

Trauma Overview

“By understanding the impact of trauma on children’s development, beliefs, and behaviors, judges can become more effective in addressing the unique needs and challenges of traumatized children and adolescents involved in the juvenile and family court system.”

-National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Children and youth who are involved in the dependency system have often been the subject of a traumatic event or have been exposed to a traumatic event that occurred to another, a parent or sibling in their own family. In addition, the mere process of placement may cause additional stress and trauma for children. Such incidents can have a profound and lasting influence changing the trajectory of development well into adulthood if left unrecognized and untreated. The most severe of these effects, diagnosed and clinically labeled as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), requires attention and appropriate treatment to successfully resolve. The cluster of symptoms displayed even in children that do not meet the criteria for clinical diagnosis are worrisome and can lead to poor outcomes. Children in placement displaying these “traumatic stress reactions” may experience placement instability and even risk-taking behavior that can lead to anti-social or criminal behavior. Judges who are well-versed and sensitive to the potential behaviors resulting from traumatic experiences are better equipped to reduce ongoing trauma for children and parents.

This section will aid judges in the early recognition of the signs and symptoms of trauma often seen in children and parents involved with the dependency system. For judges and other judicial officers, being aware of the behavioral components of trauma responses can lead to earlier and more appropriate treatment for these children and adults. Child behavior that once was seen as defiant or poor adjustment may be recognized as coping strategies for dealing with traumatic events. Parental behavior that was once seen as resistive or uncooperative may also be recognized as coping strategies to traumatic events. Correctly defined, the responses from judges and other system professionals to these behaviors can lead children and adults down the path to healing rather than solely focusing on consequences or punishment.

Many of the Dependency Benchbook chapters address areas where the usage of “best practice” will support the child and the parent deal with trauma and traumatic stress. Placement with siblings (Shelter Care Hearing – Chapter 5), maintaining family connections (Disposition - Chapter 8), and frequent visitation with family members and significant others (Visitation - Chapter 7) can all reduce isolation and loneliness that compound stress reactions. Frequent judicial oversight (Permanency Hearing - Chapter 10) can ensure that appropriate treatment is occurring to address PTSD as well as other traumatic responses.

Finally, this section will assist judges in understanding trauma both in theory and in practical terms. Additional resources include information regarding useful assessments for trauma and trauma related disorders, as well as, appropriate treatment options.