



Changing the Odds for Babies: COURT TEAMS FOR MALTREATED INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Everyday in the United States, 130 babies leave their homes because their parents cannot take care of them.¹ Infants and toddlers who have been maltreated represent almost one-third of all the children entering foster care.² They are at greatest risk for compromised development. They are six times more likely than the general population to have developmental delays,³ delays that left untreated, will compromise their ability to have healthy productive lives.

Although the developmental impact of child abuse and neglect is greatest among the very young,⁴ research confirms that the early years present an unparalleled window of opportunity to effectively intervene with at-risk children.⁵ Early intervention can change the odds for these babies and toddlers and can lead to significant cost savings over time through reduction in child abuse and neglect, school failure, criminal behaviors, welfare dependence, substance abuse, and medical care for the illnesses (both mental and physical) that are common among adults who were maltreated as children.^{6, 7, 8}

When these maltreated young children show up in juvenile and family courts, judges are faced with making difficult decisions that will have long-term implications for the emotional, developmental and physical health of these children.

A Solution: The *Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers Project*, spearheaded by ZERO TO THREE, is modeled on the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Model Courts Project. Model Court judges focus on conducting their hearings in accordance with nationally recognized best practices.⁹ The Court Teams are led by judges who place a strong emphasis on the unique challenges facing infants and toddlers. The judges collaborate with child development specialists to create teams of child welfare and health professionals, child advocates and community leaders. Together they provide services to abused and neglected infants and toddlers. *Court Teams* are being piloted in the following communities:

- Fort Bend County (suburban Houston), Texas
- Polk County (Des Moines), Iowa
- Forrest County (Hattiesburg), Mississippi
- Orleans Parish (New Orleans), Louisiana
- San Francisco, California
- Honolulu, Hawaii
- Douglas County (Omaha), Nebraska
- Douglasville, Georgia
- Cherokee, North Carolina
- New Haven, Connecticut
- Little Rock, Arkansas

The Court Team monitors foster care cases involving infants and toddlers, creating service plans that are specific to the needs of each child and family. By focusing on individual cases, the Court Team assesses

how well the local service delivery system is functioning and, where gaps are identified, it works to develop new community services.

Court Team Accomplishments:

- **A significant increase in the services provided to eligible children and their parents**, particularly in the area of health care (100% of the children had at least one pediatric visit) and developmental (Part C) screening for early intervention services (64% of the children received a full developmental assessment and at least 20% of those who had been screened had begun receiving services).
- **Reductions in the number of out-of-home placements.** Because young children experience the world through the eyes of their closest caregivers, forming an attachment to a primary caregiver is critical to their healthy development. Multiple placements can significantly challenge this development. Almost half of the children have remained (42%) in one foster home throughout their time in out-of-home care; the average number of placements for all children is two.
- **An increase in parent-child visits.** Very young children need to see their parents multiple times each week to develop a trusting relationship for reunification purposes. Prior to the Court Teams Project, visits between parents and their young children in foster care occurred less than once a week. With the advent of the Court Teams Project, visits have increased; on average, parents and their young children are spending time together more than three times each week.
- **An increase in relative/kinship placements.** Across all sites there is increased emphasis on finding relative placements for these infants and toddlers. These placements facilitate frequent contact with parents and provide consistency in a child's life. Relatives have been a key factor in placement stability and supporting families as they complete services. Approximately 37% of all placements have been with relatives. Reunification plans often include relatives as an additional support for the child.

Effecting Systems Change:

Court Team Judge: *I've learned a lot about babies and children over the past year. Because of that, I ask more questions. I want to know how the children are doing. And I'm not the only one who's learned as a result of the Court Team program. Two years ago, attorneys ad litem would not have asked a caseworker whether a child is developmentally delayed, but that happens all the time now.*

Thank you note from a foster parent to the ZERO TO THREE Community Coordinator: *How in the world could I ever thank you enough? I cannot tell you how much your support, guidance, and advocacy on Elsa's^a behalf have meant to me. Elsa, and all the children in your care, are better off because of your watchful eye and your dedicated service. Thank you especially, for your kindness and sharing your insights whenever we have spoken. I attended a luncheon 2 weeks ago, and made certain he [the judge] knew what an advocate you are and what a wonderful program Zero-to-Three is— at least from the foster parent and baby's perspective. Thank you for everything.*

Attorney appearing before a Court Team judge: *The frequent hearings keep everybody involved in a case on track. In the regular CPS cases, things can get lost in the shuffle. It does help to make sure that everybody is doing what they're supposed to do.*

Ultimately the Court Teams Project seeks to improve outcomes for all young children and families by incorporating the science of early childhood development into child welfare practice. Already the project is reaching beyond the individual children targeted and piloting new approaches to working with families:

- In Des Moines, Iowa, parents, CPS workers, attorneys, and service providers are meeting before the child is removed from home to explore family resources, get a jump start on services, and help make the transition into foster care less traumatic for child and parent.

^a The name is fictional.

- In New Orleans, Louisiana, the early intervention program is beginning to keep cases open when children move so that screening and services are not interrupted.
- In an effort to increase visitation, two additional staff are being hired by the New Orleans child welfare agency to assist with transportation and supervision of visits in the evenings and on weekends.
- In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where neither the court nor the child welfare agency were initially familiar with the federal requirements for early intervention screening of children involved in maltreatment cases, all infants and toddlers under the supervision of the child welfare agency are now being screened for developmental delays.
- In both Hattiesburg and Des Moines, hearings when a child is removed from home have become routine. So-called “shelter” or “removal” hearings had previously not occurred regularly. These hearings have proven important in frontloading services and initiating judicial oversight within the first five days after a child’s removal.
- In Fort Bend County, Texas, the 87 children identified as Court Team cases have more than 150 siblings whose cases are also receiving expedited services.
- In all jurisdictions, each child’s case is reviewed at least monthly in court or during a staffing that involves the child welfare agency, service providers, attorneys, and the Court Team Community Coordinator.

ZERO TO THREE, a national nonprofit dedicated to the health and well being of babies and toddlers, provides training for the Court Teams in the science of early childhood and arranges for the teams to meet and share their best practices strategies. In May 2007, ZERO TO THREE released *Helping Babies from the Bench: Using the Science of Early Childhood Development in Court*, a 20-minute DVD that explains why judges should focus their attention on babies and toddlers. The DVD is being distributed nationwide to juvenile and family court judges and other members of the child welfare community.

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¹ Administration for Children & Families. (October 12, 2006) *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008 (14) What were the ages of the children who entered care during FY 2006?*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.pdf , retrieved August 27, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ Leslie, L.K., Gordon, J.H., Lambors, K., Premji, K., Peeples, J., Gist, K. (2005). Addressing the developmental and mental health needs of young children in foster care. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 26-140-151.

⁴ Kotulak, R. Inside the brain: revolutionary discoveries of how the mind works. Kansas City, MO: 1997, 7-17.

⁵ Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, Editors; Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Board on Children, Youth, and Families (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

⁶ Widom, C., & Maxfield, M. (2001). *An update on the “Cycle of Violence”*, Research in Brief, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

⁷ Halfon, N.; Mendonca, A.; & Berkowitz, G. (1995) Health status of children in foster care: The experience of the Center for the Vulnerable Child. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 149(4), 386-391.

⁸ Malbin, D.V. (Spring 2004). Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and the role of family court judges in improving outcomes for children and families. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 55 (2), 53-63. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

⁹ *Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Abuse and Neglect Cases*. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1995.