

NCCTS Leadership:

Trauma-Informed Systems

By age 16, approximately 25% of children and adolescents in the U.S. experience at least one potentially traumatic event, including life threatening accidents, disasters, maltreatment, assault, and family and community violence.^{1,2}

Although some children and adolescents may recover quickly after adversity, traumatic experiences can result in significant disruptions in child or adolescent development with profound long-term consequences. Repeated exposure to traumatic events can alter psychobiological development, and increase the risk of low academic performance, engagement in high-risk behaviors, and difficulties in peer and family relationships.³ Traumatic stress is also associated with increased use of health and mental health services and increased involvement with other child-serving systems, such as the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.⁴

Reviews of studies of children's access to mental health services indicate that schools and health care settings are the primary portal of entry. For example, children are more likely to access mental health services through primary care and schools than through specialty mental health clinics: 75% of children under age 12 see a pediatrician at least once per year, whereas 4% see a mental health professional.⁵ Similarly, a longitudinal study of children in the community found that children's mental health services are most often provided by the education system.⁶

Each child-serving system approaches trauma differently, has different levels of awareness, knowledge, and skill about trauma, and varies in perceptions of the utility of gathering information about trauma. Child-serving systems also differ in their responsibilities for meeting children's needs. However, the goal for all systems is to improve outcomes for children and to maintain excellent standards of care. Addressing the impact of trauma on children and families therefore is a crucial—although often overlooked—priority for all child-serving systems.

A major goal of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is to promote a systematic approach to child trauma across child-serving systems in order to transform day-to-day practices, administrative guidelines, organizational readiness and commitment, provider and family knowledge and skills, and allocation of resources to better attend to the impact of trauma on the children and adolescents they serve. Each of these systems has unique societal responsibilities, multi-layered workforces, strategies of engagement and family

involvement, challenges to integrating trauma-informed perspectives and practices, access to evidence-based interventions, and resource availability. Consistent with the principles of all NCTSN activities, it is critical to infuse efforts to transform systems with the developmental and cultural understandings that are needed to provide truly trauma-informed services, to appropriately support families, and to build the requisite supports for recovery to maximize children's ability to thrive.

The challenge is to address central elements of trauma-informed practice in each service setting, which include skills to:

- Gather information about the child's or adolescent's trauma history and its impact on the child's development, behavior, and relationships in order to guide services
- Utilize a strength-based approach that enhances children's skills to manage reactions, reduce high-risk behaviors, and promote constructive activity
- Provide support and guidance to the child's family and caregivers
- Support and promote positive, stable relationships in the child's life
- Coordinate services with other agencies
- Explain trauma-specific care to children and their families and motivate them to participate in care
- Manage personal and professional stress

NCCTS is committed to creating and sustaining trauma-informed child-serving systems.

Accomplishments and Results

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCCTS) is committed to providing leadership in creating and sustaining trauma-informed child-serving systems through developing a knowledgeable workforce, committed organizations, and skilled professionals. NCTSN has already filled a sizeable gap in this area by creating a number of initiatives and resources to achieve these goals in several child-serving systems, including:

- **Law Enforcement:** Over 2,000 copies of a video for law enforcement officers (*Cops, Kids & Domestic Violence: Protecting Our Future*), which highlights the impact of domestic violence on children and provides recommendations for what police officers can do when responding to a domestic violence call.
- **Child Welfare:** The *Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit* is a train-the-trainer manual designed to teach basic knowledge, skills, and values about working with children who are in the child welfare system and who have experienced traumatic stress. Over 950 copies have been disseminated nationwide. Over

Trauma-Informed Systems

1,000 copies of the *Child Advocacy Center Directors' Guide to Mental Health Services for Abused Children* have been distributed to child advocacy centers across the country, largely due to a partnership with the National Children's Alliance (NCA). The *Resource Parent Curriculum*, a complement to the Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit, is nearing completion, and aims to teach basic knowledge, skills, and values about caring for children and adolescents who are in foster care and who have experienced traumatic stress.

- **Education:** The *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*, a series of fact sheets and a DVD (available in both English and Spanish) for teachers and administrators in preschool, elementary, middle and high schools, has been disseminated to over 200 schools and national organizations. The NCTSN School Committee is building upon the Toolkit to create companion web-based presentations in video and audio format. The *Children of War* video describes the experience of refugee and immigrant children in schools.
- **Health Care:** The *Pediatric Medical Traumatic Stress Toolkit for Health Care Providers* has been disseminated to nurses, physicians, and emergency medical providers, and provides tip sheets and flash cards to assist providers with identifying and addressing traumatic stress in children. A web-based training module for pediatricians, with video-based vignettes of pediatricians interviewing and/or talking with parents about trauma, will teach skills and provide a springboard for discussion about the practical aspects of identifying and responding to early childhood trauma (scheduled to be completed in October 2009).
- **Juvenile Justice:** NCTSN produced four brief papers on child trauma in the juvenile justice system: *Trauma among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System*, *Victimization and Juvenile Offending*, *Assessing Exposure to Psychological Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress in the Juvenile Justice Population*, and *Trauma-Focused Interventions for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System*. The *Educational Toolkit about Gang-Involved and At-Risk Youth* provides basic information about the impact of traumatic stress in gang-involved and at-risk youth, and highlights evidence-based treatment options. Additionally, NCTSN staff have conducted trainings at national conferences for juvenile defenders, detention personnel, judges, and probation officers. A Learning Collaborative provided cross-disciplinary training on an evidence-based trauma-focused intervention to be used with youth in the juvenile justice system.
- **Judicial:** Members of NCTSN wrote articles for two special issues of the journal of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), *The Juvenile and Family Court Journal*. The articles, published in 2006 and 2008, addressed childhood trauma within justice settings. The journal is distributed to lawyers and judges who work in juvenile and family courts. NCTSN conducted four focus groups at NCJFCJ annual meetings to learn about judges' views about the impact of trauma on youth in the justice system and the types of resources that would be helpful to them. Results are summarized

in the brief paper, *Informing Judges About Child Trauma: Findings from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network/National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Focus Groups*.

- **All child service systems:** The *Service Systems Briefs Series* and *Service Systems Speaker Series* include a few short papers (e.g., *Creating Trauma-Informed Child-Serving Systems* and *Creating a Trauma-Informed Law Enforcement System*) and 11 archived presentations from Network members on creating trauma-informed systems (e.g., education, child welfare, juvenile justice, healthcare, law enforcement). The presentations describe the current state of the system, why a trauma-informed system is necessary, and how a trauma-informed system can be created for the particular system. NCCTS and NCTSN will follow up on the series with live Q&A sessions with the experts, to be launched in Summer 2009. Additionally, NCCTS and Network members collaborated to develop a paper illustrating a conceptual framework for “Creating Trauma-Informed Child Serving Systems.” This paper was published in the American Psychological Association’s journal *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* in 2008, and is also available on the NCTSN website (www.NCTSN.org).

The National Center provides leadership to the collaborative activities of the Network by creating a vision and strategic plan for promoting transformation of service systems, and by supporting day-to-day activities that allow for the execution of initiatives. Additionally, staff has created individual campaigns around each of these service systems, and formed Network collaborative groups in key service systems areas (e.g., the Child Welfare Committee, Schools Committee, and Justice Committee), which have allowed us to leverage key expertise of Network sites in each of these child-serving systems. NCCTS and NCTSN have developed partnerships with other national organizations, such as NCJFCJ, NCA, and the Child Welfare League, which have expanded the ability to promote an understanding of child trauma, facilitate adoption of effective trauma treatments and services, provide training, and disseminate products.

Vision for the Future

NCCTS and NCTSN have made tremendous progress in developing resources, disseminating knowledge, and developing skills for creating trauma-informed service systems, which are critical for providing the highest standard of care for the nation’s children and families. The next series of major initiatives will focus attention on developing products, resources, and training in child welfare, juvenile justice, and substance abuse:

- The most significant undertaking over the next year will be the development and launching of a Breakthrough Series on Child Welfare to share strategies for creating a more trauma-informed child welfare system. The Child Welfare Breakthrough Series Collaborative will utilize an adaptation of the quality improvement methodology of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative, as created by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, for use in the child trauma field,

Trauma-Informed Systems

to focus on how a trauma-informed child welfare system can improve foster care placement stability. NCTSN has been utilizing this adaptation of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology to provide training in evidence-based trauma-focused treatments over the past few years, with tremendous success.

- The *Resource Parent Curriculum* is in the piloting phase, with an expected completion of the final version by December 2009. Once it is complete, NCCTS will initiate an assertive dissemination plan that utilizes the Network and national partner organizations.
- A *Juvenile Justice Trauma Training Toolkit* will be developed to address the needs of practitioners working with youth in the juvenile justice system. The Toolkit will teach basic skills, knowledge, and values around how to address the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system who have experienced traumatic stress.
- The Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse online curriculum is based on the content of the *Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse Toolkit*, and will explore the complex connections between traumatic stress and substance abuse, and provide guidelines for identifying, engaging, and treating adolescents suffering from these co-occurring problems.

References

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