

# Understanding and Addressing the Intersection of Substance Use and Child Trauma: For Mental Health Professionals and Substance Use Treatment Professionals



As a mental health or substance use treatment professional, you play an important role in identifying and addressing the interplay of trauma exposure, traumatic stress, and substance use as well as their effects on the emotional, behavioral, and social wellbeing of youth and families.

*The role of providers is not to save a youth or family, but rather to help them find and utilize their sources of strength and resilience, provide clear and factual information, and collaborate with other professionals to connect them with the best and most appropriate care.*

There are many things that you can do as a provider to offer support, such as:

- Helping individuals and families navigate the barriers and challenges they face in connecting with the treatment and supports they need.
- Supporting families when treatment does not seem to be working or when the worst happens, and a loved one dies.
- Helping families work through trauma exposure, reduce dependency on substances, and achieve their goals.
- Conveying hope by sharing the message that families affected by trauma and substance use can get better with treatment.

## Screening and Assessment for Trauma and Substance Use

Systematic screening and assessment for trauma exposure, traumatic stress, and substance use should be a part of the history collected by all service providers working with youth, caregivers, and families.

Resources for selecting appropriate screening tools include:

- Childhood trauma: <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/screening-and-assessment>
- Adult PTSD: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/screens/index.asp>
- Adolescent substance use: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/screening-tools-resources/screening-tools-for-adolescent-substance-use>
- Adult substance use: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/screening-tools-resources/chart-screening-tools>

**Drug screening:** Integrating clinical drug testing into treatment plans is an important component of screening and assessment for opioid use to address denial, the minimization of drug use, and to enhance motivation for treatment. In order to prevent drug screening from stigmatizing clients and burdening the therapeutic relationship, focus on compassionate, non-judgmental care that meets the clients where they are, framing addiction as a treatable disease. Clearly explain the purpose of the screening, ask non-judgmental and relevant questions, use neutral language, involve the client in goal setting, and build trust through empathy and understanding of their experiences.

**Social connectedness:** Individuals with interpersonal trauma often experience relationship difficulties and lack trust due to heightened expectations of harm. This can lead to greater isolation, elevated risk of substance use, and interference with recovery efforts. During the assessment phase, it is important to gather information on existing social supports and provide appropriate referrals to relevant community resources.

Comprehensive and integrated treatment is key when you are caring for individuals with co-occurring traumatic stress, other mental health challenges, and substance use. Trauma-focused interventions should be considered as a necessary component of treatment in order to ensure that you are addressing the needs of youth, adults, and families impacted by trauma. Providing trauma treatment in conjunction with any needed pharmacological treatment of opioid use disorder is essential.

## Addressing Trauma and Substance Use Through Clinical Interventions

### What You Can Do:

- Understand the family and social context (e.g., how substance use problems develop, are maintained, and what can positively or negatively influence its treatment).
- Address ongoing risk to minimize future trauma exposure and increase available supports to maximize emotional and behavioral regulation.
- Engage in care coordination across various service systems involved with the family. At the organizational level, this may involve adding opportunities for staff to participate in internal and cross systems team meetings, developing formal and informal partnerships among the involved service systems, and allowing for the provision of case management services, intervisit communication, and insurance reimbursement for treatment costs.
- Learn about the medical management of opioid addiction using drugs such as:
  - Methadone or buprenorphine for opioid use disorder treatment and withdrawal management
  - Naltrexone for relapse prevention
  - Naloxone to treat overdose

## Making Referrals and Connecting to Care

Families impacted by trauma and substance use can recover with the proper supports. Referral for an integrated collaborative approach to mental health and substance use treatment that uses trauma-informed interventions is recommended. Opioid and other substance use impacts the entire family. In addition to treatment for the individual, providers should consider referrals for family-based treatment, and mental health and substance use treatment for individual family members.

### What You Can Do:

- Educate individuals and families on the value of [medication-assisted treatment \(MAT\)](#).
- Encourage family members to care for their own mental health and wellbeing by spending time connecting with friends and other family members, engaging in pleasant and meaningful activities outside of the home, and becoming involved in support groups (e.g., 12-step programs).
- Understand the impact of trauma on the development and maintenance of an opioid use disorder for pregnant/parenting women and individuals and recommend evidence-based treatment that supports a parent in keeping their child with them during treatment.
- SAMHSA recommends using a collaborative approach when working with pregnant individuals with opioid use disorders. For more information, view: [A Collaborative Approach to the Treatment of Pregnant Women with Opioid Use Disorders](#)

## Training Resources

All service providers should be trained on the risks and challenges associated with trauma and substance use, screening and assessment tools, relevant evidence-based treatment and intervention approaches, and the importance of service integration and cross-system coordination. Here are some resources that may be helpful.

- Trauma-informed approaches to support youth and families are available through:
  - The NCTSN Learning Center, accessible online for all service providers (<https://learn.nctsn.org/>)
  - The National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veterans Affairs ([https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/continuing\\_ed/find\\_a\\_course.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/continuing_ed/find_a_course.asp))
  - The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (<https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence/training-technical-assistance#children-families>)
- Substance use approaches are available through:
  - The Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network (<http://attcnetwork.org/home/>).
  - SAMHSA (<https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/training-resources>) for physicians as well as physician assistants and nurse practitioners that focuses on medication-assisted treatment. (See below for more information on medication-assisted treatment.)
- Psychosocial treatment resources:
  - Opioid Use Among Individuals with PTSD, National Center for PTSD: [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/rq\\_docs/V30N1.pdf](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/rq_docs/V30N1.pdf)
  - Guidelines for Treating Individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Co-Occurring Opioid Use Disorders, SAMHSA: [http://atforum.com/documents/Pharm\\_Guidelines\\_508.pdf](http://atforum.com/documents/Pharm_Guidelines_508.pdf).
  - Practice Parameter for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (reviews psychosocial and pharmacological treatment): <https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567%2810%2900082-1/pdf>
  - NCTSN Trauma Treatments : <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/treatments-that-work>.
  - Understanding the Links Between Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/understanding-links-between-adolescent-trauma-and-substance-abuse-toolkit-providers-2nd>
  - Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse Online course: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/adolescent-trauma-and-substance-abuse-online>
  - Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder: <https://www.asam.org/Quality-Science/quality/2020-national-practice-guideline>
  - Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Patients with Substance Use Disorders: [https://psychiatryonline.org/pb/assets/raw/sitewide/practice\\_guidelines/guidelines/substanceuse.pdf](https://psychiatryonline.org/pb/assets/raw/sitewide/practice_guidelines/guidelines/substanceuse.pdf)

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