

# Informed Compassion: Humanizing the Courtroom Experience for Children and Families

Presented by Constance Cohen, Retired Juvenile Judge  
[Constance.Cohen@icloud.com](mailto:Constance.Cohen@icloud.com)

*Trauma-informed systems take trauma into account in understanding the reasons behind behaviors and what contributes to them. A dysregulated child needs a safe, secure, routine environment. A parent needs to learn about trauma triggers and how to be consistent and keep their child safe. Trauma informed professionals have the opportunity to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of violence and trauma.*  
~ Dr. Joy Osofsky

Trauma is an event that causes a person to feel intensely threatened. The effect of a single incident can linger long after the event occurred. Trauma can disrupt a person's ability to function. If left untreated, childhood trauma can have lasting effects. Healing can often take place in a non-clinical setting.  
~ Gladys Alvarez, LISW

*Being trauma-informed means asking, "What happened to you and how can we help?" **not** "What is wrong with you?"*  
~ Dr. Shawn Marsh

## **WHAT WORKS**

Transparency

Check in to be sure you are understood

Concurrent planning

Empowering parents

Kin / Fictive kin support

Building trust by over-delivering

Common courtesy, dignity and respect by and for all

Awareness of trauma / ACEs: domestic violence, physical punishment, hazardous living conditions, mental health, substance abuse, incarceration, parental or sibling history, FASD, generational trauma, sexual partners, medications, physical health, physical appearance, observed emotions, tattoos (gang-related? branding by trafficker?)

Awareness that exposure to violence profoundly disrupts normal developmental processes. PTSD impairs academic, social and developmental progress. These traumatic events cause higher cortisol levels, lower cerebral volumes, and frontal lobe asymmetry.

Remember that the frontal lobe is not fully developed in males until age 25; females, 23. Cortisol can change brain functions that control memory and learning. Adjust expectations accordingly.

Eliminating or minimizing trauma triggers

Problem-solving atmosphere

Evidence-based interventions

Raising the bar on reasonable efforts / inquiry regarding sufficiency of services

Support network-building for the times during and after the case

Access and benefit from training.

Safety planning (I don't need you to be perfect; I need you to be honest.)

Carefully examine the case plan and require effective case planning.

Zealous advocacy

Parent Partners

Tangibles: Toothbrush kits, books

2-4-2 Book Project

Create a gentle atmosphere

"Catch" him/her doing something well; spotlight and celebrate successes

***"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou***

***There is good in the worst of us and bad in the best of us. If I can't find the good, I ask myself, "What have I overlooked?" Rabbi Samuel Thurman***