



**Guidelines on Complex Trauma Assessment Process:  
Excerpted from the NCTSN Complex Trauma Assessment Guidelines, With Adaptations Recommended  
by the NYS Complex Trauma Workgroup**

**How to Conduct a Comprehensive Assessment of Complex Trauma**

The assessment of complex trauma is by definition “complex” as it involves both assessing children’s exposure to multiple traumatic events, as well as the wide-ranging and severe impact of this trauma exposure across domains of development. It is important that mental health providers, family members, and other caregivers become aware of specific questions to ask when seeking the most effective services for these children.

**The following are some key steps for conducting a comprehensive assessment of complex trauma:**

1. Assess for a wide range of traumatic events. Determine when they occurred so that they can be linked to developmental stages. In determining Health Home eligibility in NY State, assess first with an initial screener followed by a more comprehensive assessment.
  - **Suggested Trauma Exposure Screen: The NYS Health Home Complex Trauma Exposure Screen**
  - **Suggested Trauma Exposure Assessment: The NYS Health Home Complex Trauma Exposure Assessment**
2. Assess for a wide range of symptoms (beyond PTSD), risk behaviors, functional impairments, and developmental derailments. NOTE: *It is important to look at clinically significant functional impairments as they relate to complex trauma (i.e., that the impairments cannot be better accounted for by a different diagnosis and are occurring in relation to the child’s reported traumatic experiences).*
  - **NYS DOH requires the use one or more of the assessments on the NCTSN Complex Trauma Assessment webpages<sup>1</sup> to identify behavioral/functional impairments for the purpose of determining Health Home eligibility for children.**
3. Gather information using a variety of techniques (clinical interviews, standardized measures, and behavioral observations).
4. Gather information from a variety of perspectives (child, caregivers, teachers, direct care staff members, other providers, etc).
5. Try to make sense of how each traumatic event might have impacted developmental tasks and derailed future development. Note: this may be challenging given the number of pervasive and chronic traumatic events a child may have experienced throughout his or her young life.
6. Try to link traumatic events to trauma reminders that may trigger symptoms or avoidant behavior. Remember that trauma reminders can be remembered both in explicit memory and out of awareness in the child’s body and emotions.
7. The assessment should be conducted by a **clinically trained** provider who **understands child development and complex trauma<sup>22</sup>**.
  - **Suggested Complex Trauma Evaluators:** Ideally, the assessment should involve a multi-disciplinary team, including a pediatrician, mental health professional, educational specialist, and, where appropriate, an occupational therapist.
    - In residential, day treatment, and juvenile justice settings, a multi-disciplinary team might also include direct care staff familiar with the child.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nctsn.org/content/standardized-measures-assess-complex-trauma>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/complex-trauma/assessment>