

After being kidnapped, the recovery ahead

By Elizabeth Landau, CNN

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(CNN) -- It's impossible to know how any given individual is going to respond to trauma. Many children do fine if they return to a safe environment, experts say. But some have difficulty coping, and the effects may linger.

A 5-year-old boy named Ethan was kidnapped from a school bus in Midland City, Alabama, on January 29. His abductor, Jimmy Lee Dykes, also killed bus driver Charles Poland, who was blocking the aisle while other children escaped from the back of the bus, authorities said.

After being held in an underground bunker for six days, Ethan is safe and his captor is dead. The boy is currently "doing fine," FBI Special Agent in Charge Steve Richardson said Monday; he is "laughing, joking, playing, eating."

What lies ahead in terms of how this will affect him mentally is unclear, but a support structure is crucial for anyone who has experienced a traumatic event like this, experts say.

His situation resonates with victims of a bus kidnapping that happened more than three decades ago. Jennifer Hyde was 9 years old when she and 25 other children were on a school bus that was hijacked in 1976 in Chowchilla, California. The children and the bus driver were forced into a buried vehicle, where they remained for 16 hours before escaping.

"You couldn't just go on and have a normal childhood when you faced a life-threatening situation like that. You just can't go on and be carefree," she told CNN's Don Lemon on Sunday.

Hyde remembers having nightmares about her own death after it happened. These days, she still sleeps with a nightlight on, and won't ride a subway or go anywhere underground.

Former child hostage describes captivity underground

Ethan's situation is distinct in many ways: He was the only child held captive, and was kept alone for six days with the man who murdered his bus driver.



Alabama hostage safe with family



Boy's family all smiles after standoff

an abduction



Child hostage survivor recalls ordeal



Past bus kidnapping haunts victims

But other victims of trauma can empathize. Lynda Carrejo-Labendeira, who was on the same hijacked bus as Hyde, told CNN affiliate KFSN: "It's going to take the whole community, people who know him when he comes by. Just a smile, a hug or a pat on the back letting him know he's OK and it's not his fault."

Mental health professionals not involved in Ethan's care emphasized that a supportive environment is essential for recovery. That also applies to any of the children who were on the bus -- who may have witnessed Ethan's abduction or Poland's death -- or who live in that community.

"There's a ripple effect for that event that touches many lives, and certainly that community was impacted as well," said Robin Gurwitch, psychologist at Duke University Medical Center.

A child in this kind of situation will "have to redevelop a sense that the world's a safe place, and the only people who can be able to provide that feeling for him are the adults in his life," said Dr. Charles Raison, CNN Health's mental health expert and associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Parents and other adults in the community should provide a stable, strong and supportive environment for a child who has experienced trauma, he said. The adults should also make sure that they are getting the help that they need.

The big questions in children's minds after events like these are often: "Am I going to be OK?", "Can this happen again?" and "Will the people I care about be OK?" Gurwitch said.

Adults should assure children that they are doing everything they know how to do to keep them safe so that it doesn't happen again, she said.

Support crucial for kids after trauma

Children's behavior may change in response to trauma, she said. Some may become withdrawn, while others may have temper tantrums or become more defiant.

Some children may experience disturbed sleeping habits and appetite. Attention and concentration may also be affected. Together, these symptoms may bring down performance in school, so children who go through this may need extra help with homework.

Although adults may also be stressed because of the situation, they'll need to have extra patience with children who have been touched by a traumatic event, and pay a little more attention to them.

"They need that extra love to know there's somebody there that actually is going to take care of them and care about what happens to them," Gurwitch said.

In addition to having experienced kidnapping, Ethan also has diagnoses of Asperger's syndrome and attention deficit disorder, State Rep. Steve Clouse told CNN. Asperger's syndrome is a high-functioning form of autism characterized by difficulties in socializing and communicating.

It's unclear how these conditions would affect a child's response to trauma, Raison said. There is not enough research to support a generalization about how any given child with these conditions would likely react to situation such as Ethan's.

Regardless, it's important for any child who has been through trauma to return to normal routines, said Anna McConnell, state autism coordinator in Alabama. Having a daily routine is especially important with autism spectrum disorders generally, she said. Children with these diagnoses tend to find comfort in consistency and familiarity.

"Get the child back to the things that they loved and enjoyed," said Elana Newman, professor of psychology at the University of Tulsa.

Separations and reunions may be difficult after experiencing this kind of trauma, she said, which involved a child being isolated from one's community.

There are several kinds of therapy that have been shown to be effective in helping children through traumatic situations. They include trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, a specific type of psychological therapy that targets thinking and behaviors.

Other interventions involve both young children and their parents. The Child & Family Traumatic Stress Intervention program, developed at Yale University, aims to increase communication between parents and children and prevent longer-term disorders.

Hyde said she recently had a reunion with other women who had been on the Chowchilla bus in 1976, and they realized that they struggled with some of the same issues.

"I think for me personally, the fact that I was able to discuss it all these years has helped me tremendously in my recovery," Hyde said.

How our children will recover

