How are child protection agencies implementing trauma-informed, healing-centered policies and practices?

Child protection agencies serve children and families that have high rates of trauma histories,¹ perhaps more than in any other child-serving system.² Even while acting to assess and preserve safety, child protection agencies can exacerbate and cause additional trauma through the interventions of investigation, removal, and placement. The adverse effects of trauma, however, can be mitigated — and in some cases prevented — with a trauma-informed, healing-centered approach.

In response to increased understanding about the prevalence of trauma and its impact on physical and behavioral health, a growing number of child protection agencies are seeking to develop greater trauma awareness and implement policy and practice changes more responsive to people who have experienced trauma, and actively support their healing.³

Agencies may implement these policies and practices in different ways to best suit the unique contexts and needs of the communities and families they serve. In most cases, however, they take one or more of the following steps: increase their staff and partners’ knowledge of how families experience trauma; incorporate trauma
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expertise into service delivery; seek to expand and adapt the local service array to better suit children and families’ healing; and collaborate with other agencies and systems to adopt a more trauma-informed system-wide approach.4

For more information on this topic, see the companion briefs:

- **What are key principles child protection agencies should follow when providing trauma treatment and healing-centered services?**
- **What resources are available to support trauma-informed, healing-centered approaches in child welfare?**
- **What is Connecticut’s trauma-informed approach?**

**Benefits**

Trauma-informed policies and practices can assist parents and caregivers who have experienced trauma to provide nurturing and safe homes for children. This can promote child safety; improve visitation, family engagement, and permanency; and strengthen relationships with resource parents.5 When kin and foster caregivers are more aware of the connection between a child’s behavior and that child’s past exposure to trauma, they are better equipped to provide children with protective and coping skills to mitigate the impacts of being removed from their homes.

In fact, research indicates that when child protection agencies infuse trauma-informed care into everything they do, children experience fewer placements and fare better in foster care. Trauma-informed service improvements — such as ensuring that more children receive screening, assessment, and evidence-based treatment — may lead to improved outcomes, such as:

- Fewer children requiring crisis services.
- Decreased use of psychotropic medications.
- Fewer foster home placements, disruptions, and re-entries.
- Reduced length of stay in out-of-home care.
- Improved child functioning and increased well-being.

Becoming a trauma-informed, healing-centered agency also increases retention of staff and their workplace satisfaction.6

**Implementing trauma-informed, healing-centered approaches**

Several organizations have offered guidance for the development of trauma-informed child welfare systems, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Chadwick Trauma-Informed Systems Project, and Youth Thrive, an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Key steps include:

- Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and understanding potential paths for recovery.
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in families, staff, and others involved with the system.
- Responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- Seeking to actively resist re-traumatization.

Child protection agencies and service providers need to understand the trauma history of both the children and their parents/caregivers, as there is an interrelation between trauma and symptoms of trauma (such as substance use disorders, eating disorders, depression, and anxiety), which can affect both child and parent. Since children and families involved with the child welfare system experience higher rates of trauma and associated behavioral health problems, it is even more vital to develop a trauma-informed system to address these issues. Centering care and support on what the young person and family express they need is critical to helping to facilitate healing.

Trauma-informed systems employ evidence-based and best practice treatment models to directly address the impacts of trauma and to facilitate trauma recovery. While these treatment models are key, they are just some of the components in a trauma-informed system, which is less about what a system is doing and more about how the system is doing it. It is essential to partner with youth and families to understand their specific needs and
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Increasingly, child protection agencies are recognizing that being trauma-informed is not enough — they must move toward being resilience-focused and healing-centered. This stems from recognition that children and families have hopes and dreams, and are much more than the traumas they have experienced. Agencies might explore, for example, how they might implement the principles of a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented, equity-focused system established by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing.

Healing-centered approaches also recognize that trauma is a collective experience that is often shared by many children and families in the same community. Trauma occurs in an environmental and community context and is shaped by social and political factors such as widespread poverty and an inadequate social safety net. Healing approaches therefore require a commitment to support and engage communities, in addition to being led by communities, which have been harmed by the past and present actions of child protection agencies.

Jurisdictional examples

A growing number of child protection agencies are launching or sustaining efforts to increase their use of trauma-informed, healing-centered policies and practices. Since 2011, Connecticut’s Department of Children and has implemented trauma-informed policies and practices across the agency, including creating new screening and referral procedures, training staff at all levels, building a trauma-informed service array with a network of providers, and building the capacity of providers to focus specifically on race-based trauma and stress. Over 30 agencies and more than 600 clinicians have been trained in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) and the Child and Family Traumatic Stress Intervention (CFTSI), and more than 10,000 children have received evidence-based trauma treatment, resulting in an 80% reduction in trauma symptoms.

In June 2020, the New Jersey Office of Resilience was created within the state’s Department of Children and Families to identify and nurture community-developed solutions to supporting children and caregivers with adverse childhood experiences. One of several
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trauma-informed approaches is Mobile Response and Stabilization Services, an intervention that helps children in crisis stay with their families by making sure a behavioral health worker is available to any family, anywhere in the state, at any time. Since 2004, the program has consistently maintained 94% of children in their living situation at the time of service, including those involved with the child welfare system.7

**Virginia's** Department of Social Services established an Office of Trauma and Resilience Policy to focus on promoting inclusive, trauma-informed, and healing-centered practices by facilitating culture change and collaboration with other social service agencies throughout the state.

**Washington's** Department of Children, Youth, and Families’ recently launched an agency-wide effort to make trauma-informed training and communities of practice available to all staff, establish professional standards across systems, and develop tools to assess progress toward becoming a trauma-informed, healing-centered agency.

To learn more, visit Questions from the field at Casey.org.

8. Email correspondence with staff from the Office of Analytics and Systems Improvement, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, on March 24, 2023.