

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

August 2011

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Iowa Task Force for Young Women



Trauma-Informed Care

According to the Justice Policy Institute, "Research shows that while up to 34 percent of children in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event, between 75 and 93 percent of youth entering the juvenile justice system annually in this country are estimated to have experienced some degree of trauma."¹ The issue of trauma among young people in the justice system has long needed more intensive discussion. This is particularly true for young women, whom studies have shown to be 50% more likely to be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder than their male counterparts.²

Examine standard responses to behavior

If professionals rely simply on traditional punitive sanctions, it will do little to change the behaviors of the young women on their caseload who have experienced trauma, as that response fails to address the impact of traumatic stress.³ Trauma-informed care can make professionals more effective and efficient in their work and can benefit young women significantly.

"Among a sample of incarcerated youth, traumas experienced by delinquent girls were different from those experienced by delinquent boys: males were more likely to report having witnessed a violent event, while females were more likely to report being the victim of violence."

*~Trauma among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System(p. 4)
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

Review facility procedures

By understanding common trauma-based reactions of young women and making corresponding system changes, professionals can not only improve outcomes for young women while they are in the juvenile justice system, they can ultimately ensure that these same young women have long-term tools for managing trauma-based reactions as adults. For example, hypervigilance is a common reaction among those who have experienced trauma and it can be easily triggered to become a defensive/aggressive reaction to others.⁴ For a young woman who has a history of abuse, this might mean that physical restraint triggers a reaction that has little to do with her compliance and everything to do with her trauma history and feeling a loss of control. Do staff respond to the young woman by isolating her when the restraint doesn't work? Can they even recognize that it may have been a reaction based on trauma? Do they empower her at all in the situation? Do they make an effort to repair damage done to the relationship after the incident?

Facilities that make youth personal safety and feelings of security paramount by examining usage of restraints, isolation and staff behavior can increase their chances of being effective in the present. If they explore what skills they teach for managing trauma-based feelings and whether they allow young women to give meaningful input regarding the above issues, they can also increase their chances of a positive impact lasting into the future.

Is placement even necessary?

An additional aspect of trauma that must be considered, is that placement in a facility can itself be a traumatic experience or a trigger for prior trauma. As a result, decisions-makers must examine some of the traditional reasons for institutionalizing young women. Refusal to "stay put", for their own good, and for their protection against possible violence on the streets or from their own bad choices as reasons for placement must be weighed against the potential damage placement may cause.⁵

Use an appropriate screening tool

It can be challenging for professionals to distinguish between trauma-based reactions and common delinquent behaviors. This is where the use of trauma screening tools becomes important: Traumatic Events Screening Inventory (Daviss, Ford 2000), Child Welfare Trauma Screening Tool (Ingelman 2007), UCLA Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index (Steinberg, Brymer, Decker, Pynoos 2004) and the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (Briere 1996).⁶

If you work with young women in the juvenile justice system, it's time for trauma-informed care!

¹Adams, E. "Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense". Justice Policy Institute. July 2010. p. 1.

²Hennessey, M. Ford, J. Mahoney, K. Ko, S. Sigfried, C. "Trauma Among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System". National Child Traumatic Stress Network. 2004. p. 3.

³Buffington, K. Dierkhising, C. Marsh, S. "Ten Things Every Juvenile Court Judge Should Know About Trauma and Delinquency". National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. 2010. p. 6.

⁴Buffington, K. Dierkhising, C, et al. 2010. p. 12.

⁵Pasko, L. Chesney-Lind, M. "Under Lock and Key: Trauma, Marginalization, and Girls Juvenile Justice Involvement". Justice Research and Policy. Vol. 12, No. 2, 2010. p. 38.

⁶Adams, E. "Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense". Justice Policy Institute. July 2010. p. 1.

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