

MINNESOTA FAMILY SUPPORT & RECOVERY COUNCIL  
2017 ANNUAL CONFERENCE



# Trauma and the Child Support Client

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## 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

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Remember where it all begins



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## Meet Cory

Has six minor children with 3 different partners  
Owes over \$50,000 arrears  
Multiple contempt orders  
Sporadic contact with child support offices

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### Criminal History

- 1<sup>st</sup> 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




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### Cory's childhood

- Father was married to someone else- 1<sup>st</sup> 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
- 1<sup>st</sup> use of alcohol at 13 years old, weekly use to intoxication




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



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### 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



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### 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



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## 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

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



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



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**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




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**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.


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**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?




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## 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

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## Physical Space



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

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## 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.

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## 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?

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## Incarceration 101



- DOLR worklist- means update ncdd/de, refer or review for modification.
- 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

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## QUESTIONS




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