

Understanding and Addressing the Intersection of Substance Use and Child Trauma: For Juvenile Justice Professionals



The U.S. Department of Justice has made efforts to address the opioid crisis among youth. Specifically, in recent years the Office of Justice Programs started the Opioid Affected Youth Initiative, which is designed to fund six governmental organizations that are working toward the development of action plans to assist youth impacted by the opioid epidemic, as well as coordinated responses for youth who are involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems as a result of the opioid crisis.

Delinquent Behavior, Trauma Exposure, and Substance Use Involvement

There is evidence to suggest a link between serious delinquent behavior and substance use. In some cases, rates of alcohol and drug use are significantly higher for youth who are detained than youth in the community. For example, an estimated 85% of youth in justice facilities report a history of substance use, with 60% meeting diagnostic criteria for one or more substance use disorders. In addition, youth involved in the juvenile justice system have likely experienced a range of trauma and adversities. It is critical that the juvenile court system utilizes trauma-informed strategies when working with youth, and that detailed assessments that include substance use history are completed when youth are admitted to a justice facility. Specifically, gaining more information about a youth's cognitive, behavioral, and physiological functioning as well as making the distinction between substance use, substance use disorder symptoms (e.g., loss of control over substance use, continued use despite negative consequences, interpersonal difficulties resulting from substance use), and dependence (tolerance, withdrawal) should guide decisions about referral to treatment and recovery interventions.

Completing a detailed assessment regarding a youth's mental health, trauma history, and the history of substance-related issues is critical because it can help those involved in the juvenile justice system decide which youth a need of alcohol or drug treatment programming.

What You Can Do:

- Use trauma-informed practices throughout your work no matter what your role (i.e., attorneys, judges, guardians' ad litem, case managers, investigators, probation offices, residential program staff). For example, when youth are arrested for drug-related offenses, ensure that arrest procedures and placement in a detention facility does not re-traumatize the youth.
- Be aware that increasing the length of time a young person's case is being adjudicated, multiple visits to police stations or courthouses, or other stressful interactions are likely to enhance the trauma symptoms a young person might be experiencing which may, in turn, increase their use of substances and hinder their recovery process. For example, attempts should be made to avoid multiple continuances for a case when possible and to reduce stress in the courtroom.
- Involve the same staff, if possible, in all matters involving a youth. This can help youth and their family develop a sense of trust or rapport with those who will be making the decisions regarding the youth's sentencing, treatment, and recovery. That staff should have training in trauma-informed care, and the relationship between trauma and substance use and trauma and juvenile offending. NCTSN's *Think Trauma: A Training for Working with Justice Involved Youth* curriculum provides an overview for juvenile justice staff on how to work towards creating a trauma-informed juvenile justice residential setting. It includes four modules including trauma and delinquency; trauma's impact on development; coping strategies; and vicarious trauma, organizational stress, and self-care.
- Assess during the evaluation of drug-related offenses if a youth has a history of substance use, a history of delinquent behavior, or frequent interactions with peers who use drugs, to determine what resources may be provided to help the youth address substance use issues.

- It is important to always be transparent with youth and their families about how any information they provide will be used, and whether that could be used against them in any criminal proceedings.

Resources for youth and families involved with the Juvenile Justice System:

- <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/fact-sheets-fliers-and-resources>
- <https://www.ojp.gov/behavioral-health-resources-criminal-and-juvenile-justice>
- <https://jlc.org/>

Substance Use Treatment within Juvenile Justice Facilities

When the juvenile court system was first established, a key aim was to include components of rehabilitation as opposed to the punishment focused structure that is often affiliated with the adult court system. Keeping in line with the original objectives of the juvenile justice system, it is important that decisions made during juvenile court hearings include rehabilitation and treatment recommendations that can assist with a youth's history of trauma and substance use. As youth in the juvenile justice system often present with several challenges, conducting a thorough assessment of mental and behavioral health needs will help inform subsequent interventions. Information gathered from such an assessment not only allows for a comprehensive diagnostic picture but will also help professionals prioritize and address an individual's specific needs. Click this link to learn more about the [National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges \(NCJFCJ\) Enhanced Juvenile Justice Guidelines](#).

Learning more about the issues that precipitated or underlie delinquent or criminal behavior can allow those involved in the juvenile court system to implement restorative practices instead of sentences which often result in a repeated offense.

When possible, all treatment programs housed within a juvenile justice facility should aim to include a family component. Caregivers are critical in the development and maintenance of positive behaviors and the prevention and stopping of maladaptive ones. In addition to helping the youth feel supported and heard by members in their family, a family-based program allows the caregiver to learn about the importance of establishing boundaries and issuing consequences when the young person's behavior is not in line with their expectations, the youth's goals, and the goals of the treatment program. Keep in mind, as many as 90% of the youth in the juvenile justice system may be dealing with a history of trauma involving the caregiver or family, and untreated parent or family trauma can lead to further or continued substance use by youth or other family members. Those who have experienced past stressful or traumatizing events might use opioids to cope with the feelings and reactions in their mind and body. Experiences that could be traumatizing include abuse, violence, bullying, family substance use, and grief or loss of a loved one. Furthermore, youth in the juvenile justice system often have complex trauma histories and are at risk of being revictimized in the future. In light of these considerations along with the intersection of substance use, it is important for those working with this population of youth implement trauma-informed approaches to care while bearing in mind factors that may facilitate or serve as barriers to treatment.

What You Can Do:

- Include the caregiver in treatment at the juvenile justice facility. This can help to address some of the family-related issues or stressors that may be contributing to the youth's alcohol or drug use.
- Engage in skills training, specifically teaching life-skills or social skills. This can be an important component of treatment and recovery programs that are helping youth with rehabilitation. For example, teaching positive coping skills and problem-solving skills can provide new alternatives for youth who often turn to substance use when experiencing challenges.
- Have programs that teach youth relapse prevention skills and how to abstain from alcohol or substance use when returning to an environment where it may be present, whether in the home or community.
- Youth with substance use disorders may experience withdrawal symptoms and strong cravings, especially when they first discontinue using substances. These symptoms are often very unpleasant and can even be dangerous. Medications and other treatments may help manage these symptoms so that youth can participate fully in other programming. Therefore, juvenile justice facilities should coordinate closely with psychiatrists and other behavioral health specialists to continue or initiate these treatments when indicated by a clinical evaluation.

Compared to those not using opioids, community samples of youth using opioids tend to report more barriers (e.g. access to education/employment), frequent use of other substances, and earlier initiation of substance use suggesting that these factors may serve as early markers of increased risk for opioid use. An important way to support youth involved in the juvenile justice system who are dealing with opioid use is to refer them to treatment programs and ensure connection to ongoing supports. In fact, a panel convened in 2019 with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recommended that if juvenile or family court judges are aware of previous or ongoing opioid use, they should recommend that youth are enrolled in treatment and recovery programs as a part of their sentencing. Services should be provided across the continuum of care, ranging from prevention and outpatient treatment to more intensive programs like residential care and ongoing recovery services, when indicated. Research supports use of medications for opioid use disorder – in addition to individual or group behavioral therapy and recovery support services – to help youth achieve their treatment goals and to reduce risk for overdose and other serious harms. Whenever possible, clinical services should address any co-occurring mental health concerns since they may be linked to both substance use and other behaviors.

What You Can Do:

- Link youth in juvenile justice system with mentors. Having older youth or adults speak with them about the consequences associated with delinquent behavior and substance use can have monumental impact in helping a youth learn about the importance of prosocial behavior and utilizing the protective factors that are available within themselves and may be available in their community.
- Link youth who have received treatment for substance use in a juvenile detention facility to relapse prevention services as they prepare to get discharged. Upon leaving the juvenile facility, many youth will return to their home, peers, or activities that may have prompted or encouraged their past substance use. Therefore, it is critical that they have the necessary support and strategies in place to help maintain the gains that were made while in the treatment program.
- It is also recommended that all youth and families be familiar with state and local regulations or policies so that they can safely access naloxone, the overdose reversal agent, to help prevent overdose deaths.

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