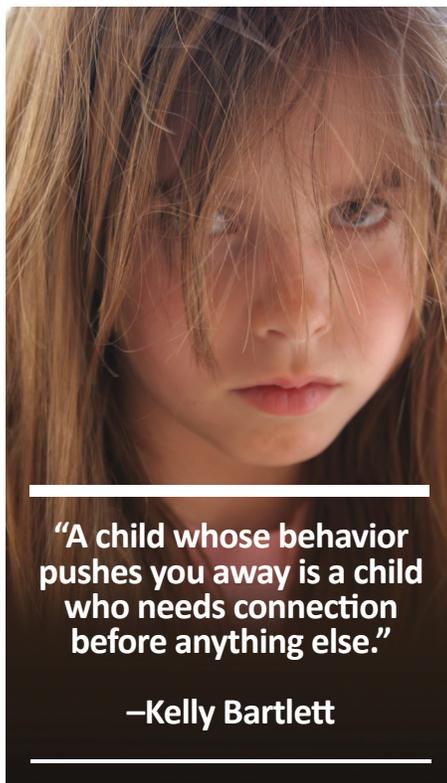


Brief 5: COVID-19 & Kids Issue Brief Series

Recommendations for Child-Serving Professionals - Healthcare, Law Enforcement, Child Protection, & More

A family-centered approach to service and resource delivery amid a pandemic

Healthcare providers have seen the most direct effects of COVID-19, but even as the pandemic wanes, all child-serving professionals are far from finished dealing with the long-term ramifications. Child-serving professionals are usually considered individuals in the fields of healthcare, mental & behavioral health, law enforcement, juvenile justice, child protection, or education. It will be crucial for child-serving professionals to be trained for an increase in trauma treatment in the coming years to ensure that children are able to be resilient against the long-term effects of a global health crisis during their formative years. Part of ensuring children have what they need to heal and bounce back is ensuring that they have a strong foundation at home and that their parent or caregiver is not also struggling to heal from trauma themselves.



“A child whose behavior pushes you away is a child who needs connection before anything else.”

—Kelly Bartlett



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West Virginia KIDS COUNT

West Virginia KIDS COUNT provides trusted data about the well-being of children and builds alliances to advocate for what kids need across the Mountain State. We provide state legislators, public officials and child advocates with reliable data, policy recommendations and tools needed to advance sound policies that benefit West Virginia’s children and families. We are a part of a national KIDS COUNT network through the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Perspective of a Child-Serving Professional - Mark Zelmanski, DO



PGY3 Surgical Resident, CAMC

“Learning about ACEs truly opened my eyes to the way I perceive a patient encounter. As a third-year surgical resident, I can use this scoring system to better approach a patient’s needs in order to provide the best treatment specific to that patient. I firmly believe that this tool will benefit not only the patient but the providers as well.”

Trauma-Informed Trainings & Actions

Having a trauma-informed approach means everyone in the office is trained to work with traumatized individuals without causing further harm. Even employees that have minimal contact with children and their guardians should be trauma-informed. With this training, they will be able to foster a safe environment, communicate effectively, and include a traumatized patient in every step of the process so that they can begin to heal and recover.

Patience, communication, and inclusivity are key in making everyone feel safe and welcome, particularly a child that is scared or uncomfortable in places like doctor's offices, courtrooms, or even classrooms. Knowing how to care for that child and minimize the effect of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is the start of being able to effectively get to the task at hand, like the child's education.

Having cohesion and coordination across agencies, even if only county-wide standards, can help parents, children, and child-serving professionals feel like they are all on the same page and can communicate across roles and agencies. Using the same terminology and similar training can help everyone be more informed and feel more comfortable, making things easier for everyone.

Something else to consider in dealing with traumatized individuals, especially related to stress caused by COVID-19, is the larger effects on marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Already they are facing systemic disadvantages, so the added restrictions and worries of COVID-19 are impacting them even more. These are likely to be the families with parents or caregivers that are already distrustful of child-serving professionals, so a trauma-informed approach will be key to treatment or serving the child.

Healthcare & Mental & Behavioral Health

Doctors' offices can be scary for children and adults alike. For children, make sure to let them know what is going on in a way they understand so that hospitals and medical professionals don't seem as daunting. Respect their bodily autonomy while still performing the necessary exams. For parents or guardians that may have experienced discrimination or inequality, be inclusive in language and literature and communicate with them as well.

Law Enforcement & Juvenile Justice

Some people fear the police and the justice system for a myriad of reasons. Helping individuals, particularly children, with ACEs relating to the justice system begins with being patient and calm. Show children, and their adults, that you are trustworthy and want to help. Even if they feel they are being punished or in trouble, it's important for them to know that they can still recover from this.

Child Protection

Children in a circumstance where child protection services need to be involved will likely already be anxious and withdrawn. Try to create an environment where children feel safe and can open up and relax. They likely will have a hard time trusting adults or feeling like it is even worthwhile to form connections but try to be patient and persistent.

Educators

Communicating with a child about accommodations and talking about the situation is great for them to be and feel supported, but it is especially important to keep these conversations and situations private. Helping other students understand how to support a classmate can be wonderful, but only done in a way that doesn't alienate children already experiencing trauma.

Supporting the Child Starts with Supporting the Parent

The best ways to prevent and heal the effects of ACEs are to create resiliency, build healthy relationships, and feel safe. The first place children will look for all of these things is their parent or caregiver, so it is important to make sure that that parent or caregiver is feeling supported and assisted so that they can support and help the child(ren). Being able to focus on helping the child heal and snap back from trauma or ACEs starts with supporting the family and assuring basic needs are met.

Parents and caregivers that have unresolved trauma are particularly vulnerable entering into the COVID-19 pandemic and may struggle to be patient and supportive of the adverse experiences their child is also having. Parents and caregivers from historically marginalized groups may especially struggle with finding support or guidance for themselves or their child(ren) due to systemic disadvantages in accessing quality healthcare and discrimination.

Some things to help and support parents, caregivers, and families revolve around positive coping skills, support networks, predictability, and routine. It is important to have trauma-informed strategies for forming connections with parents and caregivers so that they can feel safe and can learn to trust you as a child-serving professional.

If children are currently experiencing abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, they will have more trouble dealing with the uncertainty and stress that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on. Screening for these things in the house, as well as screening for poverty-related issues, will be important in helping children bounce back from the trauma potentially caused by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant financial issues, stress, and mental health problems in many families across West Virginia. Helping these families to recover from the traumatic experience that was and is the COVID-19 health crisis will be a multifaceted approach.

Serving Children with a Trauma-Informed Approach

Helping children process, heal, and recover from traumatic experiences begins with recognizing when a child is experiencing or has experienced something traumatic. A child may withdraw from family and friends, be quieter than usual, or have trouble eating or sleeping enough. They may also have trouble regulating their emotions and seem overly reactive to situations that appear small or unimportant.

No matter how many preventative steps are taken, children cannot be completely shielded from all adverse experiences, but with the right guidance and care, they can bounce back.

By teaching children how to be resilient, they are better equipped to handle adverse experiences and recover from them. Eilene Zimmerman gathered research from several areas and experts related to studying trauma that agreed there were some common characteristics in resilient individuals.

They care about others and have something that gives them a sense of purpose, often stemming from religious beliefs. They are optimistic and positive while acknowledging the reality of a situation, so instead of ignoring negativity or overly indulging in negativity, they look for bright sides and opportunities in a bad situation. They are able to adapt and accept the bad things that happen and at the same time work to make things better for themselves. Resilient individuals nearly always have a strong support system to lean on and encourage them as they navigate a difficult time.

Various professions and environments give different opportunities for teaching, practicing, and honing different resiliency skills.

Get Empowered by Getting Support

Healthcare & Mental & Behavioral Health – Any kind of health professional is in a good position to help children with their outlook and their mindset. Encourage children to find the positives in a situation, and how to identify opportunities for growth or change. Let them know that even if something is painful, scary, or difficult, it will not always be, and show them the ways they can find purpose and comfort regardless.

Law Enforcement & Juvenile Justice – Another place for children to learn to find opportunity and purpose in an otherwise difficult situation is with the law. As children break the law and begin to act out, they may want to change their ways and avoid the path they are starting down, but they likely don't know how. Helping them to develop a moral compass or find a mission in life can help them stay out of the courtroom and juvenile detention.

Child Protection – Social workers and other child protection agents have the chance to help children care for others and show them how they can find meaning and purpose in a cause that resonates with them. By encouraging them to stay positive and showing them how wonderful things can be when we all take care of each other, children can learn how valuable community and collective causes are to the individual.

Educators – Social support systems often start in schools, with peers, teachers, administrators, and staff all being familiar faces in a child's life. While educators are also in a good position for teaching children about the other aspects of resiliency, they are uniquely situated to be a consistent adult that believes in a child and treats them as capable, which can be absolutely life changing.

One step to a trauma-informed approach is ACEs 101 training. ACEs 101 introduces the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are all types of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic experiences that occur to individuals under the age of 18. ACEs originated in a groundbreaking public health study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente in 1998. The study findings concluded childhood trauma leads to reduced health and well-being later in life.

Training Objectives include:

Understanding what ACEs are and the impact they have on children and adults.

Becoming familiar with the ten types of ACEs.

Learning ways to overcome ACEs through positive childhood experiences.

Identify steps individual families, schools, communities, and service providers can take to prevent ACEs.

“Every child deserves a champion - an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

–Rita Pierson



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