Effects on Parenting and Service Engagement in the Child Welfare and Court Systems

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What is Trauma?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) there are two types of trauma: Physical and Mental.

- Physical trauma includes the body’s response to serious injury and threat.

- Mental trauma includes frightening thoughts and painful feelings. They are the mind’s response to serious injury.
Emotional and psychological trauma
• The result of extraordinarily stressful events
• Shatters your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world.

Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn’t involve physical harm.
Mental Trauma can Produce Strong Feelings and Extreme Behavior such as:

- Intense fear or helplessness
- Withdrawal or detachment
- Lack of concentration
- Irritability
- Sleep disturbance
- Aggression
- Hyper vigilance (intensely watching for more distressing events)
- Flashbacks (sense that event is reoccurring).
Types of Trauma

- Community and School Violence
- Complex Trauma
- Domestic Violence
- Early Childhood Trauma
- Medical Trauma
- Natural Disasters
- Neglect
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Refugee and War Zone Trauma
- Terrorism
- Traumatic Grief
Childhood Trauma

- Childhood trauma increases the risk of future trauma

- Experiencing trauma in childhood can have a severe and long-lasting effect. Children who have been traumatized see the world as a frightening and dangerous place. When childhood trauma is not resolved, this fundamental sense of fear and helplessness carries over into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.
Childhood Trauma

- Childhood trauma results from anything that disrupts a child’s sense of safety and security, including:
  - An unstable or unsafe environment
  - Separation from a parent
  - Serious illness
  - Intrusive medical procedures
  - Sexual, physical, or verbal abuse
  - Domestic violence
  - Neglect
  - Bullying
Complex Trauma

- The term complex trauma describes the problem of children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development.

- Complex trauma involves the simultaneous or sequential occurrence of:
  - child maltreatment—including psychological maltreatment
  - neglect
  - physical and sexual abuse
  - domestic violence

- Complex trauma is:
  - repetitive, prolonged, or cumulative usually over a period of time
  - most often interpersonal, involving direct harm, exploitation, and maltreatment including neglect/abandonment of primary caregivers or other responsible adults
  - often occurs at developmentally vulnerable times in the victim's life, especially in early childhood or adolescence, but can also occur later in life.
Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

- **Intrusive Symptoms:**
  - Persistently re-experiencing the event, images, recollections, daydreams, and or nightmares
  - Feeling upset, distressed and or anxious in the presence of reminders of the event

- **Avoidance Symptoms:**
  - Avoiding places, thoughts, conversations and or people associated with the event
  - Problems recalling some aspects of the event
  - Losing interest in formerly enjoyable and important activities of life
  - Feeling “removed” from other people
  - Feeling numb
Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

- Arousal Symptoms:
  - Being on the alert for danger
  - Being jumpy and easily startled
  - Experiencing sleep disturbance – unable to fall asleep, waking often, having vivid dreams/nightmares
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Irritability or angry outbursts
Symptoms of Complex Trauma

- Difficulty regulating affective impulses such as anger and self-destructiveness
- Dissociative episodes
- Chronic sense of guilt or responsibility
- Difficulty trusting people or feeling intimate
- Hopelessness or despair
- Other somatic or medical problems.
Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child’s and if not resolved an adult’s:

- Physiology
- Emotions
- Ability to think, learn, and concentrate
- Impulse control
- Self-image
- Relationships with others

Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems including:

- Addiction
- Chronic physical conditions
- Depression and anxiety
- Self-harming behaviors
- Other psychiatric disorders
Chronic trauma survivors may experience any of the following difficulties:

- Avoid thinking and talking about trauma-related topics because the feelings associated with the trauma are often overwhelming.
- Use alcohol or other substances as a way to avoid and numb feelings and thoughts related to the trauma.
- Engage in self-mutilation and other forms of self-harm.
Between 60–80% of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases involve substances by a custodial parent or guardian (Young, et al, 2007)

61% of infants, 41% of older children who are in out-of-home care have a parent involved with substances (Wulczyn, Ernst and Fisher, 2011)

87% of families in foster care with one parent in need of treatment; 67% with two parents in need (Smith, Johnson, Pears, Fisher, DeGarmo, 2007)
How does using mind altering substances affect parenting?

- Parents who use are inconsistent in being physically or emotionally present
- Parents who are addicted often have chaotic lives and suffer from a myriad of medical, social and legal problems
- The lifestyle and people involved in drug culture may be dangerous and unsafe for children
Parental substance is frequently reported as a reason for removal, particularly in combination with neglect (Correia, 2013).

For almost 31% of children placed in foster care in 2012, parental alcohol or drug abuse was the documented reason for removal and in several states the percentage surpassed 60% (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012).
Eliminating Barriers to Engagement

- To assist in resolving barriers to engagement in services, DTC clients are screened for trauma symptoms, and if appropriate a referral is completed to onsite trauma therapists.

- Staff use several different tools and techniques to complete the screening.
Eliminating Barriers to Engagement

- In addition to trauma symptoms all DTC clients are screened for any resource needs upon enrollment and on an ongoing basis.

- Oftentimes parents have unmet resource needs that prevent them from engaging in services.

- Clients can receive assistance in seeking community resources for things such as housing, employment, furniture, etc.
Trauma and Parenting

- Parenting problems, such as neglect and child abuse, can occur when losses or trauma experienced by parents have not been resolved.

- A traumatic childhood in itself “is not predictive of maltreatment of children. What is predictive is if the adult has not been able to come to terms with their traumatic experiences”.

- A common reaction to unresolved trauma is parental dissociation, with parents “likely to neglect the emotional needs of their children and/or have difficulty in assessing risk in their partners”.
Effect of Early Trauma on Parenting Skills and Engagement in Services

- Sights, sounds and smells can (unconsciously) remind a person of the trauma, but the person is usually unaware of the connection.

- If there has been early loss and trauma which is unresolved, the presence of a baby or toddler can ‘activate’ the original loss, because the infant’s vulnerability reminds the adult of their own.

- Early-life traumatic experiences can affect a parent's ability to cope if proper closure is not reached.
- Parent’s ability to make appropriate judgments about their own and their child’s safety and to appraise danger: overprotective/may not recognize dangerous situations

- Challenging for parents to form and maintain secure and trusting relationships leading to:
  - Disruptions in relationships with infants, children and adolescents and/or negative feelings about parenting
  - Personalization of their children’s negative behavior
  - Challenges in relationships with caseworkers, foster parents, and service providers - difficulty supporting their child’s therapy

- Impair capacity to regulate emotions

- Poor self-esteem and maladaptive coping skills (substance abuse, domestic violence etc)
Affects of trauma reminders or triggers:

- When they feel they have no control such as facing demands of the child welfare system

- A child’s behaviors or trauma reactions may remind parents of their own past trauma or feelings of helplessness, sometimes triggering impulsive or aggressive behaviors toward children
- May also seem disengaged or numb (efforts to avoid trauma reminders) making engaging with parents and addressing the family’s underlying issues difficult for caseworkers and other service providers.

- Impair decision making ability, making future planning more challenging.

- Vulnerability to other life stressors including poverty, lack of education, lack of social support which can worsen trauma reactions.
According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Many birth parents involved with CPS have their own history of childhood and/or adult trauma

C2C Trauma Statistics:

- 220 parents who have been referred for either DTC or C2C Clinical Services have been screen for trauma
- Tracked total ACE Score of 107 parents
  * 59.8% have ACE Score of 4 or higher
  * 30.8% have ACE Score of 6 or higher
Of the 220 Clients the following traumatic events were reported:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Assault</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault with a weapon</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault/molestation</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experience</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden, unexpected death or life threatening illness of someone close to you</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden, violent death, murder of close friend or family member</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen someone seriously injured or killed</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen or had to handle dead bodies (other than a funeral)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Life-threatening illness or injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Seriously injured or feared you might be killed or seriously injured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Natural or man-made disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Captivity (kidnapping) (new questionnaire does not ask this question)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>Mugging/Robbery/Home Invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Death of a spouse/partner or child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Beaten, spanked or pushed hard enough to cause injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Any other extraordinarily stressful situation or event</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*most common answer was children removed by DCS.*
Results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) screen (Events that occurred while growing up):

116  Lost a parent to divorce or abandonment
101  Felt that no one loved you or thought you were important or special or family was not close or supportive
108  Lived with someone who was an alcoholic or used street drugs
84   Experienced sexual abuse from an adult or someone at least 5 years older
104  A parent or adult in the household often or very often, swore at you, insulted you, put you down or act in a way that made you afraid you might be physically hurt
76 A household member depressed or mentally ill or attempted suicide

76 A parent or other adult in the household pushed, grabbed, slapped, or threw something at you or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured

63 Was your mother or stepmother often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped or had something thrown at her or sometimes, often or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or his with something hard or ever repeatedly hit at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife

58 A household member went to prison

41 Often or very often feel you did not have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes and had no one to protect you or your parents were too drunk or high to take care or you or take you to the doctor
Client Story