

## NCCTS Leadership:

### Family and Youth Involvement

Involving youth and family in the design and delivery of mental health services is a critically important step in making those services more responsive, culturally sensitive, and effective. It is essential to providing quality child trauma services. Research shows that the benefits of youth and family involvement may include:<sup>1,2</sup>

- Enhanced cultural competence
- Enhanced clinical treatment approaches
- Increased public awareness
- More effective outreach to other families who might need services
- Improved access to services
- Improved organizational management and leadership, and
- Changes in policies, training, and patient educational materials

Ultimately, active youth and family involvement enables the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCCTS) and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) to continually improve the quality of information and services related to child trauma and its treatment.

Youth and families can become involved in many ways, such as providing opinions on a questionnaire, participating in a focus group, giving feedback on interventions, and simply speaking to other families undergoing treatment. Some families find that reaching out to other families helps their own healing process.

For a number of reasons, however, the child trauma field lags behind the broader child mental health field in family involvement.

First, because of the scope of child trauma, a broad cross-section of families and adult and youth service “consumers” must be brought to the table. Family representatives may include foster caregivers, refugee families, parents of children with medical trauma, and families affected by natural disasters and terrorism. Consumer representatives may include foster care alumni, adult survivors of childhood trauma, and adolescents who have experienced violence.

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Secondly, because professionals in the child trauma field are dedicated to helping families and youth make sense of—and move on from—traumatic experiences, they may hesitate to involve families and youth in an ongoing way for fear of reinforcing a “victim identity.” In some cases, family members may have played a role in the child’s trauma (through abuse or failing to protect the child) that can complicate their development into parent advocates. In other cases, parents themselves have their own trauma histories that may inhibit their willingness to engage and stay involved.

Despite these obstacles, NCCTS has helped lead the development of a new and growing coalition of family members and youth who have experienced trauma. In partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Network members, and national consumer organizations, NCCTS has supported and promoted innovative approaches at all levels of the Network in engaging youth and families. These approaches are informed by and built on successful strategies from the children’s mental health and disabilities fields. NCCTS has had a long-standing relationship with the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, which was essential to getting this new movement off the ground, and to raising the visibility of child trauma issues in the broader child mental health community.

### Accomplishments and Results

In October 2005, the NCCTS brought together family members, youth and adult survivors of childhood trauma, Network service providers, and NCCTS and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration staff for a SAMHSA-funded Family and Consumer Engagement Summit. Together, they developed a guiding framework, vision, and goals for involving youth and families at all levels of Network activity. This framework, along with tools for organizational and clinical-level self-assessments, was incorporated into the comprehensive resource *Pathways for Partnerships with Youth and Families in the NCTSN*. Subsequent NCCTS accomplishments include:

- Distribution of the *Pathways to Partnerships* document to all Network members, and making it available to the public for free via the NCTSN website. To encourage its adoption by Network sites, the NCTSN Steering Committee wrote a foreword to the document and the NCCTS helped to organize “webinars” and in-person workshops at Network and national conferences that highlighted both the organizational and clinical-level strategies contained in the document.
- Support for family and youth involvement at the National Center and within NCTSN. For example, NCCTS has worked closely with the NCTSN Partnering with Youth and Families Committee to convene annual face-to-face meetings and continue to advance family and youth involvement in NCTSN.

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- Creation of a special section for youth and families on the NCTSN website ([www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)) that lists and links to a variety of resources that are available from NCTSN and other organizations. For example, the booklets for youth, *Sometimes Youth Just Want to Be Heard!* and *Youth Speak!*—both developed by La Rabida Children’s Hospital, Chicago Child Trauma Center—are available for download.
- Stronger family and youth participation in the NCTSN All-Network Conference, including an opening plenary panel featuring family and youth, promoting the inclusion of family and youth presenters in workshops and mini-sessions, and providing financial support for family and youth participants.
- Inclusion of family and consumer representatives in the NCTSN Advisory Board, which is organized and convened by NCCTS and provides guidance and consultation to the NCTSN Steering Committee. The Advisory Board is comprised of 12 members, four of whom represent family and consumer organizations.
- Inclusion of youth and families in the review and development of Network products and website content. NCCTS convened a Family Review Committee to help develop the Parents and Caregivers section of the NCTSN website. Similarly, NCCTS sought parents’ input on the development of many Network products, including those related to child physical abuse, child traumatic grief in military families, and acquaintance rape. Foster parents are integrally involved in the production and pilot-testing of a training curriculum on child traumatic stress for resource parents.

NCCTS, through the Partnering with Youth and Families Committee and the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, has helped to develop an active network of youth and family advocates dedicated to raising awareness and expanding access to child trauma services. NCCTS leadership has kept the need for family and youth involvement on the center stage at the clinical, organizational, and Network level.

### Vision for the Future

**Involving youth.** The NCCTS will support a broader Network-wide initiative that will include expanded youth representation. Adding youth, in addition to adult survivors of child trauma, to this initiative will bring energy and additional perspectives on ways to make services more available and appealing.

**Supporting Network centers.** The NCCTS will support Network centers and collaborative groups as they seek to involve more families and youth in their activities. Specifically, the NCCTS will develop a Learning Community on family and youth involvement that will include teams from multiple Network and non-Network agencies, as well as leadership training for family and youth advocates.

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**New resources.** NCCTS, in partnership with Network members, will expand tip sheets on how to build community advisory boards, how to develop peer-to-peer support networks locally, and how to recruit and mentor family member and youth advocates. NCCTS is developing guidelines for the compensation of youth and family members who participate in Network activities, along with more informational resources and web-based training materials for families and youth.

**New partnerships.** NCCTS will reach out to organizations serving military families and establish formal partnership agreements with youth-led organizations, to help expand the reach of our child trauma messages and inform the development of new Network products and website content.

**Understanding intergenerational trauma.** Increasingly, NCTSN centers work with adult family members who have experienced trauma in their own lives, in addition to their children's trauma exposure. In response, NCCTS plans to staff and support a Network collaborative group focused on the issue of intergenerational trauma. NCCTS will help to develop and disseminate best practices in screening and treatment for traumatized caregivers, and ensure that the needs of these families are considered more widely by the Network.

### References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2005). *Transforming mental health care in America: The Federal action agenda—First steps*. Rockville, MD: US Dept. of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
2. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2006). *SAMHSA Action Plan: Mental health systems transformation*. Rockville, MD: US Dept. of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.