

# Using ACES and TBRI to Implement a Trauma-Informed Courtroom

By Mark Harris, Josephine C. Vanderhorst and Kellie J. Johnson



Above, left, the 22nd Judicial District Court's sensory room is named the Kidsense Room.

Above, right, the 22nd Judicial District Court's sensory room in Covington.

Left, the 21st Judicial District Juvenile Court Annex's sensory room in Livingston Parish.



**A**dverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined in Louisiana law (R.S. 17:437.2) as “all types of abuse, neglect and other types of traumatic childhood experiences linked to lifelong health and social problems including physical, sexual and emotional abuse; physical or emotional neglect; domestic violence; divorce or separation of a parent or caregiver; substance abuse by a household member; mental illness of a household member; and incarceration of a household member.” In Louisiana, there are a plethora of additional traumatic experiences impacting families — natural disasters (hurricanes, floods and tornadoes), high crime rates, gun violence, unexpected death of family members and poverty.

In essence, the ACEs study conducted by California’s Kaiser-Permanente, in collaboration with the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC), for the first time linked certain traumatic childhood experiences with an elevated risk of serious medical and mental health issues later in life. According to the CDC:

- ▶ one in six adults experienced four or more types of ACEs;
- ▶ at least five of the top 10 leading causes of death are associated with ACEs; and

- ▶ preventing ACEs could reduce the number of adults with depression by 44%.

Toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect how the body responds to stress. However, ACEs can be prevented, according to the CDC. Prevention could dramatically influence a number of key issues including, but not limited to:

- ▶ lower risk for conditions like depression, asthma, cancer and diabetes in adulthood;

- ▶ reduce risky behaviors like smoking and heavy drinking;

- ▶ improve education and job potential; and

- ▶ stop ACEs from being passed from one generation to the next.

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of child abuse and neglect requires systems like child welfare and the courts to foster change in how people think about the causes of ACEs and how they can be prevented. This paradigm shift recognizes that many of the children who come to the

attention of the state are more likely than not to have parents who also have experienced multiple ACEs.

Recognizing the myriad challenges that families face and offering support and encouragement, while keeping children safe until they can be safely parented, can help to minimize or eliminate further trauma to children and families by undue or lengthy separation. In addition, shifting focus from individual responsibility to community solutions (*e.g., My Community Cares, see page 108*) can further promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships where children live, learn and play.

## Trauma-Informed Courts

A trauma-informed court is described as one in which judges and attorneys recognize that people appearing before them have personally experienced acts of violence or other traumatic life events and are also cognizant of how the stress of the courtroom environment impacts trauma survivors. A trauma-informed court process can help reduce stress to families, thereby creating an environment more likely to achieve success in parenting challenges and help keep families intact.

Trauma-informed practices are the current focus in addressing generations of adverse experiences, and there is currently a shift to having a more trauma-focused approach when serving youth and families and victims of crime. One significant mechanism that courts may utilize in understanding and addressing the trauma that families have experienced is Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®), a research-based, holistic approach to address trauma created by Dr. Karyn Purvis and Dr. David Cross.<sup>1</sup> The core of TBRI’s approach uses empowering, connecting and correcting principles. Use of the TBRI elements can help legal stakeholders become more trauma-informed in their approach to child in need of care and other case types.

A good first step for anyone interested in implementing trauma-informed practices into a courtroom is attending a TBRI Friday introductory training session through Crossroads NOLA.<sup>2</sup>

Other small, but impactful, steps can be taken to ensure that courts engage with children, parents and families in a trauma-

informed way. One movement that has spread across the state is the implementation of sensory rooms. Sensory rooms have been established in the 22nd Judicial District Court, the Caddo Parish Juvenile Court, the Orleans Parish Justice Center and 21st Judicial District Juvenile Court Annex in Livingston Parish.

The Orleans Parish Justice Center’s Calming Studio features soothing artwork and colorful wall designs, child-friendly games, Hula hoops and more.

In the 22nd Judicial District Court’s sensory room (appropriately named the Kidsense Room), Judge Scott C. Gardner provides snacks and treats. There are even hopes to utilize a therapy dog in court.

The 21st Judicial District Juvenile Court Annex’s sensory room implemented colorful lights, fidget spinners, comfortable chairs and a relaxing environment to help the children pass the time between cases or take a break after their cases are heard.

The Tangipahoa Parish Juvenile Justice Center is planning its own sensory room.

In addition to the tangible ways to assist families in passing time at the courthouse, time and energy can be conserved. One way to prevent long wait times and stressful court days is to stagger dockets.

Judge Scott C. Gardner in the 22nd Judicial District Court staggers dockets with up to three cases scheduled per half an hour. Judge Alvin Turner, Jr. in the 23rd Judicial District conducts court on a schedule based on the complexity of issues and by grouping cases with the same Department of Children and Family Services worker together. Judge Erin W. Lanoux in Ascension Parish holds delinquency court in the morning and starts her Child in Need of Care docket at 1 p.m. to allow a break between dockets. This cuts down wait times for children and assists parents and family members in maneuvering around their already hectic work and school schedules.

Creating a more trauma-informed courtroom can start with small changes, including:

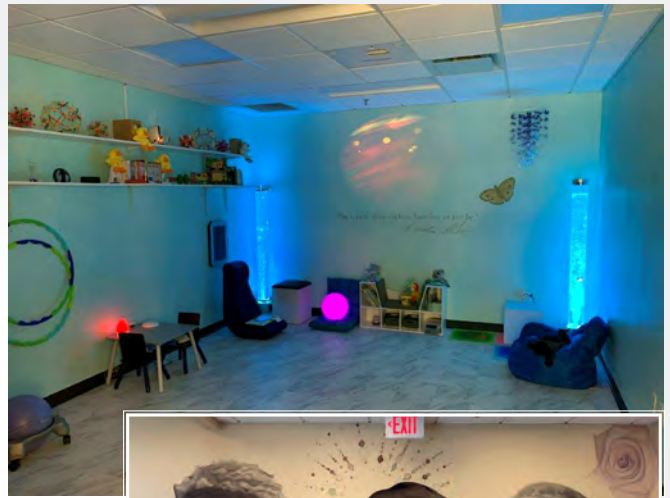
- ▶ allow time for attorneys to meet with clients they may not have been able to speak to before the hearing;

- ▶ engage children and families (a simple “hello, how are you?” shows acknowledgment of the people entering the courtroom);

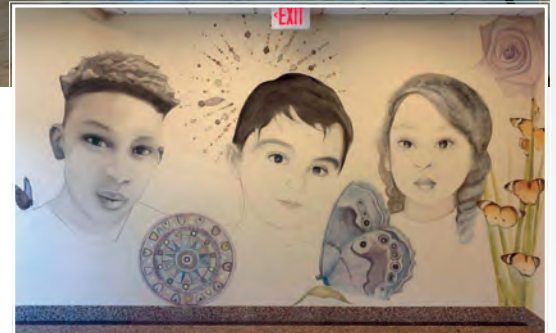




Above, Orleans Parish Justice Center's calming studio has child-friendly games and child-sized furniture.



Right, Orleans Parish Justice Center's calming studio also features soothing artwork, inspirational quotes and colorful wall designs.



- ▶ provide nutritious snacks (trail mix, granola bars) and water to allow court attendees to tend to their basic needs while waiting;

- ▶ allow bathroom breaks for court staff and attorneys on long dockets;

- ▶ provide bailiffs, and any other courthouse staff, with introductory trauma training;

- ▶ have a family-friendly waiting area so everyone can sit comfortably instead of sitting on the floor;

- ▶ separating morning and afternoon dockets; and

- ▶ staff cases prior to the court date.

Sometimes virtual hearings are requested by parties involved in the proceedings. A virtual setting may be less traumatic to participants under certain circumstances. The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) released guidance for trauma-responsive virtual hearings.<sup>3</sup> To keep all participants engaged, NCSC suggests asking for feedback and input. This empowers participants and gives them a voice.

For more information on TBRI and ACEs, visit:

<https://child.tcu.edu/about-us/tbri/#sthash.GnMj0XYR.oPzRACul.dpbs> and <https://partnersforfamilyhealth.org/aces/>.

For more resources from the Pelican

Center for Children and Families, visit: <https://www.pelicancenter.org/index.html>.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development, <https://child.tcu.edu>.

2. [www.crossroadsnola.org/tbri-fridays-register](http://www.crossroadsnola.org/tbri-fridays-register). The Crossroads NOLA introductory Trust-Based Relational Intervention course provides direct insight into how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact children and families while providing solutions to build more trusting relationships with those affected by trauma. The interactive, virtual trainings are not limited to Friday offerings. Trainings are approved for 6 (online) foster parent training hours, MCLEs, LCA CEU hours distance learning, and clinical social work CEUs distance learning. Trainings are free for Department of Child and Family Services staff and foster parents, and \$25 for all other attendees.

3. [https://www.ncsc.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/75812/Trauma-Responsive-Virtual-Hearing.pdf](https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/75812/Trauma-Responsive-Virtual-Hearing.pdf).

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