease and put them at ease in turn. This is how you build trust. You don't have to be their pal but you're in a precarious position if you don't cultivate a relationship with your child's friends. You have the right to meet their parents.”

Manette de Jager of TygerBear agrees. “Your kids should be allowed to sleep over only at the homes of people you've met and visited and you know and trust.”