



Service-Level Responses to Developmental Trauma for Adopted Children and Families in Ontario: Key Informant Perspective II

Danielle Giokas, Isayah Alman, Joanne Filippelli, & Barbara Fallon
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Introduction

This Information Sheet explores the perspective of child welfare workers and allied professionals on developmental trauma in the child welfare sector in Ontario. These findings are based on qualitative interviews conducted with those who have worked within and alongside the child welfare sector. This study is a community-based research partnership between the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and the Adoption Council of Ontario. Funding for this study was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Partnership Engage Grant.

Trauma has been known to negatively impact development, especially for children and youth involved in the child welfare system. The goal of this study is to strengthen the Ontario child welfare sector's capacity to identify and respond to the developmental trauma needs of adopted children and youth. The following statements describe an understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the child welfare system and allied sectors in identifying, assessing, responding to, and mobilizing resources to address the developmental needs of adopted children and their families. This Information Sheet focuses on the key informant perspectives regarding the service-level response to developmental trauma of children and families involved with the child welfare sector.

Findings

Key informants expressed inconsistent service-level knowledge and understanding of developmental trauma in the child welfare sector. According to a respondent, "workers in child protection have little to no information about the impacts of trauma" and often encounter "very complex situations with very limited training [and] limited support." This has resulted in "less... sensitivity around how things are worded or presented to caregivers" and has made it "more difficult to provide seamless care for families." Respondents noted that some child welfare workers may perceive developmental trauma in children and families as "dysfunctional... and make suggestions that aren't going to be helpful [or that] sometimes can be hurtful." According to one respondent, "our very involvement with a family is a source of toxic stress for them and then we judge them based on how they respond to us."

Respondents indicated a “growing awareness of the effects of trauma and what some of those needs might be” amongst child welfare workers. However, there remains a “lack of resources... combined with [a lack of] education or misinformation at times”, and the response to developmental trauma remains “inconsistent” and “not well understood” at the service level. Respondents expressed the need for a “universal language” of developmental trauma to ensure that “everyone is on the same page... have the same information, same knowledge... same language [and] the same values” when working with children and families. Accordingly, the lack of a universal understanding of developmental trauma has made it “much more challenging” for child welfare workers to “understand our kids and understand where they’re coming from.”

Key informants described inconsistent “models of practice” across the child welfare sector that have been used to address developmental trauma. One respondent indicated “a very huge inconsistency... [because] agencies around the province are doing very different things” to support the developmental trauma needs of children and families. Respondents referenced multiple approaches including “Signs of Safety”, the “Sanctuary Model”, and “Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy.” The use of widely different “models of practice” has led to a “mismatch... in how the system operates and how [child welfare workers]... deliver service.” Child welfare workers “[want] to do the right thing” for children and families, but are limited by a “reactive system” that “doesn’t address the long term needs of the child.”

Methodology

Purposive snowball sampling was used to obtain a total sample of seven key informants interviewed for this study. Respondents were provided a brief literature review on developmental trauma in the child welfare sector and participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams. The study was conducted from April to September in 2021. Researchers used an interview guide to prompt discussions on the following domains: (1) the state of the research (applicability, relevancy) with respect to their work in supporting adopted children and families who have had involvement with the child welfare system; (2) identifying needs and opportunities to address developmental trauma and promote well-being of adopted children and families within child welfare and across sectors and services; (3) gaps in supports and service delivery within child welfare and across sectors; (4) considerations and recommendations for promoting trauma-informed practice, policy and research for the child welfare system and those that work with adopted children and families. The interview guide included questions regarding the service-level response to developmental trauma in the child welfare sector. Key informant interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded into NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Members of the research team discussed and re-coded informant responses until a saturation of core themes emerged.

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