



Baby Courts: A Promising Child Protection Court Model to Serve Families with Infants and Toddlers

BACKGROUND

Children ages 0-5 are the largest age group of children being removed from their homes due to child abuse and neglect.¹ Early brain development and healthy attachments during the first few years of a child's life are critical to ensure well-being into adulthood. However, infants and toddlers in the child welfare system are at high risk for attachment issues, developmental delays, trauma – and these impacts will typically have lasting negative consequences into adulthood.

A relatively new specialty court model – often called baby courts² – combines what we know about early childhood development, effective evidence-based services for at-risk families with infants and toddlers, and the strength of a trauma informed, collaborative multidisciplinary problem-solving court approach, and is making that available to these most vulnerable families. The goals of these courts are to improve child safety and well-being, heal trauma and repair the parent/ child relationship, promote timely permanency, and stop the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment.³

CORE COMPONENTS

While the baby court models vary somewhat across jurisdictions, the core components typically include:

- Judicial leadership
- Court coordinator
- Collaborative, multidisciplinary court team
- Frequent court reviews
- Targeting the needs of infants and toddlers, including screening for developmental delays and disabilities, medical care delivered in a medical home, and mental health services that focus on the parent-child relationship, particularly child-parent psychotherapy
- Frequent parent-child contact
- Concurrent planning and limiting placements
- Family team meetings



CURRENT STATUS

As of January 2020, there are approximately 100 baby courts operating across the country in close to 30 states. Some programs operate as the only such program in the state, but more states are looking to expand these courts statewide. Florida, for example, has grown from just a few sites in 2014 to 24 sites in 2019. Tennessee has also worked recently to implement statewide, launching its first Safe Baby Court in 2015. Tennessee currently has seven Safe Baby Courts in operation across the state, and five more are in the planning phases and will be fully implemented in 2020.

WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

The baby court model has been rigorously evaluated and has demonstrated positive outcomes for the children and families they serve. The approach is recognized by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare as being highly relevant to the child welfare system and demonstrating promising research evidence.⁴

In 2014, the U.S. Children's Bureau funded the Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (QIC-ITCT), which provided technical assistance and training to 10 court sites in six states (CT, FL, HI, IA, MS, NC) and included a national evaluation component. Evaluations have identified many benefits of this approach, including the following:

- Improved safety
- Faster time to permanency
- Preserved family relationships
- Children are more likely to achieve permanency with a member of their biological family
- Placement stability
- Racial equity
- Increased service delivery
- Cost savings.⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ According to the most recent federal AFCARS national data, 41% of the children in out-of-home care on the last day of the federal fiscal year were ages 0-5.

² Other names for this court model include Safe Babies Court, Early Childhood Court, Infant-Toddler Court, Zero to Three Court, and FIT (Families with Infants and Toddlers) Court.

³ Florida Early Childhood Courts <https://www.flcourts.org/Resources-Services/Court-Improvement/Problem-Solving-Courts/Early-Childhood-Courts>

⁴ The Safe Babies Court Team™ <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/safe-babies-court-teams-project/>

⁵ Final Evaluation Report of the Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams QIC-ITCT. RTI International (Sept. 2017). <http://qicct.org/sites/default/files/QIC-ITCT%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%202017%20%28Full%20Report%29.compressed.pdf>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

How do Safe Babies Court Teams™ improve outcomes for infants and toddlers? Casey Family Programs. https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/SF_Safe-Babies-Court-Teams.pdf

Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP), The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. <https://www.cebc4cw.org/program/child-parent-psychotherapy/detailed>

Florida Early Childhood Courts. <https://www.flcourts.org/Resources-Services/Court-Improvement/Problem-Solving-Courts/Early-Childhood-Courts>

Tennessee Safe Baby Courts. <https://tnsafebabycourts.org/>

Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (QIC-ITCT). <http://qicct.org/home>