

Trauma and the Incarcerated Child Support Client

Lori Lofrano

MN Department of Corrections Child Support Liaison

Objective and Disclaimer

- Become more trauma aware in our work
- Working with incarcerated parents
- Why do ACES matter
- Much of the research in this area is new and ever changing

Remember where it
all begins



Meet Cory

Has six minor children with 3 different partners

Owes over \$50,000 arrears

Multiple contempt orders

Sporadic contact with child support offices

Criminal History

-1st Felony at the age of 24

-History of assault, domestic abuse and drugs and alcohol

-Has spent multiple years in drug court and on probation

-Last use of drugs and alcohol week prior to admittance to prison



Cory's childhood

Father was married to someone else-1st met him at 13 years old

Mother struggled with alcohol issues; multiple treatments; possible mental health issues

Moved multiple times to multiple states before age 13

1 sister who was placed out of home multiple times

Met father at 13, father died when he turned 16

Reports being sexually abused at 6

1st use of alcohol at 13 years old, weekly use to intoxication



The move from thinking “What is WRONG with you!” to “What has HAPPENED TO you?”

Cory's ACES

- Reports sexual abuse
- No written report of physical or emotional abuse- may assume with sisters out of home placements
- Neglect?
- Mental illness of family member
- Substance abuse of family member
- Death/divorce parent
- No mention in PSI of mother treated violently or incarceration

Prenatal Brain Development

- Historical Trauma- more than just learned behaviors
- The field of epigenetics:
- ep·i·ge·net·ics
- ,epəjə'nediks/
- *noun* Biology
- noun: **epigenetics**
- the study of changes in organisms caused by modification of gene expression rather than alteration of the genetic code itself.
- "epigenetics has transformed the way we think about genomes"
- Emory School of Medicine Mouse Research

Prenatal Brain Development

- Chronic or acute trauma to mother- overload of fight or flight
- Lower cortisol levels-children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors
- Chemical Dependency
- Chronic trauma plus historical trauma

The Point is:
All sorts of things
affect the
development of the
human brain, and
those things can
affect responses and
behaviors.



So What Does Trauma Informed or Trauma Sensitive Mean to Me?

Impact of Trauma on Interaction and Engagement*

Trauma can affect a survivor's...

- Interactions
- Stress tolerance and ability to regulate emotions
- Responses to negative feedback
- Ability to screen out distractions

It could look like...

- A survivor seeming "cool" and detached
- A survivor who is highly sensitive and whose feelings are easily hurt
- A survivor is suspicious and not trusting
- A survivor does not "read" or trust warmth and caring from staff and other survivors

When someone is experiencing a trauma response, she may...

- Be able to talk to you about what is happening
- Not notice what is happening
- Not know what will help or think that nothing will
- Need some time alone or be comforted by having you near
- Feel too upset or overwhelmed to interact with you
- Not want to say what she needs because she does not feel safe enough, she may want to protect you, or she may believe that she should not say

The Understanding that:

Traumatic events have made people feel unsafe and powerless



Trauma informed practice would be to seek to create a program where clients felt safe and empowered.



Communication

- Is written language too advanced or may it cause a reaction of defensiveness? Example: **Notice of Parental Liability of Support**

Under Minnesota law, you must pay back the amount of public assistance given to your child(ren).

Establishment Complaint

... is not making adequate contribution for the monies that are/have been expended for the minor child(ren).

-Some of our initial contacts use rather harsh language

-How many parents don't want to be great parents? Guilt?

Communication

- Phone communication- tone when answering the phone
- De-escalation techniques
- Avoid guilt inducing conversations
- Use praise. It takes courage to call our offices!
- Short term goal setting
- Empathy-” I really do understand why you feel angry, confused, overwhelmed” Motivational Interviewing Techniques

Physical Space

- Calming- not chaotic.
- Inviting to all- fathers, mothers, children
- Greeting clients
- Office set up for EVERYONE'S safety

Court Actions

- **What variables do we have control of?** *How things are scheduled-* multiple actions at the same time-multiple cases together-waiting area allows for privacy or no contact if wanted/needed *When actions are scheduled-* flexible for work schedule (especially ongoing contempts)- maybe phone check in vs in person *Do we have resources available?* Workforce Center info, temp agencies, information on getting/enforcing the parenting time, CD and mental health.

Let's go back to Cory

- Did not know his own bio father, what things could trigger defensiveness? How about anger?
- His own sexual abuse. How might a paternity action be a trigger?
- His own neglect, how might that change how he looks at the action? Does the action bring up feeling of guilt and being inadequate?
- History of domestic abuse. Are there ways we can frame what we do to not have mom and dad be adversarial?
- Where are his chemical dependency issues at?
- What is his probation status?

Incarceration 101

- Modification if appropriate/AMP
- Do Not Need Court Order for genetic test unless ncp objects/refuses
- Don't send envelopes, but understand they need to pay for envelopes and postage
- Many factors can prevent a phone hearing from happening
- Detainers really mess with programming and release planning
- My focus is getting these clients to engage in their case

QUESTIONS

