12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Children and Families

Applications to the Juvenile Justice System

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Trauma and the Juvenile Justice System

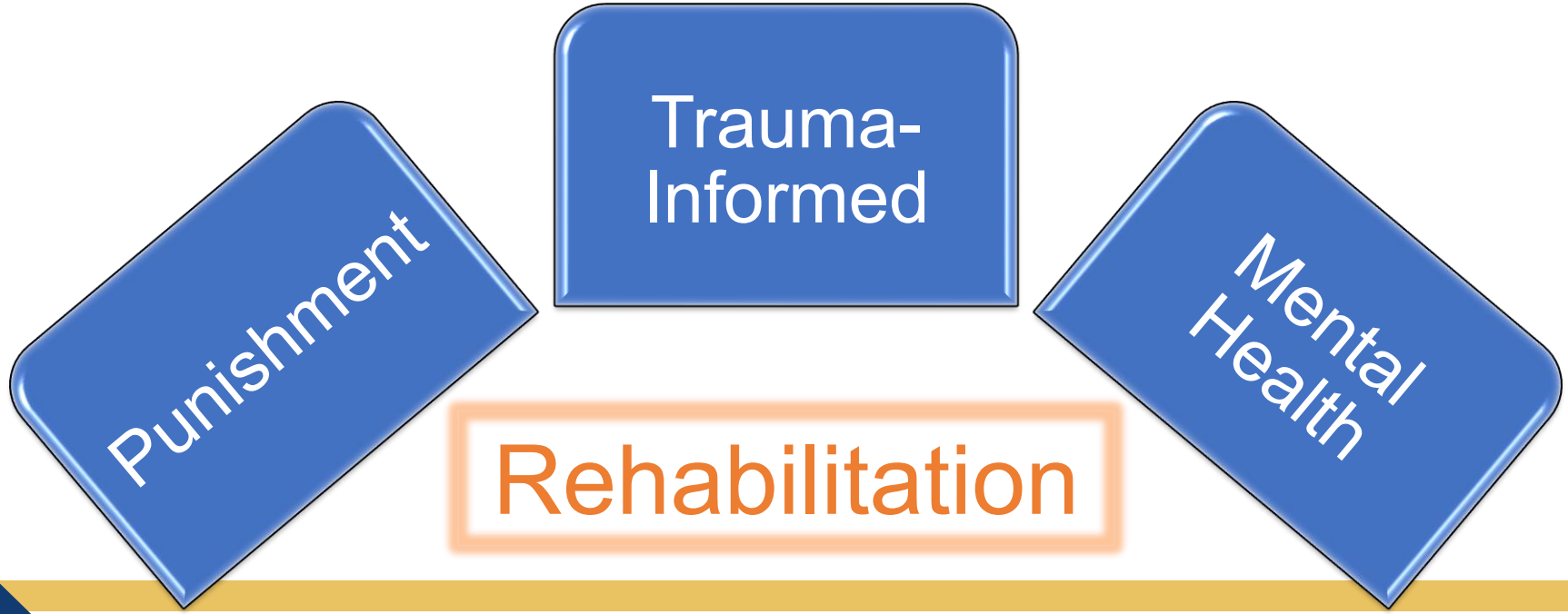
- Over 85% of justice-involved youth report experiencing at least one adverse childhood experience (Malvaso et al, 2022)
- 60% of youth in a juvenile justice sample reported 4+ types of trauma exposures (Duron et al, 2022)
- Nearly 90% of juvenile justice youth had elevated scores for at least one trauma symptom indicator (Malvaso et al, 2022)
- Child abuse and neglect (CAN) increases likelihood of arrests as a juvenile and adult, and violent crime (Ryan et al, 2007)
- Each additional trauma a youth experiences increases risk of serious, violent, and chronic offenses (Fox et al., 2015)

What is Juvenile Justice?

You have one end of the spectrum that thinks spare the rod and spoil the child, kind of, you know to put it in a very nice way, you know. You have the other end, which is, oh, you know, we just need to figure out what's wrong with this precious little flower, you know? And I think we're beyond the precious flower stage with a lot of these kids. And it seems like the loudest voices on each end don't want to acknowledge that there's gotta be some balance between the two.

(Correctional Officer at a Youth Center; Spitzer, 2010)

Models of Juvenile Justice



Principles of Trauma-Informed Care
(SAMHSA)

- Safety
- Trustworthiness & Transparency
- Peer Support
- Collaboration & Mutuality
- Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Four Rs of Trauma-Informed Care (SAMHSA, 2014)

Realize the frequency and impact of trauma

Recognize overt and subtle signs of trauma

Respond by creating spaces where survivors feel safe and supported

Resist retraumatization by safeguarding youth from trauma reminders

Benefits of Trauma-Informed Care

Individuals

- Increased perception of safety
- Reduced seclusion and restraint use
- Improved behavior and fewer negative incidents
- Improved service engagement/retention
- Improved safety outcomes
- Reduced recidivism

Staff/Organizations

- Improved attitudes toward service users
- Reduced trauma-triggers in milieu
- Reduced staff burnout and turnover
- Higher staff empathy
- Improved safety outcomes

The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Childhood

- Developed by the NCTSN Core Curriculum Task Force during an expert consensus meeting in 2007
- Distillation of decades of research on childhood trauma
- Serve as the conceptual foundation of the Core Curriculum on Childhood Trauma
- Cover a broad range of points that professionals and agencies should consider as they strive to assess, understand, and assist trauma-exposed children, families, and communities in trauma-informed ways

The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Childhood

1. Traumatic experiences are inherently complex
2. Trauma occurs within a broad context that includes children's personal characteristics, life experiences, and current circumstances
3. Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities, life changes, and distressing reminders in children's daily lives.
4. Children can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss
5. Danger and safety are core concerns for children with trauma histories
6. Trauma affects the child, their family, and other caregiving systems

The 12 Core Concepts for Understanding Traumatic Stress Responses in Childhood

7. Child, family and community strengths can reduce the harmful impact of trauma
8. Trauma and subsequent hardships can strongly influence development
9. Brain development influences children's reactions to traumatic experiences
10. Culture greatly influences traumatic experiences, response, and recovery
11. Trauma can influence how children view society and social institutions
12. Working with trauma-exposed children can cause distress in providers, making it more difficult to provide good care.

1. Traumatic experiences are inherently complex.

- **WHAT WAS EXPERIENCED DURING THE TRAUMA**
- Every traumatic event is made up of different moments
- What children think, feel, and do during the trauma can complicate the experience, both during and after the trauma
- Strongly influenced by prior experience and developmental level
- Events after the trauma can also add additional complexity
- The child's relationship with the offender is a common source of complexity

Inherent Complexity Example

- 14-year-old Damian decided to skip school to hang out at the park with friends. He was walking to the park with one of his friends. The weather was perfect for playing basketball. They were joking about who was the better basketball player. I car drove by and someone yelled, “This is for my cousin!” Shots rang out and Damian heard his friend scream. Damian fell to the asphalt. He looked over and saw blood all over his friend’s chest. An ambulance arrived and took his friend to the hospital. Damian was questioned by law enforcement.

Group Reflection: Inherent Complexity

- What are some of the different “moments” in this experience?
- What are some of Damian’s likely thoughts?
- What are some of his likely feelings?
- What are some physiological reactions he likely had?

- How would the experience be different if Damian knew the shooter?
- How would the experience be different if Damian had been in a fight with the shooter’s cousin two days ago?

2. Trauma occurs within a broad context

- **WHAT WAS HAPPENING <u>BEFORE/AROUND</u> THE TRAUMA**

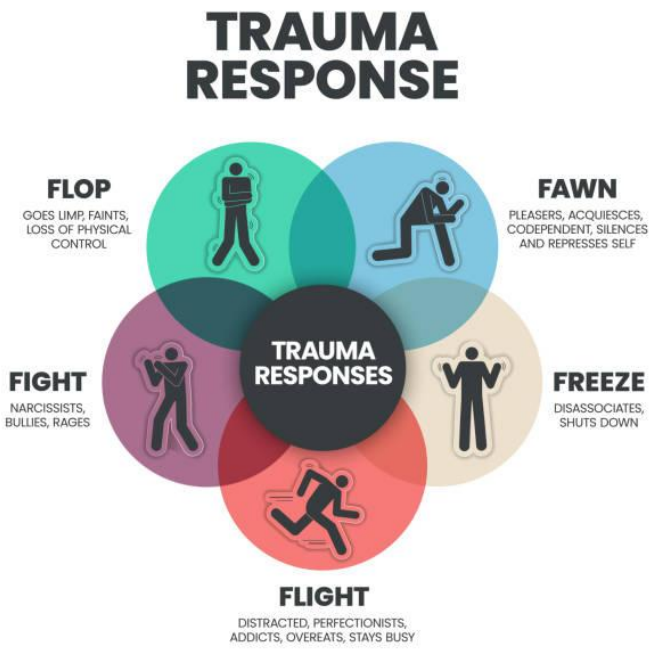
- Child *Intrinsic* Factors
  - Temperament
  - Prior exposure to trauma
  - Prior history of psychiatric disorders
- Child *Extrinsic* Factors
  - Physical environment
  - Family
  - Community
  - Culture

3. Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities

- **WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE TRAUMA**
- The aftermath of trauma can tax resources of the child, family, and community
- These changes may be highly distressing on their own (e.g., foster care placement)
- Examples:
  - Family conflict/separation
  - Financial hardship
  - Relocation to new residence and/or school
  - Social stigma
  - On-going medical treatment
  - Investigation/legal proceedings
  - Trauma reactions (e.g., sleep difficulties)

4. Children can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss.

- **THERE IS NO ONE WAY CHILDREN REACT TO TRAUMA**
- Reactions can vary in nature, onset, intensity, frequency, and duration
- Mental health disorders can be caused or worsened by trauma
- Trauma reactions can impact a child academically, behaviorally, and socially



GROUP DISCUSSION

- Discuss examples of the following that you have witnessed in juvenile justice settings:
  - FIGHT
  - FLIGHT
  - FREEZE
  - FAWN
  - FLOP

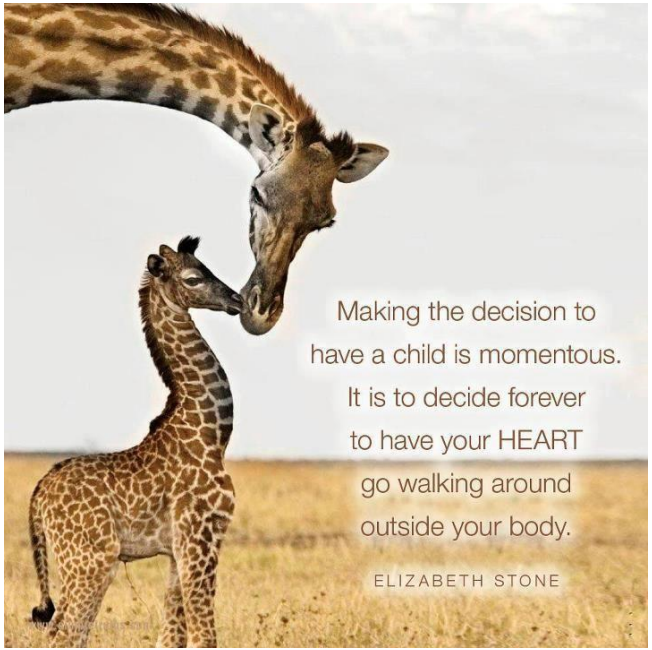
5. Danger and safety are core concerns in the lives of traumatized children.

- **TRAUMA CAN MAKE IT VERY DIFFICULT FOR CHILDREN TO FEEL/STAY SAFE**
- Trauma can undermine a child's sense of protection and safety
- Physical safety is the first step but not sufficient – also need psychological safety
- Children may have difficulty distinguishing between safe and unsafe situations
- Recovery is more difficult if the child is still living in a dangerous environment

GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss examples of physical and psychological safety concerns that could be present in a juvenile justice setting

6. Traumatic experiences affect the family and caregiving systems.



- **CARING FOR TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN CAN BE VERY CHALLENGING**
- Caregiver distress can impair their ability to support the child
- Traumatized children may be triggered by caregiver efforts to support them
- Trauma can cause serious disruptions in caregiver-child relationships
- Especially challenging for caregivers that have their own stress/trauma

7. Protective and promotive factors can reduce the adverse impact of trauma.

- **MANY CHILDREN ARE HIGHLY RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF TRAUMA**
- Protective factors– buffer the adverse effects of trauma and its aftermath (SEATBELT)
- Promotive factors – promote positive growth regardless of trauma (STEERING WHEEL)
- Enhance children's ability to resist or recover from the harmful effects of trauma
- Include intrinsic and extrinsic factors

Protective and Promotive Factors

Individual Characteristics	Cognitive Ability Self Efficacy Internal locus of control Temperament
Family Characteristics	Family cohesion Supportive parent-child interaction Social support
Community Characteristics	Positive school experiences Community resources Supportive peers/mentors
Cultural Protective Factors	Strong sense of cultural identity Spirituality Connection to cultural community Cultural talents and skills

NAME SOME PROTECTIVE OR PROMOTIVE FACTORS IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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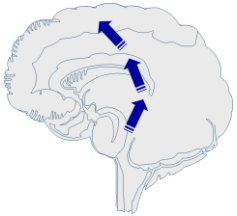
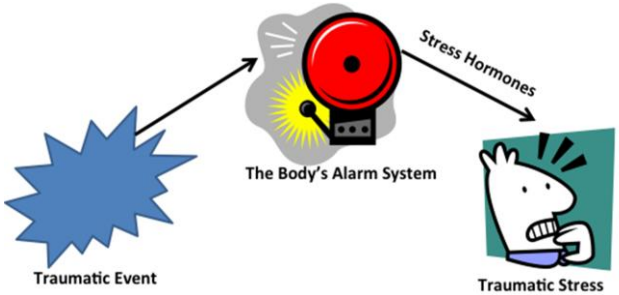
8. Trauma and post-trauma adversities can strongly influence development

- Trauma can limit developmental competency in areas like learning, self-regulation, and interpersonal relationships
- Trauma can cause *developmental delay*
  - Regressive behavior
  - Reluctance or inability to participate in developmentally appropriate activities
- Or *developmental acceleration*
  - Leaving home at an early age
  - Early engagement in sexual behavior

9. Developmental neurobiology underlies children's reactions to traumatic experiences.

- **TRAUMA CAN DAMAGE THE BRAIN**
- Trauma can cause strong, lasting biological responses that alter brain development
- Trauma early in life has more potential for long-term impact, but…
- …the brain's continuing growth and plasticity also create opportunities for recovery and adaptation…
- …especially if the child is provided with a safe, supportive environment





10. Culture is closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, response, and recovery.

- **CHILDREN OFTEN SEE TRAUMA THROUGH THE LENS OF THEIR CULURE**
- May affect the meaning a child or family gives to the trauma
- May influence the ways children and their families …
  - Experience and express distress
  - Talk about the trauma
  - Seek help/support
  - Grieve and mourn losses
- Historical trauma to a cultural group may affect their responses, world view, expectations regarding self, others, and social institutions
- Cultural beliefs/values can help or hinder a child's recovery from trauma

11. Challenges to the social contract affect trauma response and recovery.

- **TRAUMA CAN CAUSE CHILDREN TO LOSE THEIR FAITH IN PEOPLE/SOCIETY**
- Trauma is often a major violation of social expectations
  - Protection of children
  - Was justice served?
- These issues can influence…
  - Willingness to seek help
  - Willingness to cooperate with authorities
  - Willingness to trust other people
  - Long-term recovery
  - Evolving beliefs, attitudes, and values about the world

12. Working with trauma-exposed children can cause distress in providers

- **PROFESSIONAL WORK WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN CAN BE HIGHLY UPSETTING**
- Compassion fatigue found in over 50% of clinicians treating trauma survivors
- Reducing Risk (Miller & Sprang, 2016)
  - Mindful engagement with the work
  - Regulating rumination
  - Narration of distressing professional experiences
  - Reducing emotional labor
  - Parasympathetic recovery

"That which is to give light must endure burning"

-Victor Frankl

GROUP DISCUSSION

What does this look like in juvenile justice professionals?