

Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being for Children and Youth Receiving Child Welfare Services

Administration on Children, Youth and Families Information Memorandum issued 4/17/2012

Summary

I. Overview

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) is encouraging states to implement evidence-based practices that will improve the social and emotional well-being of youth in care.

II. Well-Being Framework

ACYF embraces the framework by Lou, Anthony, Stone, Vu, & Austin (2008) that has four basic domains of well-being – cognitive functioning, physical health and development, behavioral/emotional functioning, and social functioning. They have narrowed the focus to social and emotional well-being because they feel this is the greatest area of need and will have the greatest impact.

III. Emerging Evidence on the Impact of Maltreatment

This section summarizes the neurological, traumatic, and behavioral impact of abuse and neglect as well as their impact on relational competence, mental health, and use of psychotropics. It is noted that many children involved with child welfare have a set of complex challenges that cannot be addressed by our current focus on safety and permanency alone. We have to integrate the research on well-being into our system and services.

IV. Requirements and Policy Opportunities

There are two “policy requirements and opportunities” of the Social Security Act where well-being can be impacted:

1. State Plan for Child Welfare Services – states are required to coordinate and collaborate with State Title XIX (Medicaid), pediatricians, health care experts, and experts and recipients of child welfare services to create a plan for oversight and coordination of health care services for children in placement. ACYF points out that the Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act of 2011 requires states to include how they will screen for and treat emotional trauma associated with maltreatment and removal for children in foster care. This Act also requires a description of the protocols in place or planned to oversee and monitor the use of psychotropic meds among children in foster care.
2. CAPTA – In order to receive CAPTA funding, states are required to develop a plan describing how they will support and enhance interagency collaboration among public health agencies, agencies in the child protective service system, and agencies carrying out private community-based programs that impact victims of child abuse or neglect.

V. Current State and County Investments

Currently, states are spending money on interventions “not grounded in the best available evidence,” so ACYF recommends a policy of de-scaling and scaling up. This requires no new allocations, but instead takes dollars from unproven programs and puts them toward proven ones.

VI. Screening and Functional Assessment

Child welfare typically does point-in-time diagnostics, but they push for functional assessments – assessment of multiple aspects of a child’s social-emotional functioning through sets of measures selected based on the needs of the child (not a “one size fits all” assessment). Screening for trauma is an essential element of functional assessment. They recommend functional assessments at the entry point, and then key follow-up periods to generate data to help support (or disprove) services provided.

VII. Effective Interventions

This IM notes three levels where there is an emergence of promising and effective interventions:

1. At the child level related to trauma and behavioral/mental health
2. At the older youth level related to relational health and social and emotional well-being
3. At the caregiver level related to increasing capacity to care for their children

No matter what area the intervention impacts, its success hinges on the involvement of the caregiver and the support the agency provides the caregiver.

VIII. Maximizing Resources to Achieve Better Results

ACYF again suggests states take a look at the services they currently offer and compare them with the current research. Services supported by the research should be well-funded, and services not shown to have any positive impact on the youth in care should be de-funded.

IX. Focusing on Social and Emotional Well-Being

A focus on well-being requires a concerted effort for all to understand the challenges that children who have experienced maltreatment bring with them, including considering how services are structured and delivered at each point along the child's trajectory, and descaling practices that are not improving outcomes while scaling up effective approaches.

X. Strategies for Shifting the System to Promote Social and Emotional Well-Being

The IM suggests strategies to shift the focus to well-being in three main areas:

1. **Services:** implement screening and functional assessments, use evidence-based interventions, and restructure services based on collected data.
2. **Workforce:** build capacity around evidence based practices, train staff to more effectively serve specific populations, train professionals outside of child welfare (Fostering Connections allows use of IV-E dollars to train private agency staff, court personnel, attorneys, gals, casa, prospective relative guardians, and foster/adoptive parents), and engage judges and courts.
3. **System:** inventory current programs to know what can be cut and what programs need added support; and measure outcomes from services provided, rather than just noting what was provided.

XI. Resources

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): <http://www.nctsn.org/>
- SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices: <http://nrepp.samhsa.gov>
- *Interventions for Disruptive Behavior Disorders Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) KIT:* <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Interventions-for-Disruptive-Behavior-Disorders-Evidence-Based-Practices-EBP-KIT/SMA11-4634CD-DVD>
- *Interventions Addressing Child Exposure to Trauma: Part 1-Child Maltreatment:* <http://www.effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/index.cfm/search-for-guides-reviews-and-reports/?pageaction=displayproduct&productid=846#amendments>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>