

# New era in child welfare focused on the overall well-being of each child

February 27 2014, by Jon Reidel

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“It’s really important for providers to understand what’s happening with brain development, especially for kids that have been maltreated, and how to use that information to develop individually based interventions,” says social work professor Jessica Strolin-Goltzman.

The timing of Jessica Strolin-Goltzman's arrival on campus less than three years ago couldn't have been more fortuitous for the university, the state, and most importantly, children in foster care. Having landed more

than \$3 million in federal grants, the associate professor of social work is helping usher in a new era in child welfare that's focused on the overall well-being of each child.

For decades, the focus for children in [foster care](#) was on safety and permanency. Although those goals remain, the Federal Administration on Children, Youth and Families has shifted the national focus to the mental, physical and emotional well-being of children, and is backing it up with federal funds for those with a plan to execute it. Enter Strolin-Goltzman, an expert in the implementation and evaluation of evidence-supported [child welfare](#) interventions.

"We weren't checking to see how kids were doing in critical areas like mental health and well-being, so we started seeing children who were adopted before the age of three who had previously experienced trauma that went undiagnosed ending up in residential settings by the age of 10," says Strolin-Goltzman. "The adopted family didn't feel like they could manage the changes in behavior, so if we could identify these issues earlier, we could deal with them before they become too serious."

Strolin-Goltzman's most recent award – a five-year, \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau – is one of five "trauma grants" focused on this very issue. Although still in the planning stages, the grant aims to have social workers administer functional or well-being assessments as soon as kids come into custody to identify possible trauma. Data from child welfare, mental health, and other Integrated Family Services (Vermont Agency of Human Services) providers will also be collected to create profiles and identify how many kids have access to [mental health](#) services or are in need of them.

"A big part of this grant is screening and assessment and using the data for collaborative case planning to decide what the case plan should look

like and then referring and providing access to evidence-based services," says Strolin-Goltzman, who has worked closely with the State of Vermont on aspects of the grant. Her primary team includes Laurie Brown, former director of Vermont Child Trauma Collaborative, who will handle treatment and services; Beth Raliea, former assistant director of DCF in Burlington, who will handle screening and assessment; and Jeff Suter, research professor in the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, who will serve the project evaluator. A March 19 meeting is scheduled for key stakeholders to discuss direction and planning, and develop action plans to move forward.

### **Using neuroscience to inform practice**

Strolin-Goltzman's research agenda has shifted over the years but has always focused on helping children in foster care. Her clinical practice experience includes adventure-based wilderness therapy, expressive arts modalities, and working with teenagers on probation for substance abuse issues, many of whom had experienced trauma and abuse and neglect.

Some of Strolin-Goltzman's more recent research focuses on the role of neuroscience in [social work](#). She co-wrote a chapter with Suter, whose degree is in clinical psychology, and Haley Woodside-Jiron, associate professor in education, titled "How Neuroscience Can Inform Educational Practices for Youth Involved in the Child Welfare System" on the need for child welfare and education professionals to have a basic understanding of the underlying neurobiological processes that may lead to behavioral issues. The chapter appeared in the book *Neuroscience for Social Work: Current Research and Practice* (Springer, 2014).

"It's really important for providers to understand what's happening with brain development, especially for kids that have been maltreated, and how to use that information to develop individually based interventions," she says. "Using neuroscience information to educate our parents about

certain kinds of behaviors they can expect to see and what strategies they might want to employ is really powerful. There's a lot of information that neuroscience has provided for us that we haven't taken advantage of yet that is really important to inform intervention development."

Provided by University of Vermont

Citation: New era in child welfare focused on the overall well-being of each child (2014, February 27) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-era-child-welfare-focused-well-being.html>

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