

IMPACT

Executive Summary

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Helping Young Children Exposed to Trauma:

A Systems Approach to Implementing Trauma-Informed Care



This IMPACT provides a summary of the research on the effects of early trauma exposure, discusses what Connecticut is doing across systems to support young children who have experienced trauma, and identifies recommendations to improve trauma-informed services for Connecticut's youngest children.

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Visit www.chdi.org to download a copy of this report or to learn more about implementing trauma-informed care for young children exposed to trauma.

The prevalence and effects of early childhood trauma

There are more than 228,000 children under the age of six years old in Connecticut, at least a quarter of whom research suggests will have experienced or witnessed one or more potentially traumatic events during their first years of life. Exposure to trauma can lead to disruptions in development and cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral functioning, and has been associated with costly long-term mental health and health outcomes across the lifespan. Effective trauma-informed systems can help mitigate these effects and support the health and resilience of all children.

Connecticut's first steps in addressing early childhood trauma

Connecticut has made significant investments to address childhood trauma across a number of systems including child welfare, behavioral health, juvenile justice, education, and pediatrics. More than 8,000 professionals have been trained to understand and recognize trauma across a number of systems, more than 50,000 children have been screened for trauma, and more than 13,000 have been provided trauma-informed evidence-based mental health services. Trauma-informed care is also a core value identified in Connecticut's Children's Behavioral Health Plan. While the focus of much of this work has been on school-aged children, recent efforts have begun to bring trauma-informed programs to those serving the state's youngest children.

Trauma has increasingly become a focus of trainings and professional development for the early childhood workforce, including preschool teachers, daycare providers, pediatricians, child welfare workers, and others. Some of these settings are beginning to screen young children for trauma. Evidence-based treatments are also becoming more available. Child First is a trauma-informed home visiting program that now serves approximately 1,000 young children and their families each year. Outpatient children's behavioral health clinics are also expanding access to evidence-based trauma-informed models for young children through the Early Childhood Trauma Collaborative, a grant awarded to CHDI and a collaborative of state and provider agencies from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration as part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. And there are other promising small-scale efforts to support trauma-informed work with young children, including Department of

Executive Summary (continued)

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Children and Families-funded therapeutic preschools and infant-toddler court teams operated by ZERO TO THREE. Finally, the establishment of the Office of Early Childhood in 2013 demonstrates a statewide commitment to early childhood. Having a central agency focused on creating a cohesive, *high quality early childhood system* is important in facilitating the collaboration necessary to build a foundation for a trauma-informed early childhood system.

Addressing child trauma in Connecticut and closing gaps in care for young children

Even with Connecticut's investments in addressing childhood trauma, services for children younger than six still lag behind those available to older children and adults. This may be in part because of a disconnect between existing trauma-informed systems and early childhood systems. There is a need for systems to focus specifically on what trauma-informed care looks like for young children so that systems serving young children can begin to integrate practices and supports to better serve the youngest children exposed to trauma. Additionally, settings that might *already* serve those affected by trauma, such as child welfare agencies and mental health clinics, can further their understanding of how trauma profoundly impacts young children and how to best serve the youngest in their care.

A framework for trauma-informed care for young children

Connecticut is actively developing a comprehensive trauma-informed early childhood system of care. This IMPACT lays out a framework to expand Connecticut's robust systems of trauma-informed care to include younger children by infusing a trauma-informed approach into Connecticut's existing early childhood systems and highlighting the importance of collaboration between early childhood systems as well as linkages with other child-serving systems. Key components of this framework include:

- Workforce development
- Trauma screening
- Practice change and evidence-based practice
- Collaboration and communication across early childhood systems



Recommendations

This IMPACT includes a number of recommendations to continue supporting Connecticut's early childhood system to be trauma-informed, including the following key recommendations:

- All staff in home visiting and caregiver support programs, pediatric providers, and early care and education staff receive training and ongoing support about preventing, identifying, and responding to childhood trauma. Opportunities for cross training to improve collaboration and shared language across these systems are actively pursued.
- Early childhood systems and programs include trauma screening together with developmental/behavioral screening.
- The Department of Social Services includes trauma screening as a reimbursable service under Medicaid for pediatric primary care providers, and a billing mechanism for services to address "toxic stress" or similar designation for young children who are at risk due to trauma exposure but do not yet meet criteria for a diagnosable mental illness.
- The State increases the number of mental health providers trained to deliver evidence-based trauma-focused interventions for young children.