

Understanding Trauma – Informed Practice Podcast
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Kelly Meehleib: Welcome to the Judicial Council Center for Families, Children & the Courts podcast series on juvenile law. We are fortunate to have with us today Dr. Isaiah Pickens, licensed clinical psychologist and Assistant Director of the Service Systems Program at the UCLA-Duke National Center for Child Traumatic Stress the coordinating site of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Thank you so much for joining us today Dr. Pickens.

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Really glad to be here.

Kelly Meehleib: So, I first wanted to start with the basics, what is trauma-informed practice?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yes, so trauma-informed practice is really an organization considering trauma and how it's impacted its clients, its staff, and even the organizational policies. And really being mindful of that and understanding the impact that it's had on how people navigate their system. SAMHSA the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration outlines the four R's in terms of a trauma-informed organization. First is Realizing the widespread impact of trauma. Then, it's Recognizing the impact trauma has had. Which is different than realizing in the sense that it is focusing on the screening tools you have, the organizational assessments you have, the more formalized tools you have to identify trauma. And then it's Responding to trauma. So, this is having trauma-informed or trauma-specific types of interventions that really focus on helping people recover and deal with trauma. And then finally it is Resisting re-traumatization, which is truly one of the most important pieces for organizations to understand because sometimes we can unintentionally cause harm to people who've experienced trauma if we're not aware of what trauma-informed practices are.

Kelly Meehleib: And how did you become interested in trauma-informed practice?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: For me, the journey into trauma-informed practice began with my work at Rikers Island. I used to run groups for young people around mindfulness-based practices, cognitive behavioral practices. And what I learned was that so many of the young people who were involved with the juvenile justice system also were victims of traumatic stress life events and experiences. In fact, research shows that about 90% of youth involved the justice system have experienced some kind of trauma. And so, I felt like this could be one of the best pathways to really create healing and rehabilitation for young people.

Kelly Meehleib: And why is trauma-informed practice important?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Trauma-informed practice is important because it probably is one of the most effective and practical ways that we can look at injury, in terms of psychological injury that's happened to someone, and be able to manage it. Unlike disorders like conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder which we call externalizing behavior disorders, they deal with looking at this behavior as you know this is just the behavior the person is doing and you can

give them skills to be able to better manage it, trauma really gets at the root of why that behavior is there in the first place and it helps you understand that the person is trying to find a way to survive and manage life because their previous life experiences have potentially told them that the world is dangerous. And, if you can get at that trauma that you can better address the heart of the issue.

Kelly Meehleib: So, what are the benefits of trauma-informed practice?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Some of the major benefits that we see right out the gate is there is a reduction in PTSD type of symptoms and these PTSD symptoms are often some of the same symptoms that can get young people involved the justice system in the first place. So, hyper arousal and aggressive behavior, avoidance that might involve substance use, dealing with dissociation, which is having almost a mental separation from situations. When you're able to reduce the impact of these symptoms, you're actually able to help young people learn more healthy and effective ways to navigate their world to deal with the justice system, to engage in school, to do all these things that will keep them out of the justice system.

Kelly Meehleib: What's the difference between trauma-informed practice and trauma-informed organization?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: So, trauma-informed practices are what trauma-informed organizations are comprised of. These are the specific practices such as screenings, such as interventions, such as the way that you train staff to be able to integrate with their clients and with their co-workers. It is looking at secondary traumatic stress, which is that indirect impact of trauma on the staff. And so, an organization that is trauma-informed has these practices in addition to policies that allow them to do this on a sustained basis.

Kelly Meehleib: Could you give us some examples of trauma-informed practice?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yes, so trauma-informed practice can show up in many different ways. I worked with a judge, Judge Howard out in Ohio, and part of what we worked with him on was first doing a trauma-informed organizational assessment. So organizational assessments are, I would say, one of the first steps that you want to have in a trauma-informed organization because you want to know where the practices you already do align or diverge from trauma-informed practices. So, you can build on your strengths and also fill in your gaps.

One of the things that he realized is that there were gaps in their screening process. Sometimes youth were screened in certain settings and then that information wasn't transferred to other settings. And so, one of the things his court did was one they created a universal screening procedure where all youth who were coming through the system were screened in some way for trauma so that there can be a red flag put up around kids who might need those services.

And then, the other thing he realized is that when they got these services they actually weren't using it because they didn't know the people they were going to. So, what he did is created a warm referral system where it was pretty much the people who were referring had to directly

kind of navigate the young person to their next treatment provider to make sure that they are connected.

Kelly Meehleib: And do you have some other examples of how you worked with an organization to get them to become trauma-informed?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Absolutely. One of the, I think, most important foundational pieces is also professional development. So, there's a professional development tool called Think Trauma which is an 8 to 16-hour curriculum for organizations to train their staff on trauma-informed practices. I've provided this training in a number of settings and part of what it has sparked is, one, organizations to think about how trauma-informed practices align with other practices they're already putting in place like PREA, restorative justice, some of these really important pieces. And really to a degree, foundationally change how they're approaching some of these practices.

So, for instance, just to give a practical example, you know, you might have an organization that the way that they do shower time is they just say “kids it's time to shower time” or “youth it's time to do shower time” in their facility. And what we have encouraged them to do is, one, identify if this can be a trigger for some kids and so maybe changing the timing so that all kids aren't going at the same time. You're giving space and you're also having policies that allow staff to do this without them being reprimanded. Because what can happen, sometimes, is we could recommend trauma-informed practices for organizations and then they, the staff on the ground, put it in place and then the leadership who brought us in to help them say this is against our policies and it creates friction within the actual organization. And so, really thinking about this holistically and from a systemic perspective it's been really important.

Kelly Meehleib: As professionals working with children and families who have experienced trauma, how can we better manage our own experience in self-care as to not affect our work with our clients?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yeah, first it's “wake up and know it impacts us.” We are humans we're not immune to hearing these really tragic stories. I mean the work that we do we're not immune to feeling the stress of our outside life and how it impacts our work life and vice versa.

So, I think one of the first steps is creating awareness. And you can create awareness in a lot of ways. One, you can create into your role calls, your team meetings, your interdisciplinary team meetings, moments for check-in that focus on using reflective practices. So, when we talk about reflective practices and reflective supervision it's really being able to give people to space in a non-judgmental way to express their emotional reactions to things that are happening around them within the workplace.

And I think the other piece you can do is really be more intentional around assessment. So, one of the assessments that is common in a lot of workplace settings is the Professional Quality of Life Scale which individuals can take. There's also the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale that is another individual assessment. There's a secondary traumatic stress organizational assessment. So, there's a lot of tools out there to help people begin to assess. And I think that gives you the

information and data to start working from so that you can start adjusting aspects of your workplace environment to address these issues.

Kelly Meehleib: And is there anything else that we can use to help us identify when we need self-care aside from those things?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yeah, I mean some practical things that you want to look out for is if you feel you don't have the desire to take on any extra work, you get really easily annoyed or frustrated. If there's a lot of distrust in the organization, if the people on the ground don't trust the supervisors, and the supervisors don't trust the judge, with the administrators. That's a huge sign that, you know, there is a lot of secondary traumatic stress. And then, on the flip side, I think is important for us to know that we're not just trying to avoid stress, we're trying to work toward wellness.

And so, some of the things you would expect to see if an organization is addressing these issues is that people will have each other's back and that they feel comfortable in that setting. And they also have flexibility and their ability to deal with tasks. And just real quick, what I mean by that is, what we see in a lot of organizations, unfortunately, is if you're really good at what you do you get punished for it because you get more work. And so, when organizations are able to say "look, I see you have a lot, take it off your plate so that you don't get burned out," give you something else to do, and go back and forth, that's another sign of a healthy organization.

Kelly Meehleib: And lastly, can you share any tips for day to day self-care that we should practice?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yeah, so there's a technique called WTF and it's not what you think.

[laughter]

It's pretty close, but it stands for Walk Talk Flush. And this is one of the really quick techniques that we train people. You can have meetings walking sometimes, find a private place doing that physical activity can really start to shift your body and where it's at in terms of how it's managing stress. Talk, you know, connecting with other people about different issues that you're talking about can be really important. And then Flush, actually getting fluids or crying or, you know, really doing something that allows you to purge yourself in that moment can be really huge. And so, you can actually find on our website, www.nctsn.org, a number of really quick 2-minute, 10-minute, 30-minute, actions that you can take and experiences you can have to really promote your own health and wellness.

Kelly Meehleib: Well, Dr. Pickens, thank you so much for spending time to talk with us today about trauma-informed practice. Could you give our listeners again the website where they can get more information?

Dr. Isaiah Pickens: Yes, it was great to be here. The website is www.nctsn.org and if you want to get in contact with me or my company you can contact us at info@iopeningenterprises.com and that's iOpening Enterprises with the "i".

Kelly Meehleib: Thank you so much.

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