

Trauma-Informed Strategies for Partnering with TANF Families

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Ensure concrete needs are met

- Providing economic assistance to families is one of the most effective ways to address the negative effects of trauma. It reduces family stress and prevents further trauma related to living in extreme poverty.
- Take time to understand families' needs, the supports they would like to receive, and barriers to accessing support.
- Think big – beyond your own programming. Establish a list of emergency resources that staff can easily reference when they need to connect families to resources, including other types of support (e.g., free tax preparations services to receive the earned income tax credit, housing and child care subsidies, unemployment offices) and community resources (e.g., health and emergency services, food banks, shelters, mental health teams).

Ensure physical and emotional safety of the environment

- Try to keep your interactions with families calm and strengths-based to promote psychological safety.
- During COVID-19, ensuring safety also means wearing masks, social distancing, and following other public health guidance so families don't have to worry about getting sick.
- Ensure there are spaces and materials that help children and youth feel welcome and safe (e.g., paper and crayons, a quiet area, child size chair and table).

Build Trust and Transparency

- Communicate that distress during challenging times is understandable and respond to families with patience and compassion, including when parents or children engage in challenging behaviors that are likely symptoms of their exposure to adversity and trauma.
- Explain ahead of time how your work with the family will go and follow through with any plans you make with a family. Unpredictability is especially difficult for people who have experienced trauma because their stress response systems are primed to respond strongly to unexpected

changes in routines. Similarly, children need predictability and an age-appropriate description of what will be happening.

Be collaborative

- Approach families as partners rather than presenting yourself as the “expert.” When traumatized individuals feel disempowered, it also heightens their traumatic stress reactions. So, ensuring that you partner with families as equals enhances families’ sense of empowerment and self-worth.

Emphasize family empowerment, voice, and choice

- Focus on families’ strengths and protective factors that can help promote family resilience by identifying and calling attention to them during conversations with families.
- Both the organization and its staff can help by communicating to families’ that their voice matters, that they have a choice in what happens to them, and that they can recover from hardship—in other words, there’s hope despite the hardships they are experiencing.

Respect and be responsive to cultural, historical, and gender issues

- Stereotypes and biases about people who are poor, use welfare, or experience trauma can re-traumatize children and families and are critical to avoid—even positive stereotypes.
- It is also important to tailor services to all gender identities (not just male/female), to offer services in families’ preferred language, and to support the use of cultural traditions and norms to manage trauma and poverty.

Self-care is also critical!

- The well-being of children and families depends heavily on the well-being of their parents, caregivers, and others they interact with. We all can help improve their odds of resilience by promoting the critical importance of self-care and by practicing it ourselves.
- Staff need frequent opportunities for self-care (e.g., short breaks, quiet areas, opportunities to socialize) during the workday to avoid burnout and secondary traumatic stress staff may experience as a result of working with traumatized families.
- Even small acts make a big difference—a short walk, mindfulness exercises, talking with a friend, or just finding a quiet space can replenish adults’ well of resources so they are able to relate to families in trauma-informed ways. And we can encourage parents to engage in self-care as well, explaining its importance to well-being, healthy parenting, and resilience to trauma and adversity.