

Trauma and Youth with Autism



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic experiences in childhood, such as witnessing violence in the home, experiencing neglect, or having a family member with a mental illness. ACEs can have lasting effects on future physical and mental health but are often an overlooked health disparity in the autism population (Rigles, 2016).

Youth with autism may have difficulty coping with such experiences. Individuals with autism have a higher rate of internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression, and often struggle with emotional regulation skills, which help facilitate coping with these stressors (Kerns et al., 2015).

Assessment of Trauma in Youth with Autism

It can be challenging to identify trauma in autistic youth. For example, the emotions created by trauma may lead to challenging behaviors, which may be incorrectly attributed to the youth's autism. It is important to recognize and treat trauma because it can negatively impact development, behavior, mental and physical wellbeing, and a youth's sense of safety.

Identifying trauma can also be difficult if a person has complex communication needs. Consider an autistic person's communication needs by adapting assessment materials and practices to include visual supports. Ensure a person has access to alternative or augmentative communication devices they may use to communicate.

Observations and assessment data, including input from those who know the youth well, can help identify signs of trauma. Knowing how a youth typically behaves and recognizing the onset of new behaviors may help determine events that influenced a change.

TF-CBT for Youth with Autism

Treating trauma increases the quality of life of youth with autism and may reduce their need for additional supports and services. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is an evidence-based treatment used to help children and adolescents recover after trauma. An autism-sensitive application of TF-CBT can be an effective treatment for youth with autism who have experienced trauma (Earl et al., 2017).

It's important to adapt TF-CBT to meet the youth's individual needs and learning styles. For example, this may include using visual supports, such as session schedules or social narratives, and increasing caregiver involvement in helping to reinforce skills outside of therapy. It is also important to allow additional time when teaching emotional stages. Be mindful of sensory differences and ways to incorporate sensory experiences into treatment.

Additional resource guides at <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>

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Trauma Informed Approaches

Education

As youth spend much of their time in schools, trauma-informed approaches are crucial to supporting social, emotional, and physical well-being. Trauma-informed approaches in education help create safe, trusting, and healing environments. For more information on Delaware-specific trauma-informed approaches in education, please visit:

<https://www.doe.k12.de.us/Page/4349>

Organizations

Becoming a trauma-informed agency or organization means committing to changing an entire organization's practices, policies, and culture. This ongoing type of change necessitates that all staff in all roles modify their behavior and provide an awareness of trauma's impact on the needs of trauma survivors.

The publication [Delaware Developmental Framework for Trauma-Informed Care](#), describes the purpose of trauma-informed care as well as a framework for a trauma-informed care continuum of implementation. For more information on implementing trauma-informed approaches in organizations, please see the publication linked above.

If you suspect that a youth with autism has experienced trauma, you can support their recovery by:

- Building on natural supports by identifying strengths in the youth and their caregivers;
- Creating a safe environment and fostering trusting relationships; and
- Seeking trauma-informed care training to obtain specialized knowledge and skills.

If you suspect a youth has been abused or neglected, you must report your concerns to the Delaware Division of Family Services electronically at <https://dscyfkids.force.com/ReporterPortal/s/> or by phone at 1-800-292-9582.

References

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