

## 8 STEPS FOR GETTING STARTED WITH TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

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After watching *ALL RISE: For the Good of the Children*, you may be wondering how to get started implementing the trauma-informed practices used by Judge Clark and her team. Below are some suggestions for how judges and court personnel can begin implementing the trauma-informed approach featured in the film, and how you can get started today even without any additional resources or grant funding.

### FREE and quick steps for creating a trauma-informed court

#### STEP 1 - SET THE TONE

The judge sets the tone from the top. However, this trauma-informed approach requires a team of dedicated people working behind the scenes to create a cooperative environment that is the basis of this process. It is hard work, and should be approached with an ‘all hands on deck attitude.’ The judge should lead the changes, but if not, as many of the other decision-makers as possible (attorneys, CPS supervisors, providers) should be involved. Meet with the court, attorneys and CPS staff to discuss the ideas that will be promoted by all, what language to use, and to set expectations. For example, in the initial orders of the case, the court can direct all parties to convene a Family Group Conference and conduct drug assessments. This tone of cooperative engagement begins at the start of each case. Parents may disagree, but the “team” should all be on the same page as to why this is starting early.

Encourage your staff and all other parties in the court – including the parents – to adopt the mindset of reunification and healing. Repeatedly remind everyone that the children were removed because of safety concerns. Now that the case is in court, the goal is to figure out how things went awry and how to fix that to make the family and home environment safe and healthy again so the parents and children can be reunited.

#### STEP 2 - OBTAIN ORDERS FOR FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES

As soon as a child is removed from his/her parents, immediately obtain an order for a Family Group Conference so that all parties can get together before the first court hearing to understand the process and next steps. Engage with the parents and start building trust and connection with them by helping them understand the process and explaining over and over that the goal is family reunification, but they must first get themselves clean, sober and healthy so that their children are safe and healthy. This meeting needs to include both the removal workers, and the worker who will take over the services cases, if they are different. This helps families to see the full range of services available to them. Holding the Family Group Conference so early in the process also allows for all family members who are willing and able to be present to step up for placement of the children. This could avoid potentially traumatizing placements of children outside of families.

Be mindful that the removal process -- a forced separation -- is a trauma itself for both children and parents, even in the most dysfunctional families. Diffuse and lessen the anger and fear by reassuring the parents that you don't want to permanently keep their children, but you want to return them to a safer and healthier place. Again, the judge sets this tone, but it is reinforced by all of the attorneys and providers involved with the case.

"We meet with the parents very early and we say not only did we not want to do this, but we want to give your child back to you as soon as possible," says state's attorney Elizabeth Watkins. "And in order to do that, you need to be safe and healthy. We need you healthy to do that. And you won't find many parents who don't agree. I need to be safe and healthy for my child."

### STEP 3 - ACTIVATE PHASE PLANS FOR TREATMENT

Immediately activate Phase Plans for treatment. While this may require meetings and legwork, changing the paperwork and revising plans to make them easier to comprehend and follow can be accomplished on any budget. Instead of giving parents a random list of dozens of required actions that can easily overwhelm them, break them into smaller bites. Guide and encourage them at every step. This step is key for the traumatized, and usually still using, parent. They need a short and simple plan they can understand and follow. A long task list can be maintained internally, but the list given to the parents should be simple and start with Phase 1 - GET CLEAN. More information on the phased plans used by Judge Clark's court can be found in *Judge Carole Clark's Trauma-Informed Approach to Family/Drug Court* at [allriseforchildren.com/resources](http://allriseforchildren.com/resources).

"So, we start from minute one with a plan that we develop together, the state, the parent's attorney, the child's attorney, and grandparents - whoever is involved -- and we develop that plan towards safety, towards health for the parent and child and they believe us," Watkins said. "And the tension is immediately drawn out of the room."

### STEP 4 - IMPLEMENT "PARENT DOCKETS"

Hold weekly "parent dockets." Everyone meets with the judge before the regular docket to hear words of encouragement. Again, repeat and reinforce the goal with the team: We will do everything in our power to get your kids back with you if you will work with us to help make things safe for them with you in your home. Any setbacks or relapses, which are a part of the process, are discussed in a non-threatening environment with the idea that the court team and the parent both understand and want the parent to work through the actual challenges.

The weekly meeting allows any issue to be taken up quickly, without delay in revising plans. This is the real-world application of the process. There will always be setbacks. Instead of punishing parents for their failures, this approach helps parents learn to be honest about their setbacks, overcome them and move forward. This is crucial to the parent's ability to maintain this positive change long after the courts have left the family unit.

## STEP 5 - USE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACE) QUESTIONNAIRE AT INTAKE

Meet with your substance abuse assessment provider and make sure they are using the ACE Questionnaire as part of their intake for client histories. Understanding and capturing the parents' trauma history – insight they may have no awareness about – helps tailor treatment and service plans for their needs.

**Liz Watkins:** “It’s imperative that courts be trauma informed because the impact of trauma on a person’s behavior, actions and personality is essentially what got them to the courtroom in the first place. If you don’t understand what got them there, you can’t really take measures to alleviate it. You can’t really take measures to heal and to help if you don’t understand what got them there in the first place.”

## STEP 6 - CREATE CONTACT LISTS

Make organizational charts for your local and regional Child Protective Services staff, outlining who is in charge of what with a list of contact information and a list of regional providers. These are the people who will actually be providing funding, transportation, and monitoring of the services. The team needs to know who these people are, how they require court orders for payment of the services, who to ask when a special service is needed and how to obtain approval from the agency to work these particular services. Without knowing who is in charge of what, neither the court, nor the attorneys, will know who to go to for provision of these services.

The list should be updated regularly, because agency employees change frequently. Open lines of communication between the court, CPS, attorneys, and providers are necessary to ensure everyone understands the clear intent is to close cases with successful, healed families. Coordination is also critical as the team starts to offer additional trauma-informed services and support to parents and families.

## STEP 7 - PLAN TO MAKE TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING AVAILABLE

Start researching/ planning for longer-term trauma training, brown-bag seminars, etc. to educate court personnel about trauma. There are a number of trauma-informed trainings available online for free that you can share with your team. Another idea is to organize and hold monthly book studies for recommended books and set up a lending library. It can also be helpful to create a list of local trauma-informed training and services providers.

## STEP 8 - HOLD MONTHLY CORE MEETINGS

Initiate CORE meetings that are exactly as they sound – a monthly meeting to bring together the core people necessary to ensure a shared vision of trauma-informed care. This would include your CPS workers (for services and conservatorship), CPS attorneys, family attorneys, service providers such as sober living homes, 12-step programs, inpatient and outpatient providers, assessors, and local treatment providers. Hold a meet-and-greet or a breakfast with coffee and donuts to get started. Do anything to build and grow a network of like-minded people who are committed to healing families.