



Creating and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice System

The pathway to justice-involvement is varied, but for most juveniles includes exposure to a traumatic event.¹ **Trauma**, by definition, is an **event** that reshapes a person's life by becoming an emotional injury **experienced** as harmful or life **threatening**. While trauma's **effects** vary, its impact on an individual's sense of psychological safety remains a constant.² A compromised sense of psychological safety—a person's belief in their ability to manage stress or use support from others to manage stress—is often the driving force behind the deep pain experienced by individuals struggling to recover from traumatic events. The road to recovery requires restoring psychological safety by increasing insight about the impact of traumatic events and developing new skills to effectively manage the effects of trauma. Juvenile justice systems have the potential to restore psychological safety by using their pivotal role in promoting recovery to employ a trauma-informed approach.

The promise of a trauma-informed approach is it creates an opportunity to address root causes for the behaviors often leading to justice-involvement. Given trauma is an injury, understanding the breadth and depth of pain experienced based on traumatic events is an important first step. One-time traumatic events such as a car accident can potentially have a significant impact on a person's ability to function in important areas of life such as work and relationships, but the likelihood of function impairment increases tremendously when additional traumatic events occur—particularly when events happen early in life and are interpersonal in nature. The cumulative impact of traumatic events early in life is often referred to as **complex trauma**. When events ranging from abuse and neglect to community and domestic violence are happening over time or simultaneously as a young person is developing their understanding of how the world operates, deep emotional wounds are created that extend into adulthood and may take intensive support to heal.

Research findings suggests the prevalence of individual trauma and multiple traumatic events is high among justice-involved individuals. In a study exploring lifetime trauma exposure among 658 justice-involved adolescents, findings indicated 93% of youth had experienced at least one traumatic event with most youth having experienced an average of 6

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Three E's of Trauma:

- **Event:** An occurrence that makes an individual feel that their life is threatened or the life of someone they loved is threatened. Includes physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, neglect, community violence, assault, and a host of other events.
- **Experience:** The event is experienced as harmful to the individual. This can include feeling emotionally harmed or physical pain related to the event.
- **Effect:** The event has short-term or long term impact on functioning. Difficulty continuing school or work, avoiding people or situations that are reminders of the event, or severe dysregulation in mood, thoughts, or perceptions of self are each effects that may occur immediately following the event or have a delayed onset.

Key Takeaways

Trauma impacts people very differently and it is best to learn about the person's experience before making assumptions.

Complex Trauma

Children's exposure to multiple traumatic events that often occur early in life and at the hands of a caregiver. Given the interpersonal nature of these events by a trusted adult, the victimization that youth experience makes it difficult to trust others, find psychological safety without aggressive or isolating behavior, and regulate behavior to reach long-term goals.

Key Takeaway

Recovery from complex trauma is possible and begins with adults willing to build trust with youth over time.

1 Abram, K. M., Teplin, L. A., Charles, D. R., Longworth, S. L., McClelland, G. M., & Dulcan, M. K. (2004). *Posttraumatic stress disorder and trauma in youth in juvenile detention*. *Archives of general psychiatry*, 61(4), 403-410.

2 Abuse, S. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach.

traumatic events.³ These rates are particularly pronounced for youth who are members of groups that experience heightened levels of harassment, bias, and discrimination such as LGBTQ youth, Black and Latino youth, special needs youth, and homeless youth.^{4, 5, 6} These challenges are exacerbated as justice-involved youth are at heightened risk of experiencing mental health disorders in addition to trauma-exposure. In a study exploring rates of mental health disorders among 1,400 justice-involved youth in 29 different programs across the United States, 46% of youth met criteria for a Disruptive Behavior Disorder or Substance Use Disorder while 34% met criteria for an Anxiety Disorder and 18% a Mood Disorder.⁷

Understanding youth trauma-exposure in the context of other mental health disorders is important for both understanding the individual trajectory of youth and the organizational structures that provide a pathway to rehabilitation and accountability. The multiple systems youth are engaged prior to justice involvement such as schools and child welfare have had challenges accurately identifying behavior related trauma-exposure versus other behavioral health challenges.⁴ As a result of this challenge, misdiagnoses and mislabeling behavior challenges as behavioral disorders instead as the result of trauma-exposure has prevented interventions adequately addressing the impact of trauma-exposure—particularly for Black and Latino youth.⁸ The unique opportunity that juvenile systems provide is embodied in the ability to hold youth accountable while accurately identifying treatment needs that are driving the behaviors leading to justice involvement.

Impact of Trauma-Exposure on Youth

The personal aftermath of experiencing trauma varies widely and is closely tied to our biological stress response. Bodies and brains are wired to manage stress, but experiencing one or several traumas can shift the stress response into overdrive and lead a person to believe achieving psychological safety requires coping strategies generally reserved for survival situations. These survival coping strategies are most clearly observed through the symptoms of **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**, also referred to as traumatic stress responses. Whether the traumatic stress responses manifest as aggression during relatively benign interactions or severe substance use to avoid pain caused by the wound from trauma, these behaviors can significantly interfere with the drug court’s ability to support recovery when misunderstood. Understanding traumatic stress reactions are a response to past traumas and current **trauma reminders (aka triggers)** and early warning signs positions justice professionals to facilitate interactions with youth that build skills for managing life challenges in a manner that reduces risk for further justice-involvement.

3 Dierkhising, C. B., Ko, S. J., Woods-Jaeger, B., Briggs, E. C., Lee, R., & Pynoos, R. S. (2013). Trauma histories among justice-involved youth: Findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 4(1), 20274.

4 Herz, D., Lee, P., Lutz, L., Stewart, M., Tuell, J., & Wiig, J. (2012). *Addressing the needs of multi-system youth: Strengthening the connection between child welfare and juvenile justice*. Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.

5 Wilson, B. D., Jordan, S. P., Meyer, I. H., Flores, A. R., Stemple, L., & Herman, J. L. (2017). Disproportionality and disparities among sexual minority youth in custody. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(7), 1547-1561.

6 Kolivoski, K. M., Goodkind, S., & Shook, J. J. (2017). Social justice for crossover youth: The intersection of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *Social Work*, 62(4), 313-321.

7 Coccozza, J. J., & Shufelt, J. L. (2006). *Juvenile mental health courts: An emerging strategy*. Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice.

8 Sterling, R. W. (2012). Children are different: Implicit bias, rehabilitation, and the New Juvenile Jurisprudence. *Loy. LAL Rev.*, 46, 1019.



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Traumatic Stress Reactions

These reactions are intended to help youth protect themselves in crisis situations, but after a traumatic event youth may develop these reactions for the first time and display them in non-crisis situation. This occurs particularly when feeling threatened. When untreated, these reactions disrupt functioning in several areas of life including school, work, and relationships. Common types of traumatic stress reactions include:

- **Re-experiencing Reactions:** Includes nightmares, flashbacks, and other intrusive thoughts that make a person feel as if the traumatic event is occurring again.
- **Avoidance Reactions:** Heightened conscious and unconscious desire to avoid reminders of the traumatic event. Can include attempts to avoid places and subtler strategies of avoidance such as substance use and complaining about physical ailments that keep youth out of school.
- **Changes in Thoughts and Mood:** Feelings can shift about oneself, others, and the world toward very negative feelings including self-blame, extreme anger and rage, and anxiety and depression.
- **Hyperarousal Reactions:** Increased reaction to others and can include aggressive behavior or constantly scanning the environment for possible threats.
- **Dissociation Reactions:** Mental separation that can appear to be “zoning out”. Individuals may have short-term memory loss or self-harm without being aware during dissociative states.

Key Takeaways

Youth can learn new reactions to stress and threats when given the opportunity to practice new coping strategies with trusting adults.

Productively engaging trauma-impacted youth begins with understanding how trauma shapes the brain and using this information to reshape interactions with youth. For the purpose of understanding trauma's impact on individual's brain can be divided into two major areas: survival brain and learning brain. The survival brain consists of our limbic system and is responsible for our processing of threat and stress. When it is activated by events a person perceives as stressful or threatening, it sets off our fight, flight, or freeze response to ensure we remain safe. The challenge for individuals who experience trauma, particularly early in life and frequently, this can lead the survival brain to be highly activated even when threat or stress is not present—leading a person to respond to others as a threat even when they are not. This undermines forming relationships that support healing from trauma. When the survival brain is highly activated and processing information related to threats the decision-making process is compromised because the learning brain is not processing that information. The learning brain consist of the frontal lobe and is responsible for our ability to control impulses and make decisions. When a person is actively engaging the learning brain, their decision making process is significantly improved by thinking through consequences for decisions, resisting solely emotional responses, and an authentic exploration of the best possible outcomes that eliminate harm to self and others. Use of the learning brain in stressful or threatening situations requires practice and can be tremendously underdeveloped when trauma occurs early in life.

A key step toward becoming trauma-informed is understanding how to identify when the survival brain is highly activated and engaging with individuals to promote activation of their learning brain. The essential component to facilitating this transition is promoting psychological safety and building trust over time. Some strategies for supporting the recovery of a trauma-impacted youth currently using survival brain include:

- **Make information digestible.** This involves providing directions and other information so youth can understand and use the information effectively. Feeling confused by directions can trigger survival brain for some youth. Breaking down information such as giving fewer directions at one time or asking youth what they may not understand can help youth use the learning brain more frequently.
- **Support effective transitions.** Transitions in which youth don't know what can happen next can trigger the survival brain. Warn them when there are transitions and give them an idea of what is occurring next.
- **Empower youth with choice.** Youth who have experienced trauma are sensitive to situations that make them feel powerless. Giving youth choices about what they can do in a situation can help prompt their learning brain. These choices should be ones that the adult is fine with youth choosing either option. For instance, the youth can either sit in this corner or another corner before you speak with them about their behavior problems.
- **Validate feelings.** Youth may have very legitimate reasons to be angry, sad, or feel a host of other emotions. By acknowledging those feelings and not making them feel like bad people or crazy for having those feelings can help them use the learning brain. Specifically, directly saying "I understand why you feel like that" and explain to them why you understand can help to prompt healthy coping strategies and build trust.

Trauma Reminders (Triggers) and Early Warning Signs

Trauma reminders (triggers) is anything that consciously or unconsciously reminds a person of a traumatic event and can include a song, time of day or year, type of person (i.e., an authority figure or a female), particular place, tone of voice and a host of other experiences.

Early warning signs are the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors youth show before escalating into survival brain (or crisis behavior). This can include cursing, pacing, becoming fidgety, or thinking that others are trying to cause embarrassment.

Key Takeaways

Trauma reminders and early warning signs are unique to the individual. One of the best ways to help youth gain control over their behavior is to work with them to become aware of their trauma reminders and early warning sign while practicing healthy coping strategies for dealing with them when they arise.



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- **Opportunities to address the damage trauma has caused.** Many youth want to find ways to deal with the damage the trauma or injustice they have experienced has caused. By giving them prosocial and positive outlets and opportunities for making a situation better that trauma has negatively affected can motivate youth to learn healthy coping strategies. For example, many youth in violent communities participate in “stop the violence” rallies or find ways to warn other youth about the dangers of drinking and driving after a family member is killed.

Conclusion

The journey toward recovery and accountability for youth involved in juvenile justice systems often includes overcoming the impact of several past traumatic experiences. These systems have the unique opportunity of promoting both recovery and accountability through treating youth with trauma-informed services that increase psychological safety, build prosocial skills, and increase healthy decision-making processes. Becoming a trauma-informed drug court is an extended process that involves convening and collaborating with several drug court stakeholders.

Our Justice First Program trains justice professionals in Think Trauma: A Training for Juvenile Justice Professionals Second Edition, developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), focuses on the impact of trauma on justice-involved youth and providing staff with tangible skills for supporting adolescents who have been exposed to traumatic life events.

Involvement with the juvenile justice system is likely one of the defining moments of an adolescent’s life: together we can turn it into a positive one that marks the start of their journey towards maximizing their true, pre-trauma potential.

To learn how iOpening Enterprises can bring **Think Trauma** to your organization, contact us at 310-694-6008 or customercare@iopeningenterprises.com.

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