

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE & Family Engagement

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening. Trauma events have lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Organizations that provide human, social, and health services realize the need to be trauma-informed. Sometimes trauma-informed training or policies are required. At the same time, organizations are increasingly realizing a need to better engage and connect with the individuals and families who come to them for services. It sounds like organizations are needing to adapt and learn two new ways of doing business – but that's not exactly the case.

Trauma-informed services and family engagement fit together naturally. In fact, excellent family engagement forms the foundation of trauma-informed care.

FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Different organizations have different frameworks for understanding trauma. Two prevalent examples come from SAMHSA and ITTIC. Each one calls for collaboration, client voice, and personal safety to set the tone for all interactions – meaning that full and open engagement is a prerequisite for excellent trauma-informed care.

[SAMHSA: Six Key Principles to Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

- 1. Safety:** Understand safety as defined by those served. Physical and psychological safety within the organization is very important. The physical setting and interpersonal interactions need to promote a sense of safety.
- 2. Trustworthiness & Transparency:** Organizational practices and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust with clients and family members.
- 3. Peer Support:** Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles of establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing their stories and lives experience to promote recovery and healing.
- 4. Collaboration & Mutuality:** Partnering with clients and leveling power differences between staff and clients demonstrates that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making. Every person within an organization has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach. As one expert stated, "One does not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic."



5. Empowerment, Voice & Choice: Client strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon. Clients are supported in shared decision-making, choice and goal setting to determine the plan of action they need to heal and move forward. Practitioners are facilitators of recovery rather than controllers of recovery. Organizations understand the importance of power differentials and ways in which clients, historically, have been diminished in voice and choice and are often recipients of coercive treatment.

6. Cultural, Historical & Gender Issues:

The organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender-identity, geography, etc.). Offers access to gender responsive services, leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections, incorporates policies and practices that are responsive to racial, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals served and recognizes and addresses historical trauma.

[The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care \(ITTIC\)](#)

Retraumatization Within Systems (Policies, Procedures, “The Way Things Are Done”): Having to continually retell their story. Being treated as a number. Procedures that require disrobing. Being seen as their label. No choice in service or treatment. No opportunity to give feedback about their experience with the service delivery.

Retraumatization Within Relationships (Power, Control, Subversiveness): Not being seen or heard. Violating trust. Failure to ensure emotional safety. Noncollaborative. Does things for rather than with. Use of punitive treatment, coercive practices and oppressive language.

Five Principles of Trauma-Informed Care:

1. **Safety** – Ensuring physical and emotional safety
2. **Choice** – Individual has choice and control
3. **Collaboration** – Making decisions with the individual and sharing power
4. **Trustworthiness** – Task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries
5. **Empowerment** – Prioritizing empowerment and skill building



LINKING TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In [The Role of Family Engagement in Creating Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems](#), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network outlines the core areas of overlap between trauma-informed care and family engagement. The article was written specifically about the juvenile justice system, but the examples and lessons apply to any agency that works with traumatized children and families.

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#)

Family Engagement Definition: A collaborative relationship between agencies or systems and families. Encompasses a spectrum of activity that not only includes the individual system-involved youth and their families, but also encompasses the policies, practices, and governance of the agency or system.

Why Family Engagement Is a Key Element in Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice: Families, in the broadest sense, are the primary context in which children receive care, support, a sense of identity and belonging. Even – and perhaps especially –

when youth are placed out of the home, families are key to children’s ongoing health and development. Families will be involved long after children leave the juvenile justice system. The need for trauma-informed juvenile justice systems to recognize and respond to trauma as it affects caregivers, to act in collaboration with all those who are involved with the child, to make resources available, to address family trauma and strengthen family resilience, as described above, makes it absolutely critical that such a system partner with families. It is only through fully embracing family engagement that a juvenile justice system can become a truly trauma-informed system. Family partnership is the means through

which the necessary relationships can be built, and through which policies, practices, and agency culture can be shifted to create a trauma-informed system.

When families are viewed and treated as partners in both their child’s care and in the operations of the juvenile justice and other systems, the child, the family, and the system all benefit. The most effective interventions for youth in the justice system are those that engage families in a strength-based partnership. A trauma-informed system builds on that fact by adopting a collaborative approach to the families and youth with whom they interact.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE
Ensure that families feel safe in your agency.	Show empathy. Actively avoid practices that retraumatize, such as treating clients as a number or a label. Be clear about agency processes, and follow through on your promises.
Really hear families and adapt to meet their expressed needs.	Start by asking questions, and really listen to the answers.
Intentionally and actively solicit family input and desires.	Empower families to speak up. Ask questions. In particular, ask about cultural, historical, and gender issues.
Remember that families are the experts on their experiences and needs.	Empower families to make choices. Make decisions and plans with families, not for them.
Include families in making decisions.	Collaborate on treatment plans. Give families options.
Include other friends, family, and professionals when wanted by the family.	Invite and encourage peer support. Better yet, develop a peer support program.
Engage families in all aspect of work, including policy and administration.	Develop policies and procedures that prioritize family voice in agency operations.

Resources

- [Family Voice Curious Manifesto](#), Center for Children, Families & Workforce Development, University of Montana
- [Family Engagement Inventory](#) for multiple disciplines, Administration for Children & Families
- [Engaging Youth and Families](#), Children’s Behavioral Health Knowledge Center, Massachusetts Department of Health