Juvenile Justice and Childhood Trauma

A number of factors contribute to leading a young person into the juvenile justice system, but one rarely talked about is trauma. According to The Justice Policy Institute, “Research shows that while up to 34 percent of children in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event, between 75 and 93 percent of youth entering the juvenile justice system annually in this country are estimated to have experienced some degree of trauma.”

This number is much too high to be a coincidence and shows that most likely traumatic events aren’t being dealt with early enough before children enter the justice system. It’s also important to remember that our brains are developing as children. According to Renee VandenWallBake, “This means that children who have experienced trauma may be more impulsive, more susceptible to peer pressure, and less able to appreciate the consequences of their actions than children of like age.” When children enter the juvenile justice system, how they are treated is based on their age. Not acknowledging their differences in emotional intelligence can be unjust and damaging.

“Recognizing that childhood trauma may be at the heart of the status offense or public offense is essential to ensuring that the child receives proper treatment and to prevent recidivism.” Because being involved in the juvenile justice system can cause more trauma and take children away from the comfort of the familiar, this sudden change can lead to more recidivism, as children are not given the necessary tools to handle trauma.

Through increased involvement with mental health professionals, recidivism may be able to go down and by having courts that are more aware of trauma, children and young adults may be able to get more reasonable responses to their actions.