Addressing Child Trauma by Working Together
The Need for Coordination among Child-Serving Systems
by Claire Chiamulera

Trauma-exposed children often interact with several systems, among them child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and mental health. When these systems have a shared view of trauma's impact on children and provide a coordinated system of care, children can thrive.

A new Chapin Hall report, *Responding to Students Affected by Trauma: Collaboration across Public Systems*, explores how public child-serving systems can work together to help children affected by trauma. It finds that child welfare, juvenile justice, public schools, and mental health/substance abuse agencies struggle when handling the behaviors of children affected by trauma. Responses either focus on protecting public safety or rehabilitating the child, with wide differences within and across systems.

Child-serving systems often intersect and overlap, according to the report. For example, a school may refer a youth who acts out to the juvenile justice system. Or, the juvenile justice system may have to decide how to transition a youth back to the education system. Different approaches within and across these systems to handling a child's trauma-induced behaviors can clash, further affecting children's behavior. Adopting trauma-informed approaches and coordinating efforts would benefit children.

Lessons Learned

Changing fragmented approaches and ensuring child-serving systems are on the same page when responding to traumatized children is the aim of a fairly new movement. Some child-serving systems are using trauma-informed approaches that address a child's safety and risk behaviors and draw on family and protective factors. Work in this area has often focused on the education system, likely because children spend so much time at school.

Approaches are also expanding to the child welfare system. The report describes assessments of three approaches, one child welfare agency-based and two school-based. The assessments have have uncovered the following themes:

Assessing a child's and family's experiences aids the response.
An assessment of an Illinois child welfare agency program (the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services' Integrated Assessment Program) finds a trauma-informed approach helped the agency match appropriate services with a child's individual circumstances and needs. The program uses integrated assessments by child welfare caseworkers to evaluate children's educational experiences and status in school. School staff receive information about the children's and family's circumstances to help put children's behaviors in context and view a child's learning and behavior issues through a trauma-informed lens.

Behavior is seen as an expression of trauma.
An approach by Chicago public schools uses a three-tiered framework to identify traumatized children's social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Evidence-based interventions are identified for each tier that increase in intensity based on the level of need. Evaluations have found school staff shift their focus once they adopt a trauma-informed approach. Instead of seeing problem behavior

as anger-based, they begin to see it as an expression of trauma. Rather than perceiving a child's violence as threatening, a trauma-informed view enables staff to see it as a response to feeling unsafe or threatened. Instead of referring a child to anger management, the three-tiered framework allows staff to make referrals to the evidence-based interventions designated for each tier or level of need.

A trauma-sensitive environment promotes healing.
Another school-based approach in Massachusetts, Helping Traumatized Children Learn, creates trauma-sensitive school environments to enhance children's sense of safety. Clear behavioral expectations, supportive relationships, and established routines are key supports used to create this environment. Teachers also receive guidance on tailoring instruction to support learning for traumatized children. The program benefits children with identified trauma exposure, as well as those whose trauma has not yet been identified.

Family involvement is key.
As interest in trauma-informed approaches and advocacy grows, the need to coordinate efforts to engage families, especially "hard-to-reach" families is gaining attention. The underlying thinking is that:

- Parents need support handling their children's behaviors and issues of their own that may contribute to the child's behaviors.

- Families can provide valuable information about a child that is critical to the system serving the youth.

- A family's support may reduce a child's anxiety and aid treatment.

Schools have a harder time reaching and engaging "hard-to-reach" families. Yet, juvenile courts, the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and mental health/substance abuse agencies often engage with them. Improved coordination among these systems and schools could help bridge this gap.

Developing a child's strengths lessens trauma's impact.
Studies show that helping a child develop talents and interests, grow stable relationships, and experience success are key to resolving trauma's impact and preventing risky behaviors. Schools, in particular, can provide children with stable adult relationships, and opportunities to experience success academically and socially. Other systems can also work creatively to surround children with strong adult role models, opportunities to develop talents, and positive experiences.

How child-serving systems respond to child trauma is gaining attention and a push for trauma-informed responses is underway. The report notes that juvenile courts are uneven in their responses depending on their views about punishment versus rehabilitation. However, with the growing focus on child trauma, more programs are finding their way into educational, juvenile justice, child welfare and mental health/substance abuse systems. Sharing the experiences of these programs across systems is needed to promote a more collaborative cross-systems approach.

Claire Chiamulera is CLP's editor.

Child Trauma Resources

Coming Soon: New Resources from the Safe Start Center, ABA Center on Children and the Law and Child & Family Policy Associates.
■ Issue Brief on Trauma Informed Legal Advocacy
■ Identification Tool and Resource Guide on Polyvictimization and Trauma among Court-Involved Youth
Will be available at www.safestartcenter.org

Understanding Children's Exposure to Violence. E. Cohen, et al (Safe Start Center), 2009. <http://safestartcenter.org/pdf/IssueBrief1_UNDERSTANDING.pdf>

Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. National Child Traumatic Stress Network Child Welfare Committee, 2008. <www.nctsn.org/products/child-welfare-trauma-training-toolkit-2008>

Birth Parents with Trauma Histories and the Child Welfare System: A Guide for Judges and Attorneys. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Welfare Committee, 2011. <www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/birth_parents_trauma_guide_judges_final.pdf>

CAC Directors' Guide to Mental Health Services for Abused Children. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Welfare Committee & National Children's Alliance, 2008. <www.nctsnet.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/CAC_Directors_Guide_Final.pdf>

Polyvictimization: Children's Exposure to Multiple Types of Violence, Crime, and Abuse. (Juvenile Justice Bulletin – NCJ 235504.) Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Hamby, S., & Ormrod, R., 2011. <www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/jvq/Polyvictimization%20OJJDP%20bulletin.pdf>

How Trauma Impacts Children

According to the Chapin Hall report, studies find high rates of child trauma for youth involved in public child-serving systems:

■ 97% of youth in the Illinois child welfare system for abuse or neglect experienced a traumatic event, and 25% had an identifiable trauma symptom;

■ 75% of youth in the juvenile justice system have experienced traumatic victimization, with as many as 50% experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms.

The effects of trauma exposure observed by public systems include behavioral, cognitive, and social.

Behavioral effects:
■ Risk taking
■ Acting out
■ Rule breaking

Cognitive effects:
■ Compromised cognitive abilities (attention, memory, executive functions, verbal abilities) and skills development.
■ Difficulty with language, concentration, understanding, and responding to classroom instruction.
■ Challenged ability to problem solve, make abstractions, participate in groups, adjust to classroom transitions, form relationships, regulate emotions and organize material sequentially.

Social effects:
■ Impulsivity
■ Aggression
■ Defiance
■ Withdrawal
■ Challenged relationships