Approximately 3 million children in the United States were reported to child protective services in 2010 for at least one instance of abuse or neglect. Further, a 2006 National Institute of Justice report found domestic violence and child maltreatment co-occur at rates up to 60%, and noted research that suggests a significant number of children “exposed to domestic violence come in contact with the child welfare system because of maltreatment.”

The experience of violence within the family is detrimental to children’s well-being by contributing to developmental deficits, mental health disorders, and health problems across the lifespan. Child abuse and neglect is a pervasive public health problem because of the association between exposure to early adversity, adoption of high-risk health behaviors as a coping mechanism, and early mortality (e.g., see the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study [ACES] at www.acestudy.org). The long-term and costly consequences of adverse childhood experiences emphasize the critical need for trauma-responsive prevention and intervention supports to promote the lifelong well-being of children and families.

Courts seeking to be trauma-responsive are increasingly aware that being “informed” is not only being knowledgeable about the biological/psychological/social impacts of adverse experiences and the state of evidence-based treatments. Judges and trauma professionals alike are coming to understand that “informed” also includes ensuring that environments, practices, and policies are designed to reduce unnecessary stress and potential stress reactions in those that have been trauma-exposed.
Despite the growing recognition that families entering the system are likely to have experienced trauma, there has yet to be identified a clear definition of trauma-responsive justice within the juvenile and family court systems. NCJFCJ researchers are currently developing a framework to assist the emerging field of ‘trauma-responsive justice’ in creating a shared definition of what it means to be trauma-responsive in courts. As part of this process, the NCJFCJ is developing tools to evaluate court practices, policies, and environment through a trauma-responsive lens. This process is termed a trauma audit.

The goal of a trauma audit is to provide the courts with information on how to improve the experiences of the children and families they serve, as well as to assist courts to identify areas in which they can help to reduce the secondary trauma that professionals who work in this field often experience. The NCJFCJ audit protocol uses a multi-method data collection process to assess myriad factors related to trauma-responsive justice, including but not limited to, system practices, policies, environments, and stakeholders’ attitudes and behaviors. NCJFCJ researchers are currently pilot testing the trauma audit process in several dependency courts across the nation as part of the development of this framework. Participating in such an audit will highlight both the achievements and challenges an organization faces when becoming trauma-responsive.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Judges and courts need help defining what it means to be trauma-responsive.
- Child friendly does not equal trauma-responsive.
- Trauma-responsive encompasses both the needs of the clients and court professionals.
- Small changes to practice, policy, or environment may reduce trauma triggers, promote engagement, and support healing.

For more information about trauma audits, please feel free to contact Dr. Shawn Marsh, the Chief Program Officer, Juvenile Law at NCJFCJ SMarsh@ncjfcj.org, or Dr. Alicia Summers, the Director of Research and Evaluation at NCJFCJ ASummers@ncjfcj.org. You can also request a trauma audit in your court by completing a Trauma Audit Request Form at this link: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TraumaAuditRequest

Research Snapshots highlight key elements of reports and projects that address the need for empirically-based research on systems change in the juvenile and family court system. For more information, please visit our website: www.ncjfcj.org