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RESOURCES FOR LAWYERS WHO WORK WITH TRAUMATIZED YOUTH
ABA Child Law Center Produces Free Online Toolkit

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LOA -- Office Automation: Computer Hardware & Software

Research shows that most young people entering the juvenile or adult justice system have been exposed to violence and other traumatic events, and often they have experienced trauma multiple times. Research also shows that the greater the degree of exposure, the more likely the child will suffer physically, socially and emotionally, says Howard Davidson, director of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law.

These factors led to the creation of a free toolkit, available online and intended for use by the justice system. The toolkit is titled "Identifying Polyvictimization and Trauma Among Court-Involved Children and Youth: A Checklist and Resource Guide for Attorneys and Other Court-Appointed Advocates." It is designed to make legal representation of children in delinquency, dependency (abuse/neglect) and other cases more focused on addressing the victimization a child client has experienced, and on how that client has been affected by multiple traumas, Davidson says.

Lawyers can use the toolkit's in-depth checklist to identify and better understand what violence and other distress their child clients have experienced, he explains. The checklist provides a vehicle to help lawyers determine whether the youth they represent has one of more than 20 adverse symptoms that may indicate the client is suffering from severe traumatic stress.

"If their client has traumatic stress, there is a flowchart to help the lawyer understand what trauma-informed referrals and services the child may need," Davidson adds.

Accompanying the toolkit is the issue brief titled "Victimization and Trauma Experienced by Children and Youth: Implications for Legal Advocates." Among the topics the document covers are understanding the symptoms of traumatic stress; the role of legal advocates, judges and court staff; screening instruments for identifying past trauma and exposure to violence; descriptions of relevant state and local initiatives; and considerations related to developing a trauma-informed legal practice.

The tools stand to benefit lawyers and their child clients, Davidson points out. "Many children and youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have experienced or witnessed violence or other traumatic events and suffered the fear of ongoing exposure to harm," he says. "Trauma-informed care and evidence-based mental health treatments are a crucial part of recovery. These tools were developed to increase awareness of these issues among the legal profession, especially court-appointed lawyers for children in juvenile and family courts."

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Davidson encouraged development of the documents and facilitated support through the Safe Start Center, a program funded by the Department of Justice. The final products represent a partnership between the ABA, Safe Start, Child and Family Policy Associates and the Chadwick Center for Children and Families.

“I hope that these documents will be widely disseminated and utilized, so that we will truly have trauma-informed legal advocacy for vulnerable children and youth across the country,” Davidson says.

With nearly 400,000 members, the American Bar Association (www.americanbar.org) is one of the largest voluntary professional membership organizations in the world. As the national voice of the legal profession, the ABA works to improve the administration of justice, promotes programs that assist lawyers and judges in their work, accredits law schools, provides continuing legal education, and works to build public understanding around the world of the importance of the rule of law.

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