

# Understanding Relational Trauma and Its Connection with Violence and Criminal Behavior

Victoria Sanders, PhD, LMFT

## Level

Intermediate

## Room

## Track

Clinical

## CE

CPA/BBS/CJER

## Bio

**Victoria Sanders, PhD, LMFT** specializes in working with individuals who have experienced foster care, adoption, or complex relational trauma. She prioritizes evidence-based treatments while tailoring her approach to each client's unique needs. Grounded in a client-centered philosophy, she ensures individuals understand both the "what" and the "why" of therapy, empowering them to take an active role in their healing journey. Victoria's research on how adoption trauma impacted individuals who were convicted of murder provides much needed information about the life-long impact of early childhood relational trauma. Her expertise in relational trauma and healing, foster care and adoption, domestic violence and trauma, substance use, and mental health, and supporting children and adults with special needs has made her a leading speaker in these fields.

## Narrative

In this compelling and clinically grounded session, professionals are invited to explore the profound connection between early relational trauma and later patterns of violence and criminal behavior. The presentation begins by examining how chronic neglect, abuse, and disrupted attachment in childhood can impair the development of critical brain structures responsible for emotion regulation, impulse control, and empathy.

Through the lens of neurobiology and developmental psychology, attendees are guided to understand how trauma that occurs in the context of primary caregiving relationships—what we call *relational trauma*—lays the groundwork for survival-based behaviors that may later be misinterpreted as aggression, defiance, or antisocial traits.

Real-life case studies illustrate how untreated relational trauma can manifest in criminal behavior, especially when compounded by environmental stressors, lack of support, or punitive systems. The presentation also highlights the role of trauma-informed approaches in prevention, rehabilitation, and reducing recidivism.

Participants leave with a clearer understanding of the underlying "why" behind certain violent or criminal behaviors and are equipped with trauma-responsive strategies that can be applied in clinical, correctional, educational, and community settings.

## Learning Objectives

1. Identify three core features of relational trauma and explain how early disruptions in attachment and caregiving relationships impact brain development, emotional regulation, and behavioral functioning across the lifespan
2. Explain the link between relational trauma and criminal behavior, including how survival-based adaptations in childhood may manifest as aggression, impulsivity, or antisocial conduct in adolescence and adulthood
3. Differentiate between trauma-driven behavior and intentional criminality, using case examples and research to illustrate how trauma-informed assessment can guide appropriate intervention

Apply trauma-informed principles to clinical, legal, or correctional settings in order to reduce re-traumatization, support rehabilitation, and promote long-term behavioral change in individuals with histories of relational trauma