

Trauma Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence

Tips for Agencies and Staff Working with Youth

What happens to youth who have been exposed to violence?

Exposure to violence at home, in the form of child abuse and neglect, or in the community, whether at school or in the neighborhood, can affect young people in profound ways. Youth who have been exposed to violence may drop out of school, run away or become homeless, become involved in the juvenile justice system (regardless of whether it is the reason they come before the courts), abuse drugs or alcohol, or end up with labels like “conduct disordered.” A significant portion of these youth may also go on to act violently against intimate partners or family members.

Because exposure to violence is often a hidden problem, adults may deem these youth undeserving of sympathy and view them as willfully bad kids who resist efforts to help them.

Read the rest of this tip sheet to find out how youth workers can identify youth exposed to violence and give them the sympathetic care they need.

What are some warning signs?

Some young people react immediately when exposed to violence. For other youth, signs of the exposure appear months, even years later.

In addition, young people’s reactions differ in severity and include a range of behaviors. What warning signs appear will depend on the frequency and intensity of the traumatic events.

Youth

Youth may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Constant worry about danger or the safety of loved ones
- Signs of depression, such as withdrawing from others or no longer enjoying favorite activities
- Difficulty paying attention in class, concentrating on work, or learning new information
- Outbursts of anger directed toward others or themselves
- Refusal to follow rules
- Use of violence to get what they want
- Rebellion at home and at school
- Bullying or aggression toward others
- Risky behavior such as driving fast or jumping from high places
- Revenge-seeking
- Abrupt changes in friends or dating relationships
- Stereotypical beliefs about males as aggressors and females as victims



What can youth workers do?

People who work with youth, such as social workers, teachers, coaches, therapists, and shelter staff, can play a critical role in reducing the impact exposure to violence has on youth.

First, youth workers can recognize that a lifetime of exposure to violence may be pervasive in young people's lives. To aid that recognition, youth-serving organizations can inform staff about the incidence and prevalence of exposure in the community they serve.

Second, staff must understand how exposure to violence may be affecting each individual young person. By identifying and addressing young people's exposure to violence and victimization, youth-serving organizations can attempt to break the cycle of violence.

Here are some steps organizations and their staff can take to support young people who have been exposed to violence:

Establish protocols to screen for exposure to violence symptoms and mental health needs on an ongoing basis.

Routine screening for possible exposure to violence and its impact on youth is recommended at every phase of youths' involvement with an agency.

Refer youth for comprehensive mental health assessment.

The assessment should evaluate direct victimization or exposure of violence, especially family violence in the home. The assessment will help identify trauma and stressors that might be contributing to a young person's problems. It will also help the agency decide how to intervene. The assessment should result in a plan to provide the services and supports that are needed to help the young person heal.

Plan individualized interventions that take traumatic experiences into consideration.

Youth respond to violence in different ways, depending on their gender, age, and past experiences. Each treatment plan should be individualized, age-appropriate, and tailored to the young person's family history. At the same time, every treatment plan should help the youth (and caregivers) re-establish a normal routine, safety, and predictability.

When planning for services, it is important to remember that young people's families may have been exposed to violence, too, and may have their own reactions to

trauma. When that's the case, agencies should offer specific plans and supports that help parents address their own needs so they can become a powerful anchor for the youth treatment.

The Evidence-Based Practices for Children Exposed to Violence: A Selection from Federal Databases¹ describes several interventions that have shown success in helping children who have been exposed to violence. The publication also describes common characteristics of effective treatments.

Avoid staff burnout.

Youth workers may also have been exposed to violence, whether on the job or in their personal lives. To be able to effectively respond to their client needs, they should develop their own plans for resolving personal issues and addressing job stress.

Help youth feel safe and in control.

Adolescents may feel embarrassed to talk to adults about what they are going through. Youth workers can help them feel comfortable using some of the following strategies:

- Don't force them to talk if they don't want to.
- Find out what is making them feel unsafe and help them make a safety plan.
- Give straightforward explanations for things that are worrying them.
- Don't downplay their feelings by saying things like "Don't worry" or "Everything will be all right."
- Don't make commitments that you cannot honor.
- Look at their options and suggest concrete steps they can take.
- Help them think of positive ways to keep busy, such as playing sports, going out with friends, or making art or music.

When to seek professional help

If an adolescent is doing any of the following, youth workers should take serious notice and link the young person specialized mental health interventions:

- Being involved in violent dating relationships, either as abuser or victim
- Drinking and using drugs
- Skipping school a lot or dropping out
- Thinking about wanting to die or committing suicide
- Breaking the law or destroying things

¹ http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf

Mandated Reporting

Many children experiencing crises or violence are also at risk for child abuse and neglect. All States have child welfare systems that receive and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect, offer services to families, provide foster homes for children who must be removed from their parents' care, and work to find permanent placements for children who cannot safely return home.

Domestic violence does not equal child abuse and neglect, and therefore not all cases of domestic violence must be reported to child protective services. When responding to families affected by domestic violence, it is very important to consider simultaneously the safety of the child and the safety of the adult victim.

State by State information on reporting requirements can be found at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state

**For more information and resources, please contact the Safe Start Center,
a National Resource Center for Children's Exposure to Violence:**

<http://www.safestartcenter.org>

1-800-865-0965

info@safestartcenter.org

Additional Resources

Baker, L.L. and Jaffee, P.G. (2003). *Youth Exposed to Domestic Violence: A Handbook for the Juvenile Justice System to Enhance Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Youth from Violent Homes*. Ontario, Canada: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System.

National Traumatic Stress Network (2008). *Treatment for Youth with Traumatic Stress and Substance Abuse Problems —Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/satoolkit_4.pdf

Whitman, J. (2007). *Reaching and Serving Teen Victims: A Practical Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Victims of Crime and the National Crime Prevention Council. <http://www.ncpc.org/resources/files/pdf/violent-crime/teen%20victims.pdf>