



Life After Traumatic Brain Injury: What to Expect and How to Help Your Foster Child

What is Traumatic Brain Injury?

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is an injury to the brain caused by a bump, hit, or jolt that can change how a child thinks, reasons, acts, learns, and talks. Children with TBI may also experience changes in memory, walking, seeing, and hearing.¹ TBI severity ratings range from mild to moderate or severe. In 2014, an estimated 812,000 children, ages 17 and younger, were diagnosed with TBI.²

TBI Severity

The Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) is commonly used by medical professionals to rate severity of TBI.³ It is common for differences in brain functioning to be obvious at the time of injury, but caregivers should know that some TBI symptoms may not show up until weeks to years after the injury.⁴

Mild	Moderate	Severe
Loss of consciousness for less than 30 minutes	Loss of consciousness 1-24 hours	Loss of consciousness for more than 24 hours
Post traumatic amnesia for less than 24 hours	Post traumatic amnesia for 1-24 hours	Post traumatic amnesia for more than 7 days
GCS score of 13-15	GCS score of 9-12	GCS score of 3-8

Possible Physical, Cognitive, and Emotional Changes in Children after TBI

Physical recovery is different for each child with. Physical recovery tends to happen quicker than cognitive recovery. Family support, physical therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and speech therapy can improve chances for recovery.⁵

Cognitive changes in children may not be obvious until the child gets older. The greatest challenges in children with TBI can often be in their ability to think, learn, and develop socially appropriate behaviors. Common problems from TBI include difficulty concentrating, learning and understanding information, impaired judgement, and developing mature reasoning.⁶ Cognitive rehabilitation is an option for children with TBI.

Children with TBI may experience emotions that are hard to control, communicate, and understand. Families of children with TBI need to understand that these behavioral and emotional changes are a result of the injury and not the child deciding to be difficult or defiant. Social and family support, neuropsychology and behavioral therapy can help with these issues during the recovery process.⁷

¹Center for Parent Information & Resources. (2015, June 16). *Traumatic brain injury*. <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/tbi/>

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Surveillance report of traumatic brain injury-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and deaths*. https://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/pdf/TBI-Surveillance-Report-FINAL_508.pdf

³Araki, T., Yokota, H., & Morita, A. (2017, February). Pediatric traumatic brain injury: Characteristic features, diagnosis, and management. *Neurologia Medico-Chirurgica*, 57(2), 82-93. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5341344/>

⁴Grey Law. (2019). *Difference mild moderate severe brain injuries*. <https://www.greylaw.com/difference-mild-moderate-severe-brain-injuries/>

⁵The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. (2020, August). *Brain injury – Physical effects of injury*. https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Brain_injury_Physical_effects_of_Injury/#:~:text=reduced%20balance%20and%20coordination,bod y%20parts%20are%20in%20space

⁶Brain Injury Association of America. (2021). *Symptoms and recovery in children*. <https://www.biausa.org/brain-injury/about-brain-injury/children-what-to-expect/symptoms-recovery-in-children>

⁷BrainLine. (2021). *TBI 101: Behavioral & emotional symptoms*. <https://www.brainline.org/article/tbi-101-behavioral-emotional-symptoms>



Physical

Slurred Speech
Tight or Weak Muscles
Stiff Joints
Lack of Coordination and Balance
Saliva Control
Changes in Sensation
Lack of Body Awareness
Vision Impairments

Cognitive

Short-Term Memory Problems
Difficulty Concentrating
Limited Attention Span
Slowness in Thinking
Lack of Communication Skills
Reading Problems
Impaired Judgement

Emotional

Mood Swings
Verbal and Physical Outbursts
Anxiety
Denial
Depression
Low Self-Esteem
Poor Emotional Regulation

Tips for Foster Families and Caregivers⁸

- Practice self-care so that you are healthy enough to help your child. Consider joining a support group.
- Establish daily structure and consistency for the child. Document symptoms or changes in your child.
- Communicate clearly with your child and be prepared to repeat communication as needed.
- Help your child learn de-escalation techniques to help calm emotional and behavioral outbursts.
- Give your child alone time when needed and offer minor choices so child avoids feeling powerless.
- Encourage family communication and make sure all family members are educated on TBI.
- Nurture the child's self-esteem and help maximize social and peer supports.
- Give the child attention, patience, and love as they deal with this difficult life change.
- Talk with school staff to create a re-entry and learning plan for when they return to school.
- Provide safety and home structural changes needed to help physical or motor skill deficiencies.
- Collaborate with medical and behavioral professionals to develop a treatment and safety plan

Community Resources

TBI Medical and Behavioral Treatment Options

TN Dept. of Health https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/program-areas/tbi/TBI_Directory.pdf

Siskin Hospital for Rehabilitation <https://www.siskinrehab.org/rehabilitation-services/inpatient/brain-injury/>

TBI Educational Material

CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/TraumaticBrainInjury/index.html>

CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/parents/index.html>

TBI Support Groups for Families

Brain Injury Association of America <https://www.biausa.org/public-affairs/media/virtual-support-groups>

Siskin Hospital for Rehabilitation <https://www.siskinrehab.org/patients-visitors/resources/support-groups/>

⁸Rocchio, C. A. (n.d.). *Challenges, changes, and choices: A brain injury guide for families and caregivers*. Brain Injury Association of America. <https://www.biausa.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-for-Families-and-Caregivers.pdf>