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## Statistically Speaking: Developing Stronger Support: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Advocacy

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*Statistically Speaking:*  
**Developing Stronger Support:  
The Impact of Trauma-Informed Advocacy**

*By: Katharine Czinke*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

With the passage of the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, trauma-informed services became a nationally recognized method of care for families involved in or at risk of being involved in the child welfare system. Although the use of trauma-informed services was not a new concept in 2018, the widespread use of trauma-informed advocacy in the legal field is still a growing practice. In Section II, this article will first briefly overview the impact and prevalence of trauma in vulnerable child populations. Section III will then review recent studies showing the positive impact of trauma-informed interactions for individuals who have been impacted by trauma. Finally, Section IV will conclude with recommendations for legal professionals interacting with children who have experienced complex trauma.

**II. THE PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF TRAUMA IN VULNERABLE CHILD POPULATIONS**

Traumatic experiences are defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network as frightening, dangerous, or violent events which threaten a child's body or life. These types of events may include, but are not limited to, abuse, violence within the family or community, sudden loss of attachment, or serious accident. Events of this nature include abuse, neglect, natural disaster, gang activity, mental illness either personally or within the family, incarceration of a family member, or divorce. While these traumas impact each individual in different ways, there is now well-established scientific research which shows that repeated exposure to trauma can impact neurobiology, the nervous system, and physical health long term. Children exposed to repeated traumatic events, also known as complex trauma, often experience an inability to regulate their emotions. Additionally, children who have experienced complex trauma often react in the extreme or alternately completely suppress any reaction when a reaction would be appropriate. They may be quick to respond to any unexpected situation out of the "fight, flight, or freeze" response most people only experience during singular traumatic events. In addition, children may also experience challenges developing healthy attachments in relationships, have compromised immune systems and experience delays in reaching developmental milestones.

The 2016 data from Kaiser-Permanente's Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study showed that more than 60% of the study's 17,337 middle-class, predominantly white individuals had experienced childhood traumas. ACEs within economically disadvantaged

or racially diverse communities are estimated to be even higher. Within the child welfare system, by the time a child is adjudicated abused or neglected, it is undeniable that they have experienced at least some type of trauma. Similarly, children involved in the juvenile justice system are also highly likely to experience at least one type of trauma, if not multiple traumas by the time they are in contact with an attorney.

The impact and prevalence of traumatic experiences within vulnerable child populations is expansive, but the question remains, how much impact can trauma-informed services or advocacy provide?

### **III. THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES**

Much like the conundrum of defining legislative terms such as “reasonable efforts” or “best interests,” the definition of trauma-informed services varies based on location and provider. Studies show that trainings to provide trauma-informed services range from one hour to multiple days. Because of these variances, it has been challenging for studies to accurately depict the true impact of trauma-informed services. However, even in light of these broad variations, several studies published within the last year have attempted to quantify the impact and outcomes of trauma-informed services.

Two recent studies have shown favorable and improved outcomes for individuals receiving trauma-informed services through state aid and through primary schools. These studies demonstrated a decrease in posttraumatic stress responses when compared to the control group. Though services provided in these studies were focused mainly on mental health interventions, they demonstrate the impact of utilizing a trauma-informed approach over traditional approaches.

In other research focused on identifying outcomes for recipients of trauma-informed social service programs, researchers found that social service programs struggle to implement efficient trauma-informed programs. One study specifically focused on the lack of data agencies collect related to outcomes for clientele, but noted that the agency staff were in fact more empathetic and attuned toward their clients after receiving trauma-informed training.

One statewide study identified positive outcomes for recipients of trauma-informed mental health services, especially when pre-screening for trauma was used for clients. However, the research also indicated significant challenges in successful implementation due to the high rate of turnover in state agencies and low rates of full participation in services offered. Overall, the study was hopeful but inconclusive.

Overall, the general consensus seems to be that the impact of trauma-informed services is beneficial. Both trained staff and served clientele were found to have improved outcomes. However, the inconsistency of the data presents significant challenges in fully

determining the impact of these services and these inconsistencies must be addressed to determine the long-term efficacy of trauma-informed services.

#### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

On a macro level moving forward, there are several recommendations that stand out from reviewing the data. First, there is a strong need for a more uniform definition of trauma-informed and better identification of what constitutes effective trauma-informed training. In addition, there is a great need for specific and directed studies on long term outcomes for recipients of trauma-informed services.

On a micro level, professionals who engage with children who may have experienced complex trauma have several strong options for the future. As one study indicated, implementing trauma screening for incoming clients can be extremely helpful in ensuring effective advocacy. Additionally, even though significant data regarding long-term benefits for clients is still forthcoming, studies show that trauma-informed training is effective in developing attorneys' empathetic skills in support of their clients. Moreover, anecdotal feedback shows that disarming a client's trauma response through trauma-informed practices is more likely to help the client feel safe during professional interactions and develop trust in the relationship, which arguably is beneficial at any level. Furthermore, professionals may learn from the challenges within the published studies by implementing evaluation measures and working to remove barriers which prevent clients from fully participating in services. Finally, professionals should realize that the impact of complex trauma may alter the way in which their clients are able to interact or engage in the services provided and adjust both expectations and interactions accordingly.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, trauma-informed services provide a valuable opportunity to better support vulnerable child populations. The studies published within the last year show that trauma-informed services are well on their way to deeper, long-term understanding. While the long-term impact is still to be determined, in the short-term, professionals have an opportunity to be at the forefront of a necessary development in client support. Trauma-informed advocacy is well on its way to becoming a new standard for vulnerable populations and a step taken to better serve clients. Professionals would do well to take notice of this growing trend and pursue opportunities to understand and utilize trauma-informed interventions for their clients.

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