



Organization-Level Responses to Developmental Trauma for Adopted Children and Families in Ontario: Key Informant Perspectives III

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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 organization-level responses to the developmental trauma needs of children and families who have been involved with the child welfare sector.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interviews with key informants relating to the organizational-level responses to developmental trauma in the child welfare sector. The following themes were identified: moving beyond practices of safety, the importance of leadership support, the creation of an organizational culture of safety, and the availability of appropriate supports.

Moving Beyond Safety

Several respondents emphasized the need to move beyond organizational practices centered around "compliance and accountability" when addressing developmental trauma in child welfare

involved children and families. One respondent described the need to “move beyond safety” by going “beyond just the behavioural needs and move towards more of a trauma-informed approach... to create refined interventions for what children need at particular stages of their development.” As described by another respondent, child welfare organizations would benefit from a better understanding of “who this child is...how their functioning has been impacted, [and] how their development has been impacted [by trauma].”

Leadership Support

Key informants recognized “leadership support” as essential to the endorsement of trauma-informed practices at all levels of an organization. Several respondents recognized the need for key “leadership that really emphasizes [and] understands the physiology of trauma... and who can work with families that have been traumatized intergenerationally.” Respondents noted that “frontline workers... are limited in how much change they can actually act in their agency” when lacking support from their supervisors and key decision-makers. One respondent described the importance of key-decision makers “who become champions... who are the implementers, who have a model they can change... [and] the mindset to make it successful.”

Organizational Culture of Safety

Multiple respondents emphasized the need for child welfare organizations to create a trauma-informed “culture of safety” throughout all levels of the organization. Respondents identified that this organizational culture would require a “parallel process” where leaders, supervisors, and decision-makers can have “an open dialogue and discussion” about developmental trauma. Respondents called for more “education... support and supervision, being empathic and creating a safe environment” for staff who are exposed to risk of “vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, and burnout.” According to one respondent, “how we treat our staff is how they’re going to treat our service recipient.” As respondents described, it will be important to create “a culture that is safe in the room” and “bridge the gap [in] knowledge” without “diminish[ing] the work that has been done for years.”

Barriers to Implementation: Available and Appropriate Supports

Several key informants stated funding and accessibility as a significant barrier for the implementation of trauma-informed practices within child welfare organizations. A respondent identified that inconsistent funding across the province has led to “difficulties with long term planning” for child welfare organization leaders and decision-makers. One respondent stated that “young people with developmental trauma can't access the type of therapy and intervention they need without access to funding, private benefits, or paying for it through child welfare or through the caregivers.” Another respondent indicated that, “when we're thinking about supporting a young person with developmental trauma, we want them to have a safe person. We want them to have a safe place to go. We want them to have someone who's available to catch them before they are overwhelmed, and that's very challenging without extra support.” These limitations have made it difficult for child welfare organizations to provide early interventions that would address the developmental trauma needs of child welfare involved children and families.

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 organization-level responses 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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