Social-Emotional Screening Protocol Implementation: A Trauma-Informed Response for Young Children in Child Welfare

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Introduction
- Adverse childhood experiences and resulting trauma in children less than three years old negatively affects brain growth and development resulting in:
  - damaged learning processes
  - decreased coping skills
  - diminished social-emotional regulation
- Children in the child welfare system are more likely to have experienced trauma at an early age
- Without identification, trauma-based behavioral problems in children may increase the number of foster care placements, and lead to lifelong issues with emotional attachments

Background
Project implemented in the ongoing case management department at a non-profit child welfare agency.
- Around 1200 children in ongoing Child Protective Services (CPS) cases in a large Midwestern urban city.
- Current processes did not sufficiently identify young children with social-emotional health needs—even those noted by caregivers to have severe and concerning behaviors

Current State
Agency currently utilizes the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS)-Child/Youth Mental Health Algorithm to identify mental health needs
- Algorithm: Not evidenced-based
- Not specific to child developmental age
- Completed by case managers alone rather than in conjunction with child’s caregivers

Project Purpose
To improve identification of social-emotional impairments among young children at risk for childhood trauma and to increase referrals of these children to trauma-informed mental health services

Intervention & Supporting Literature
Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2)
- Chosen as the potential screening tool as it was readily available to the child welfare agency
- Tool does not diagnose or directly identify past traumatic experiences in children, but identifies delays in social-emotional behaviors which are common in children who have experienced trauma

Literature Review
PICO question: “In children, less than three years of age, how does utilization of the ASQ:SE screening tool affect early identification of social-emotional concerns and rates of child referral to mental health therapies?”
- ASQ:SE 2 is an evidenced-based screening in identifying social-emotional impairments and improving referral rates
- Found to significantly increase rates of social-emotional problem identification compared to baseline provider identification or caregiver identification alone
- ASQ:SE specifically demonstrates qualities appropriate for use in child welfare compared to other tools
- ASQ:SE is the only tool available to screen for social-emotional problems in children less than one year old

Methods
- Implementation of an evidence-based, social-emotional screening protocol for young children between ages 1 month to 3 years old placed in out-of-home care through the child welfare system
- Key protocol intervention: ASQ:SE-2 completed by kinship caregivers or foster parents during the initial nurse home visit
  - Typically 15-30 days after placement
  - Project designated as quality improvement and not in need of further IRB review
- Data collected over 3 month pilot to compare:
  - Rate of identification of social emotional impairments
  - Rate of referrals to trauma focused mental health therapy
- Data analysis completed retroactively utilizing CANS data
  - Data 3 months’ pre-protocol implementation and project data 3 months’ post-implementation
  - All data de-identified prior to analysis

Results/Findings
Pre-Project Implementation
- 52 Children Screened, Average age: 13mo
- 3 Children Identified with Social-Emotional Concerns (5.77%)
- Of 3 children identified only 1 referred for further mental health evaluation (33.3%)

Post-Project Implementation
- 42 Children Screened, Average age: 14mo
- 19 Children Identified with Social-Emotional Concerns (45.2%)
- Of 19 children identified, all 19 were referred for further mental health evaluation (100%)

Implications
- Nurses should further understand the effects of trauma on social-emotional development of young children within the child welfare system
- Nurses within the child welfare system should assess and evaluate current practices intended to identify young children with social-emotional concerns
- Utilization of an evidence-based tool such as the ASQ:SE-2 along with a systematic screening protocol can clinically improve identification and referral of young children in child welfare with social-emotional concerns that are potentially trauma related.

References