

Kansas Foster Care Contractor Sees Benefits Of Trauma-Informed Training

By MEG WINGERTER • JUN 21, 2017



KVC Kansas, one of the state's two foster care contractors, worked with a national research group to find out if training foster parents and caseworkers about childhood trauma would result in fewer moves for foster children.

MEG WINGERTER / KANSAS NEWS SERVICE

The foster care system in Kansas has problems, but a national child welfare group sees one area where it could lead the way for other states.

<http://kcur.org/post/kansas-foster-care-contractor-sees-benefits-trauma-informed-training#stream/0>

Tracey Feild, director of the child welfare strategy group at the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), said work on childhood trauma by KVC Kansas, one of the state's two foster care contractors, could be a model for others. The Casey Foundation sponsors the annual Kids Count report and other child-focused research.

KVC partnered with [Child Trends](#), a nonpartisan national research group, to find out if training foster parents and caseworkers about childhood trauma would result in fewer moves for foster children. Childhood trauma includes experiences such as being exposed to violence, experiencing economic hardship or living with parents or guardians who abuse alcohol or drugs, are mentally ill or served time in prison.

KVC and Child Trends found that if adults understood the effects of traumatic events, children were [more likely to stay in one home](#) during their time in foster care. Children working with better-trained adults also were observed to have better behavior.

Editor's note: *Kansas privatized its foster care system in 1997 after a lawsuit revealed widespread problems. Twenty years later, the number of Kansas children in foster care has shot up — topping 7,100 in April — and lawmakers approved the creation of a task force to examine the system. The Kansas News Service investigated problems in the foster care system and possible solutions. This is the fifth story in a series.*

It makes sense that children whose foster parents and caseworkers understand their trauma fare better in the foster care system, Feild said. If parents and caseworkers know the reasons why children are acting out, they can stay calm and work through the issue instead of labeling the child as defiant, she said.

“That’s what you always hear about disruptions: ‘The child’s defiant. He won’t listen to me,’” she said. “Everybody has their own suitcase of reactions. You have to try to keep your suitcase closed and look at what’s going on in the child’s suitcase.”

Saint Francis Community Services, the state’s other contractor, also uses trauma-informed care, spokeswoman Vickee Spicer said.

Kids who experienced multiple traumatic events often struggle to trust adults, control their emotions or even understand their feelings, said Kelly McCauley, associate director of KVC’s [Institute for Health Systems Innovation](#). The institute studies child welfare practices and offers training and consultation.

“We are often serving children who have significant levels of trauma,” she said. “For these kids, just getting through the day can be so much more difficult.”

The conventional wisdom was that foster children would get better once they were placed in a safe environment, but more recent research suggests that’s not always the case, McCauley said. Trauma can [affect brain development](#) and leave children in a fight-or-flight mode, which can lead them to overreact in situations that aren’t a threat, she said.

“It’s not because they’re bad kids. It’s not because they’re troublemakers or being willful or defiant,” she said.

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can be so much more difficult.”**

KVC staff and foster parents learn how to set healthy limits and guide kids toward good behavior, McCauley said. Children with a history of trauma

need clear, positive behavior expectations, stable routines and the freedom to make choices within healthy limits, she said.

“With kids who’ve experienced trauma, overly punitive discipline can be very triggering,” she said.

Kids work with therapists to learn to tell their story, including their trauma and how they intend to move beyond it, and practice techniques to relax and express emotions in healthy ways, McCauley said. Some children in the foster care system often have a dark view of their future, she said, noting that one 18-year-old she worked with didn’t believe she would live to turn 19.

“Another part of it is helping them see that they don’t have to be defined by their trauma,” she said.

Meg Wingerter is a reporter for the Kansas News Service, a collaboration of KCUR, Kansas Public Radio and KMUW covering health, education and politics. You can reach her on Twitter [@MegWingerter](#). Kansas News Service stories and photos may be republished at no cost with proper attribution and a link back to [kcur.org](#).