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Best Practices for Addressing Community Violence

Violence can be prevented and there are things we can do to improve the lives of those who have to deal with its effects. Here, we list important strategies that work for addressing violence, tell you about why they are important, and give you some examples about what you can do to use each strategy.

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<th>Why this is important</th>
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| **#1** Know the signs... Be supportive | Experiencing violence and trauma can bring on long term problems with mental and physical health, affect people’s relationships, schoolwork and jobs. They are also at greater risk of being a victim of violence again or a perpetrator of more violence in the future. It is important to know the signs that tell us that someone is struggling and understand traumatic stress. There are great tools that have been developed to find out how much youth and families have been affected. Also, there are great treatment programs that have shown that youth and families affected by violence and trauma can feel better and rise above their difficulties. | • Knowing the signs when people are struggling after experiencing community violence (called traumatic stress) and encouraging them to get help.  
• Using screening tools or other ways to find out about youth and families affected by community violence  
• Helping youth and families connect with supportive help and services when they have been affected by community violence  
• For therapists: Providing a clinical evaluation of youth affected by violence to identify the presence of traumatic stress symptoms and other emotional, behavioral or social difficulties  
• For therapists: Providing trauma informed clinical interventions for youth affected by community violence |
| **#2** A sense of trust | Children and adolescents who are well cared for and have a good relationship with their parents or other people in their lives have a better chance to grow up safe and healthy. They are also less likely to be victims of maltreatment, or have problems because of aggressive behavior. **For this reason, helping an adult to be the best possible caretaker to children is very important. Parenting classes can help caretakers know what to expect as they’re raising a toddler, a child, and an adolescent. These classes can also teach positive and effective ways to have children behave the way they want them to, and ways to have less conflict and better communication.** | • Offering a parenting class or parent support group where parents learn skills for raising children, get more knowledge about child development, and/or are encouraged to use positive child management strategies.  
• Working with youth, parents or caregivers to improve the relationship between caregivers and their children  
• Connecting parents or caregivers to resources where they could get more support or learn skills to develop better relationships with their children or improve their parenting skills.  
• Becoming a mentor - be that trusted adult  
• Helping youth connect with mentors or other supportive adults  
• Sharing information (like a fact sheet or a training) talking about the importance of helping parents, caregivers, and mentors have better connections and relationships with youth. Now that you know – tell others. |
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| **#3**  | **A sense of mastery** | - Providing programs for youth that support the development of like skills, such as sports, arts, music, leadership, academic enrichment (help with doing better at school), and vocational assistance (help with skills for getting a job). Be a sports coach, teach a child how to do something you enjoy (car repair, cooking).  
- Connecting youth to any of these programs. For example: suggest that a youth join a band or give them art materials.  
- Sharing information (like a fact sheet or a training) talking about the importance of developing life skills among youth. | |
|          | Everyone plays a role in keeping a community safe, but no one person, organization, or system can make a difference without support. Efforts to having safer communities include having monitored and safe areas to go to, having a plan for what to do when violence happens, and taking steps to improve communities so that they have less chances of experiencing violence. | - Providing or ensuring monitoring of recreational areas for youth and families. This could include providing safe havens for children on high-risk routes to/from school or providing after school programs to ensure more adult supervision once the school day is over.  
- Participate in efforts to assist youth and families find places they feel safe and brainstorm strategies for staying out of harm’s way.  
- Reporting and responding to community violence in a way that considers the needs of victims of community violence. This includes participating in community policing programs where victims are connected to services or sharing with youth and families numbers to call when violence occurs.  
- Talking with gang involved or at risk youth directly to prevent retaliation following a gang related shooting or another act of violence.  
- Advocating for laws or enforcement of laws that promote safety in the community. This includes gun control and gun safety laws and controlling the number of alcohol establishments available in a community.  
- Working towards reducing youth access to guns, alcohol or drugs. This includes efforts in your own home and community or with youth and families that you may come in contact with.  
- Helping to bring businesses, community members and organizations together to make changes that lead to a safer and healthier community.  
- Sharing information (like a fact sheet or a training) talking about the importance of promoting a safe environment in the community? |
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| #5 Changing the message | The rules or expectations of behavior (cultural norms) in our society can sometimes encourage violence. Aggressive behavior among young people and adults can easily influence others. Sometimes having the wrong impression about other people’s intentions can lead to violence. Seeing a lot of violence in the media can make people more accepting of violence. Laws that make violent behavior an offence send the message that violence is not acceptable. In the same way, to change these cultural norms or expectations, it is important to change the pattern of messages that support violence. | • Sending the message to others about the importance of mutual respect and encouraging the use of conflict resolution skills that do not lead to aggression or violence. This could be in conversation with others, during your work with youth and families, with fact sheets or through trainings  
• Organize youth and or caregiver discussions on attitudes towards community violence, aggressive and violent behaviors, weapons and gangs  
• Providing programs in which adults or youth serve as positive role models for showing mutual respect and using good problem solving skills  
• Participating in efforts to reduce violent content of movies, television, video games, and internet sites available to children, or efforts to reduce how much youth are exposed to this media. |
Understanding the Effects of Trauma in Children and Adolescents

Types of traumatic events

- Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Neglect (failure to provide for a child’s basic physical, medical, educational, and emotional needs)
- Interpersonal violence or victimization (e.g., assault, rape)
- Community violence (e.g., gang violence, riots, school shootings)
- Natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, floods, tornadoes)
- Terrorism
- Traumatic loss or grief (e.g., murder of a parent or sibling, death of a parent in battle)
- Medical trauma (e.g., severe injury, life-threatening illness)
- Accidents

Defining trauma

Traumatic events cause great anxiety or distress and include experiencing, witnessing, or being confronted with physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, or another event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury to oneself or someone else. Responses to trauma exposure most often include intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

The body’s response to threat and danger

In the face of a possibly dangerous or threatening situation, the body’s natural response is to try to assess how serious the danger is and respond as quickly as possible. This includes having a strong emotional and physical reaction in efforts to protect ourselves from potential harm.

During situations of threat, our body’s alarm response is activated. This alarm response allows us to respond better in the face of danger, and our body starts working in “survival mode”. This response is sometimes called ‘fight or flight’ reaction because its purpose is to help us physically defend ourselves or get away. When the fight or flight reaction is activated, our experiences may include...

- Heart pounding
- Palpitations
- Fast pulse
- Nausea
- Knot in stomach
- Dry mouth and throat
- Difficulty swallowing
- Sweating
- Clammy feeling
- Cold hands
- Pale face and skin
- Blurred vision
- Light seems brighter
- Feeling detached from self or surroundings
- Feeling frozen or immobile
- Feeling spaced out or in another world

Mental response

In times of threat and danger, the usual mental mechanisms (or procedures) that help us make everyday decisions are temporarily shut down. We can make more primitive responses and take quick action rather than to think carefully about the situation at hand. We are operating in **SURVIVAL** mode.
Trauma reminders

The body’s **alarm reaction** can be triggered by situations that remind us of the trauma, even if we are no longer in a truly dangerous or threatening situation. These **trauma reminders** or **triggers** might include situations that have something in common with the traumatic event, but they could also be thoughts or memories about what happened. Even when we are no longer in danger, our body’s alarm response could become activated as if we were experiencing the trauma all over again.

What is child traumatic stress?

Traumatic stress in childhood involves **physical and emotional responses** to exposure to extreme threat, injury or death. Traumatic events overwhelm a child’s capacity to cope and elicit feelings of terror, powerlessness, and out-of-control physiological arousal. A child’s response to a traumatic event may have a profound effect on his/her perception of self, the world, and the future.

Traumatic events may affect children’s ability to trust others, sense of personal safety, and effectiveness in navigating life changes

**Effects of trauma exposure on children**

Trauma exposure can impact all aspects of children’s lives.

- **Attachment.** Traumatized children feel that the world is uncertain and unpredictable. They can become socially isolated and have difficulty relating to and empathizing with others or understanding and connecting with the feelings of others.

- **Biology.** Traumatized children may experience problems with movement and sensation, including hypersensitivity to physical contact and insensitivity to pain. They may exhibit unexplained **physical symptoms and increased medical problems**.

- **Mood regulation.** Children exposed to trauma can have difficulty regulating their emotions, as well as difficulty knowing and describing their feelings and internal states.

- **Dissociation.** Some traumatized children experience a feeling of detachment or depersonalization, as if they are “observing” something happening to them that is unreal.

- **Behavioral control.** Traumatized children can show poor impulse control, self-destructive or risk-taking behavior, and aggression towards others.

- **Cognition.** Traumatized children can have problems focusing on and completing tasks, or planning for and anticipating future events. Some exhibit learning difficulties and problems with language development.

- **Self-concept.** Traumatized children frequently suffer from disturbed body image, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt.

**Long term effects**

In the absence of more positive coping strategies, children who have experienced trauma may engage in high-risk or destructive coping behaviors. These behaviors place them at risk for a range of serious mental and physical health problems, including:

- Alcoholism & drug abuse
- Depression
- Suicide attempts
- Sexually transmitted diseases (due to high risk activity with multiple partners)
- Heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
After experiencing a traumatic event, people may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which includes three general types of problems:

- **Re-Experiencing** the traumatic event through intrusive thoughts or dreams of the event, or intense psychological distress when exposed to reminders of the event.
- **Avoidance** of thoughts, feelings, images, or locations that remind the adolescent of or are associated with the traumatic event.
- **Increased arousal** such as hyper-vigilance, irritability, exaggerated startle response, and sleeping difficulties.

What can you do to help a traumatized child?

- **Involve those who can help.** Tell administrative or counseling staff about your concerns for the child and follow guidelines within your work setting to connect youth with needed services and support.
- **Be responsive to child’s requests for help or information.** Let the child know you can be there to talk. Be an active listener, acknowledge and accept the child’s feelings, and help validate and normalize struggles.
- **Provide a supportive environment.** Reduce a child’s sense of chaos and loss of control by returning to scheduled and predictable routines. Provide reassurance when changes are needed.
- **Help program staff understand how to best support traumatized youth.** Professionals working with children may need help understanding behavioral and emotional changes that children experience after trauma.
- **Make referrals.** Consider referral to a mental health professional. Children with trauma related emotional problems will benefit from learning coping skills and processing what happened. If possible, become familiar with clinicians who have experience working with traumatized youth.

Mental health treatment usually involves:

- **Stability and safety:** Helping children and caregivers restore a safe environment and a sense of safety, involving primary caregivers in the healing process if needed, helping parents and children return to normal routines, and connecting caregivers to resources to address their needs.
- **Understanding:** Education about the impact of trauma. Explaining the trauma and answering questions in an honest but simple and age-appropriate manner. An opportunity to talk about and make sense of the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment.
- **Coping:** Teaching skills to deal with strong emotional reactions. Helping the child verbalize feelings rather than engage in problem behavior.
Helping Youth Impacted by Violence

How can exposure to violence in the community affect children?

Children living in communities affected by violence often experience emotional problems, including anxiety, depression, as well as behavioral problems, such as hostility and aggression. Youth may also develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may include feeling as if the traumatic event is happening again (nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive thoughts), being easily startled or jumpy, and avoiding thoughts, feelings, images or places that remind them of what happened. Children affected by violence and trauma sometimes show reckless and risk-taking behavior, such as a “living for today and not tomorrow” attitude, leading them to make poor choices. They may also experience academic underachievement and school failure. In the long term, these youth are at greater risk of engaging in delinquency, future acts of violence, and developing substance abuse problems.

Community violence also has a considerable impact on families. Most families are often already experiencing financial strain and living in communities with increased crime and few resources. Parents’ own psychological and emotional problems resulting from exposure to violence in their own past or current situation may impact their ability to provide consistent parenting and support to their children. In efforts to maintain their families safe, community residents often become isolated from other people (e.g., trying to staying indoors and away from public places, activities, etc.).

What are signs that a child is experiencing problems because of violence and trauma?

Signs of traumatic stress may first emerge as physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches. Children may have a hard time controlling emotions or act impulsively. They may become easily startled by loud or sudden noises (bells, sirens, doors slamming), changes in lighting, sudden movements or physical contact. Children may begin to have strong reactions when reminded of the traumatic event. Reactions may include problems during transition or change, mistaking others’ intentions, and becoming agitated, upset, angry, aggressive, or self-conscious.

How can you help a child affected by violence and trauma?

Knowing how violence and trauma affect children will prepare you to identify children who are struggling. Children will need encouragement, support, and the opportunity to have a safe place to talk about what happened. Not all children cope and respond in the same way and it is important to be flexible and recognize that they may not be ready to talk right away. After a violent event, children will need help from adults around them to regain a sense of safety and “normalcy” by returning to their usual routines as soon as possible. Because of the turmoil and chaos that may result from community violence, children will need assistance regaining a sense of control and therefore providing them with choices will be important. Traumatized youth will need simple responses to questions about what happened, and help clarifying any misconceptions about the event, including feelings of guilt,
uncertainty, and mistrust. Adults working with traumatized youth should be sensitive to cues in the environment that may remind them of the event, and provide them with support and understanding.

How can we prevent development of more problems?

*Relationships with caregivers and other adults.* Children and adolescents who are well cared for and have a good relationship with their parents or other people in their lives have a better chance to grow up safe and healthy. They are also less likely to be victims of abuse, or have problems because of aggressive behavior. Mentoring opportunities that help connect youth with supportive adults can provide additional ways to develop strong relationships with caring adults.

*Development of life skills.* When children and adolescents learn skills in sports, arts, music, leadership, academics and vocational programs, they are better able to handle themselves in the world and deal with the challenges of everyday life. They are more protected against aggression, have better social skills, and they do better at school and later in their jobs.

*Referring youth for additional services*

It is normal to have negative reactions after experiencing traumatic events such as witnessing violence in the community. Some children may have more severe and long lasting problems. Mental health professionals can provide evaluations to identify youth in need of treatment. Interventions for traumatized youth usually involve helping youth understand and manage responses to traumatic experiences as well as their reactions to ongoing reminders of the negative event. In addition, other types of professionals (e.g., school teachers, etc.) and community “healers” (e.g., faith-based leaders) can either support the work of the mental health and other professionals or sometimes take the lead in identifying and addressing these traumatic problems until more formal services are available or needed.

*Taking care of yourself*

Individuals who work with traumatized youth may begin to experience emotional problems because of “compassion fatigue” or “secondary traumatic stress”. Youth workers who have survived personal traumas have can have a better understanding to the experiences of children, but they may also tend to overextend themselves or experience distress when being constantly reminded of their own past negative experiences. In order to take good care of themselves, youth workers should 1) be aware of their own needs, limits, emotions, and resources; 2) maintain a balance between work, play, and rest; 3) maintain connections to themselves, to loved ones, to colleagues, and to the larger community; and 4) seek support and assistance when needed.
Managing Personal and Professional Stress

Working with trauma survivors reminds us of our own vulnerability to traumatic events, the dangerousness of the world we live in, and the way in which the things that matter to us (e.g., our loved ones, our health, our sense of meaning) can be suddenly affected. This is why providers, parents, and other types of “helpers” sometimes develop secondary traumatic stress. Adults working with youth may be confronted with situations involving danger, threats, or violence. They may also strongly empathize with youths’ experiences and therefore it is common for them to develop feelings of helplessness, anger, and fear. Helpers who are providers or parents—especially those who have their own histories and experiences with childhood trauma—may be at particular risk for experiencing such reactions.

Professional and personal stress

Helpers should take care not to ignore their own stress and emotional experiences in working with trauma survivors. When the work is with children who have experienced interpersonal traumas, the pain for the helper is deeper and another level of vulnerability is touched. This can lead to increased emotional distress or the development of emotional numbing or feeling disconnected from others. Helpers may have also experienced personal traumas, and working with youth with similar struggles is naturally going to bring up upsetting feelings. As a result of their experiences, helpers who are also survivors bring a unique understanding to their work. However, they can also become overwhelmed or over-extended (often without realizing it), and it is important to make sure that adequate support is available.

Recognizing signs of secondary traumatic stress

Secondary traumatic stress can shows up as strong reactions of grief, rage, and outrage, which grow as helpers repeatedly hear about and see other people’s pain and loss. This secondary traumatic stress is also evident in emotional numbing and the desire not to know specific details in the lives of youth affected by trauma.

Other signs include:

- Feeling off balance
- Being easily flooded by negative feelings and having to limit exposure to violence (e.g., by avoiding TV or movies)
- Being easily moved to tears
- Feelings of “burn-out”
- Feelings of despair and hopelessness
- Reduced productivity
Managing personal and professional stress: what helpers can do:

- Get support and help from others.
- Consider therapy to address personal trauma’s that may be activated by working with affected youth.
- Practice stress management through meditation, prayer, conscious relaxation, deep breathing, and exercise.
- Develop a written plan focused on work-life balance.
- Participate in community-building activities and system change.
- Work together with youth, our co-workers, and communities in order to truly make a difference and change feelings of isolation.
- Attend to your health: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual
- Eat healthily
- Exercise
- Take mini-vacations
- Practice receiving from others
- Spend time with important people in your life
- Identify comforting activities
- Take time to eat lunch and chat with co-workers
- Work with administrators to ensure a supportive work environment

Self-care and coping

Three essential tools in coping with secondary traumatic stress are awareness, balance, and connection.

- **Awareness**: Being attuned to and aware of your own needs, limits, emotions, and resources.
- **Balance**: Maintaining balance among work, play, and rest.
- **Connection**: Connections to oneself, to loved ones, to colleagues, and to the larger community.

*In remembering to help ourselves, we can better help others!*
You play an important role in addressing community violence, but you can have more influence if you connect with other people.

1. **Trauma Survivors**: Community residents (youth and caregivers) who have been affected by violence know the needs in the community and can have a powerful voice.

2. **Clinicians**: Clinical professionals and therapists, mental health and substance abuse counselors provide treatment to help youth and families overcome the effects of violence and trauma.

3. **Supportive adults**: Non-clinical professionals who work directly with youth, including youth workers, school personnel, advocates, mentors, faith-based representatives play a key role in helping youth develop skills, leadership, and confidence to protect them from the negative impact of possible experiences of violence in the community. They can help identify youth at risk and connect them to services, and they have the potential to develop supportive and caring relationships that are so needed among children and adolescents.

4. **Law enforcement and juvenile justice professionals** play an important role in ensuring and maintaining community safety. They can help identify youth at risk and connect them to services, and they have the potential to develop supportive and caring relationships that are so needed among children and adolescents.

**Here are some examples of how you can connect with others to address community violence:**

- Know what programs, services and resources are available in your community so that you can help connect youth with a program that might help them. Is there a park district for safe activities? Is there a counseling office? Where can someone go for help with their homework or to find a job?
- Develop partnerships within your community to use best practices to address community violence
- Participate in events in your community that send messages about the importance of addressing violence (this could include peace marches in your neighborhood)
- Become a member of an advisory board for a program that addresses violence
- If you work in an organization that addresses violence, make sure to get feedback and opinions from members of your community affected by violence and people working in other sectors of the community to make sure that their points of view are included.
For more information, please visit:

Urban Youth Trauma Center
http://www.psych.uic.edu/ijr-programs/urban-youth-trauma-center
https://www.facebook.com/UrbanYouthTraumaCenter

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Homepage: www.nctsn.org