

Brief 5: COVID-19 & Kids Issue Brief Series

Recommendations for Child-Serving Professionals - Healthcare, Law Enforcement, Child Protection, & More

A family-centered approach to service and resource delivery amid a pandemic

Healthcare providers have seen the most direct effects of COVID-19, but even as the pandemic wanes, all child-serving professionals are far from finished dealing with the long-term ramifications. Child-serving professionals are usually considered individuals in the fields of healthcare, mental & behavioral health, law enforcement, juvenile justice, child protection, or education.

It will be crucial for child-serving professionals to be trained for an increase in trauma treatment in the coming years to ensure that children are able to be resilient against the long-term effects of a global health crisis during their formative years. Part of ensuring children have what they need to heal and bounce back is ensuring that they have a strong foundation at home and that their parent or caregiver is not also struggling to heal from trauma themselves.



“A child whose behavior pushes you away is a child who needs connection before anything else.”

—Kelly Bartlett

Perspective of a Child-Serving Professional - Laure Marino



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“Screening for adverse childhood events is a powerful way to connect with our patients, understand their circumstances and direct them to essential resources. When used properly, the ACE’s screening can actually mitigate the burden of many chronic diseases. As our awareness is heightened, we can work with our patients and families to teach coping mechanisms and develop strategies that support healthier lifestyles.”



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West Virginia KIDS COUNT

West Virginia KIDS COUNT provides trusted data about the well-being of children and builds alliances to advocate for what kids need across the Mountain State. We provide state legislators, public officials and child advocates with reliable data, policy recommendations and tools needed to advance sound policies that benefit West Virginia’s children and families. We are a part of a national KIDS COUNT network through the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Trauma-Informed Trainings & Actions

Having a fully trauma-informed staff means even employees like secretaries or administrators that have minimal contact with children and their guardians should be trauma-informed.

Patience, communication, and inclusivity are key in making everyone feel safe and welcome. Knowing how to care for that child and minimize the effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is the start of being able to effectively get to the task at hand, like the child's education.

Having cohesion and coordination across agencies, even if only county-wide standards, can help parents, children, and child-serving professionals feel like they are all on the same page and can communicate across roles and agencies. Using the same terminology and similar training can help everyone be more informed and feel more comfortable, making things easier for everyone.

Something else to consider in dealing with traumatized individuals, especially related to stress caused by COVID-19, is the larger effects on marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Already they are facing systemic disadvantages, so the added restrictions and worries of COVID-19 are impacting them even more. These are likely to be the families with parents or caregivers that are already distrustful of child-serving professionals, so a trauma-informed approach will be essential to treating or serving the child.

Trauma-informed care may look a little bit different in different professions. Here are some more personalized recommendations from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network for helping all members of a family feel safe and supported so everyone can get the most out of the service.



Healthcare & Mental & Behavioral Health

Physicians' offices can be scary. Children may express intense discomfort with examinations which they regard as invasive. Children's parents sometimes feel overwhelmed at their child's discomfort. And parents/guardians who may have experienced historical inequities, or discrimination themselves, may hesitate to invest trust in the medical community. It is therefore essential for professionals to be other-centered and inclusive in word choice, proactively reduce possible micro-aggressions, and be aware that professional terminology may feel stigmatizing to a parent, guardian, or child. Consider the interaction from the child's perspective. Build trust and a sense of teamwork for the benefit of pediatric patients and clients.

Law Enforcement & Juvenile Justice

First responders and officers meet children under traumatic circumstances, when the youngsters are still in shock. Through the intentional use of mindful body language, tone, and word choice, you can provide safety, reassurance, and calm structure to an otherwise overwhelming situation. Simple things like getting on the child's level physically, and seeing from the child's point of view can go a long way to help a frightened child cope successfully with an otherwise negative experience.

Child Protection

Try to create an environment where children feel safe and can open up and relax. They likely will have a hard time trusting adults or feeling like it is even worthwhile to form connections but try to be patient and persistent.

Educators

Communicating with a child about accommodations and talking about the situation is great for them to be and feel supported, but it is especially important to keep these conversations and situations private.

Supporting the Child Starts with Supporting the Parent

The best ways to prevent and heal the effects of ACEs are to create resiliency, build healthy relationships, and feel safe. The first place children will look for all of these things is their parent or caregiver, so it is important to make sure that they are feeling supported and assisted as well. Being able to focus on helping the child heal and snap back from trauma or ACEs starts with supporting the family and assuring basic needs are met.

Parents and caregivers that have unresolved trauma are particularly vulnerable entering into the COVID-19 pandemic and may struggle to be patient and supportive of the adverse experiences their child is also having.

Some of the most important things all members of the family will need include:

- » Positive coping skills
- » Support networks
- » Predictability
- » Routine

If children are currently experiencing abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, they will have more trouble dealing with the uncertainty and stress that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on. Screening for these things in the house, as well as screening for poverty-related issues, will be important in helping children bounce back from the trauma potentially caused by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant financial issues, stress, and mental health problems in many families across West Virginia. Helping these families to recover from the traumatic experience that was and is the COVID-19 health crisis will be a multifaceted approach.

Family Resource Centers: www.wvfrn.org



Serving Children with a Trauma-Informed Approach

Helping children process, heal, and recover from traumatic experiences begins with recognizing when a child is experiencing or has experienced something traumatic. A child may withdraw from family and friends, be quieter than usual, or have trouble eating or sleeping enough. They may also have trouble regulating their emotions and seem overly reactive to situations that appear small or unimportant.

No matter how many preventative steps are taken, children cannot be completely shielded from all adverse experiences, but with the right guidance and care, they can bounce back.

By teaching children how to be resilient, they are better equipped to handle adverse experiences and recover from them. Eilene Zimmerman gathered research from several areas and experts related to studying trauma that agreed there were some common characteristics in resilient individuals. These include:

- » They care about others and have something that gives them a sense of purpose, often stemming from religious beliefs.
- » They are optimistic and positive while acknowledging the reality of a situation, so instead of ignoring negativity or overly indulging in negativity, they look for bright sides and opportunities in a bad situation.
- » They are able to adapt and accept the bad things that happen and at the same time work to make things better for themselves. Resilient individuals nearly always have a strong support system to lean on and encourage them as they navigate a difficult time.

Various professions and environments give different opportunities for teaching, practicing, and honing different resiliency skills.



Healthcare & Mental & Behavioral Health

Encourage children to find the positives in a situation, and how to identify opportunities for growth or change. Let them know that even if something is painful, scary, or difficult, it will not always be, and show them the ways they can find purpose and comfort regardless.

Law Enforcement & Juvenile Justice

As children break the law and begin to act out, they may want to change their ways and avoid the path they are starting down, but they likely don't know how. Helping them to develop a moral compass or find a mission in life can help them stay out of the courtroom and juvenile detention.

Child Protection

Show children how they can find meaning and purpose in a cause that resonates with them. By encouraging them to stay positive and showing them how wonderful things can be when we all take care of each other, children can learn how valuable community and collective causes are to the individual.

Educators

Social support systems often start in schools, with peers, teachers, administrators, and staff all being familiar faces in a child's life. Educators are in a perfect position to be a consistent adult that believes in a child and treats them as capable, which can be absolutely life-changing.

One step to a trauma-informed approach is ACEs 101 training. ACEs 101 introduces the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are all types of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic experiences that occur to individuals under the age of 18. The recognition and study of ACEs originated in a groundbreaking public health study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente in 1998. The study findings concluded childhood trauma leads to reduced health and well-being later in life.

Training Objectives include:

- » Understanding what ACEs are and the impact they have on children and adults.
- » Becoming familiar with the ten types of ACEs.
- » Learning ways to overcome ACEs through positive childhood experiences.
- » Identify steps individual families, schools, communities, and service providers can take to prevent ACEs.



“Every child deserves a champion - an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

—Rita Pierson



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