

Issue

- In Wisconsin, over 1/3 of children in the child welfare system have some type of disability.
- 70 percent of respondents with disabilities reported they had been a victim of abuse, and of those, 90% had experienced abuse on multiple occasions.
- Most reports regarding the incidence of trauma for people with developmental disabilities indicate it is likely the statistics under represent the prevalence of trauma.
- People with disabilities are more likely to be offered behavior management models rather than mental health treatments. The opportunity for a sense of safety, meaningful relationships, or empowerment is often missed.
- Knowledge of trauma informed care principles, and application of these principles with empathy in daily practice is a critical skill set for developing professionals of all disciplines.

Trauma Informed Care Guiding Principles



Trauma Informed Care Practices:

A Framework for Responding to High Rates of Abuse and Neglect of Youth with Disabilities

Realize

Help people at every level of an organization have a basic understanding of trauma and response –“What happened to you?” vs. “What’s wrong with you?”

Trauma is Subjective – What is traumatic to one person may not be to another

Trauma Multiplies – if a person has already experienced a traumatic event, they are more likely to feel unsafe, increasing traumatic response to future experiences

People with disabilities are more likely to experience trauma because:

- They may have learned to be compliant to authority figures
- They may be dependent on a caregiver or multiple caregivers for assistance
- They may be unable to meet parental expectations
- Family stress levels may be high/lack of support for family caregivers

People with disabilities may experience situations which impact reporting abuse:

- Isolation from resources
- Communication impairments
- Limited mobility
- Lack of information about sexuality

Helping children with disabilities to lead full, connected lives allows youth to develop protective factors from many of the above risk factors.

Promote inclusion of youth with disabilities

- Encourage parent education, training, support and family services
- Offer respite care--both planned and in times of crisis
- Maximize communication skills of youth. Support self-advocacy.
- Reduce youth and family isolation

Recognize

Trauma is very individualized and shaped by factors such as:

- Age
- Gender
- Culture
- Past Experiences

For persons with a developmental disability, signs of abuse may include:

New disruptive behaviors (aggressive and/or avoidant)
Sleep disturbances • Physical complaints • Attention difficulties
Attempts to self-soothe • Excessive fears, phobias or worries
Decline in skill development • Repetition of statements about an event
Bed wetting or bowel accidents • Lack of energy and/or loss of joy

Respond

Individual Practice, organizational policies and procedures all need to be considered part of the solution.

Universal precautions

It is challenging to identify who may have experienced trauma. Instead, develop skills that will help all, including:

- Helping people feel welcome and safe
- Responding empathetically
- Talking about trauma
- Knowing local resources for reporting and referral

Provide information to parents and caregivers

- How to recognize and report abuse
- Ways to teach protective behaviors to their child(ren)
- Explore services to support the child and family

Consider Best Practices

- Refer to mental health treatment (behavior management plans do not treat trauma)
- Coordinate positive behavior supports and person-centered planning with mental health assessments and services/supports when indicated
- Make non-traditional services available, such as WRAP – Wellness Recovery Action Plan Training for People with Developmental Distinctions (Mary Ellen Copeland)
- Peer support
- Include a wide range of caregivers in the assessment process (i.e. family/guardians, school, daycare)
- Cross training and communication between disability and mental health professionals

Resist Re-Traumatization

Remove practices that interfere with healing such as:

- Use of restraints on someone who has experienced trauma
- Placing someone in seclusion who has been abandoned or neglected

Provide Support to families and youth with disabilities through:

- Information about specific disabilities
- Connection to parent and peer support
- Service coordination
- Home, school and community services

References

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