

CREATING A TRAUMA-INFORMED JUVENILE COURT: IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

A history of childhood trauma is common among youth who enter the juvenile-justice system. When children are abused or exposed to other forms of violence, they may lose their trust in the adults who are either responsible for perpetrating the abuse or who fail to protect them. This distrust— often accompanied by a disregard for adult rules and laws — places these youth at greater risk for delinquency and other inappropriate behaviors. Research has repeatedly shown that the majority of youth in the juvenile justice system have experienced traumatic events. In fact, the estimated rates of PTSD among JJ-involved youth are comparable to those of soldiers returning from deployment in Iraq.

A history of trauma also puts youth at increased risk of substance abuse, as alcohol and other drugs offer an immediate and easily available way of coping with anxiety and other uncomfortable feelings that follow trauma. A national survey of adolescents found that teens who had experienced physical or sexual abuse/assault were three times more likely to report past or current substance abuse than those without a history of trauma. Other studies indicate that up to 59% of young people with PTSD subsequently develop substance abuse problems.

It is important for everyone working with youth in the juvenile justice system to receive training so that they can recognize trauma and ensure that youth find positive ways to cope and heal; and second, to ensure that involvement with the JJ system does not re-traumatize them.

In selecting an area of focus, it will be helpful for you to create a stakeholder group that comes together for the express purpose of improving juvenile court operation. Your stakeholders should be made up of judges, representatives from the district attorney's office, representatives from the defense bar, chief

probation, juvenile court management, court administrators, representatives from community service providers, representatives from youth oriented-prosocial activities (like youth sports leagues), youth and their families, and of course the community. Once you've gathered your stakeholders together, there are a number of things your team needs to know about family engagement including:

- What trauma is, and the various forms it takes (such as acute, chronic, complex);
- The symptoms of trauma and PTSD;
- The short- and long-term impacts of trauma on children and youth;
- The factors that determine how a particular child or youth is impacted by a potentially traumatic event;
- The relationship between child / adolescent trauma and use of alcohol and other drugs;
- How trauma contributes to delinquency;
- How youth can be re-traumatized by the juvenile justice system, and how to avoid this;
- Why cross-system collaboration is essential to a trauma-informed response;
- The characteristics of trauma-informed practice, and how to determine whether potential service providers offer trauma-informed care;
- The treatment approaches shown to be most effective with youth who have experienced trauma;
- Why it's essential to involve the family when working with youth who have experienced trauma.

Recommended Resources

Ten Things Every Juvenile Court Judge Should Know about Trauma and Delinquency, a technical- assistance brief published by The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Reno, Nevada, 2010. Can be downloaded at <http://www.ncjfcj.org>.

National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Discusses how trauma-informed screening and assessment and evidence-based treatments play integral roles in supporting traumatized youth, explores the challenges of implementing and sustaining these practices, and highlights practice examples for integrating them into a justice setting. <http://www.nctsn.org>

Understanding the Links between Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse: A Toolkit for Providers. 2nd Edition, June 2008, National Child Traumatic Stress Network. The NCTSN is a collaboration of frontline providers, researchers, and families committed to raising the standard of care while increasing access to services. This toolkit was developed by the Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse Committee of the NCTSN to raise awareness about the needs of youth with traumatic stress and substance abuse problems, and to promote evidence-based practices in clinical settings. It is meant to serve as a training guide for providers working with this population. <http://nctsn.org>.

Questions for Discussion

What experiences of trauma are common among youth in our juvenile court?



How do we ensure that all the components of our court programs meet the needs of traumatized youth?

What measures do we take to ensure that our juvenile court does not re-traumatize youth?

What questions do we ask potential service providers to determine whether their programs are trauma-informed?

How do we educate families about trauma and its impacts on their child?