

# Assessment of a Child's Trauma Experiences

## The Importance of Trauma Assessment

- Not all children who have experienced trauma need trauma-specific intervention.
- Some children have amazing natural resilience and are able to use their natural support systems to integrate their traumatic experience.
- Ideally, children should be in a stable placement when receiving trauma-informed treatment. However, children should *always* be referred for necessary treatment regardless of their placement status.
- Unfortunately, many children in the child welfare system lack natural support systems and need the help of trauma-informed care. Some may meet the clinical criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD.
- Many children who do not meet the full criteria for PTSD still suffer significant posttraumatic symptoms that can have a dramatic adverse impact on behavior, judgment, educational performance, and ability to connect with caregivers.
- These children need a comprehensive trauma assessment to determine which intervention will be most beneficial.

## What is a Trauma assessment?

- Trauma Assessment begins with a thorough trauma history.
  - Identify all forms of traumatic events experienced directly or witnessed by the child to determine the best type of treatment for that specific child.
- Supplement trauma history with trauma-specific standardized clinical measures to assist in identifying the types and severity of symptoms the child is experiencing.
- There are evidence-supported interventions that are appropriate for many children and that share many core components of trauma-informed treatments. Examples of Trauma Assessment Measures include:
  - UCLA PTSD Index for DSM-IV
  - Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC)
  - Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC)
  - Child Sexual Behavior Inventory

If a Comprehensive Trauma Assessment indicates that the child would most benefit from trauma-focused treatment, the child welfare worker should seek mental health practitioners with the skill-set and expertise to address these issues using evidence-based treatments. There are many different evidence-based trauma-focused treatments. A trauma-informed mental health professional should be able to determine which treatment is most appropriate for a given case.

### **Questions to Ask Therapists/Agencies That Provide Services**

- Do you provide trauma-specific or trauma-informed therapy? If so, how do you determine if the child needs a trauma-specific therapy?
- How familiar are you with evidence-based treatment models designed and tested for treatment of child trauma-related symptoms?
- How do you approach therapy with traumatized children and their families (regardless of whether they indicate or request trauma-informed treatment)?
- Describe a typical course of therapy (e.g., can you describe the core components of your treatment approach?).

### **Examples of Evidence-Based Treatments for children experiencing childhood traumatic stress (see Web Resources Handout for more option & links):**

- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
- Abuse-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (AF-CBT)
- Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP)

### **Core Components of Trauma-Informed, Evidence-Based Treatment**

- Building a strong therapeutic relationship
- Psychoeducation about normal responses to trauma
- Parent/Caregiver support, conjoint therapy, or parent/caregiver training
- Emotional expression and regulation skills
- Anxiety management and relaxation skills
- Cognitive processing or reframing

### **Comprehensive Assessment: What Child Welfare Workers Can Do**

- Gather a full picture of a child's experiences and trauma history.
- Identify immediate needs and concerns in order to prioritize interventions for specific individuals.
- Identify and interview individuals or agencies to determine which are knowledgeable about trauma assessment and evidence-based treatments.
- Request regular, ongoing assessments (e.g., every three months) regarding the child's progress and symptoms.
- Use tools such as the *Child Welfare Trauma Referral Tool* to determine whether the child needs mental health treatment and, if so, what type.
- Gain a better understanding of the range of programs available in order to make informed choices when referring families to services.
- Ensure that families are referred to the most effective programs that the community provides.