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Integrating a Trauma-Informed Approach with Youth Development Programs

Youth development programs provide a unique but largely untapped opportunity to support youth who experience potentially traumatic events and adversity, such as racism/discrimination, poverty, and violence. Nationally and in Connecticut, 50% to 75% of youth are involved in at least one youth development program, including mentoring programs and team sports.[1,2] More than 111,000 Connecticut youth participate in team sports[3], an experience that helps to build positive relationships and conflict resolution skills. Youth development programs promote positive and sustained youth-adult relationships and life and leadership skills. Despite the promise that community-based, culturally grounded, and safe and supervised youth development programs offer to youth affected by trauma, very few programs have integrated a trauma-informed approach.

Many Youth Have Experienced Trauma or Adversity

More than half of all youth in the United States. reported exposure to trauma in the past year, an experience that is linked to traumatic stress and other problematic and costly health outcomes across the life span.[4] Trauma-affected youth may experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges that negatively affect their daily functioning and may also have an impact on their likelihood of participating in youth development programs. These challenges include difficulty trusting authority figures, difficulty forming healthy adult and peer relationships, anxiety, sadness, and anger. However, youth development programs are a promising and non-stigmatizing venue in which to protect youth from the effects of trauma by connecting them with caring adult mentors, promoting resilience, and cultivating problem-solving skills that youth can apply in diverse challenging situations.

Key Components of a Trauma-Informed Approach

Federal, state, and local leaders are increasingly integrating trauma-informed approaches within health, education, judicial, and social service systems in order to build youth and family resilience,

support recovery, and prevent additional trauma exposure. These approaches generally involve: (1) workforce development related to preventing and addressing trauma and traumatic stress; (2) changes to organizational policy and practice; and (3) early identification of needs and improved access to evidence-based services.[5] The single most important resource for children exposed to trauma is a supportive adult, a resource that youth development programs are well-positioned to provide.

Recommendations for Helping Youth Development Programs to Become Trauma-Informed

Incorporating a trauma-informed approach into youth development programs may increase young people's potential for thriving inside and outside of these settings. Although most staff are not therapists, caring youth-adult relationships can be therapeutic for youth. For example, in 2016, Boy Scouts of America provided leaders with training in how to appropriately respond to signs of child traumatic stress and foster resilience.[6] Coaching in youth sports may also be adapted to address the needs of youth who experience traumatic stress, through emphasizing mindfulness and focusing skills.[7]

The following recommendations are based on the key components of a trauma-informed approach and growing research to support the development of trauma-informed youth development programs:

1. **Promote Workforce Development.** Provide basic training to all staff that includes how to recognize the signs of traumatic stress, how trauma can negatively affect youth relationships and behaviors, how to talk with youth and caregivers about trauma in developmentally appropriate ways, and how to teach youth healthy coping skills, including mindfulness and self-regulation.[8]
2. **Implement Changes to Organizational Policy and Practice.** Ensure that policies and practices, including those focused on discipline and staff wellness, are examined through a "trauma lens" in order to determine whether they are supportive of trauma-affected youth and staff, including staff who may experience secondary traumatic stress related to working with youth exposed to trauma. Organizational policies and practices may increase staff awareness of self-care strategies and available supports, such as Employee Assistance Programs.
3. **Improve Early Identification and Access to Evidence-Based Services**. Provide training and technical assistance to help staff identify youth and families who may benefit from more specific services and how to make appropriate referrals, including to behavioral health providers. Collaborate with local agencies with expertise in child trauma who can support the implementation of trauma-informed approaches through organizational development and staff training, conducting trauma screening, and offering additional resources for trauma-affected youth and families. A directory of agencies and institutions in Connecticut with expertise in trauma-focused interventions for youth is available.

Youth development programs offer strong potential for helping to improve the health and well-being of trauma-affected youth in their care. Although current practice suggests effective strategies for how these programs may become more trauma-informed, continued research is needed to understand how to effectively incorporate and sustain trauma-informed approaches in these settings.

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