



***INTRODUCING:
COURT TEAMS FOR MALTREATED INFANTS AND TODDLERS***

Babies and toddlers are frequent victims of abuse and neglect in families, and the only ones without words. Judges in juvenile and family courts want to break the cycle of despair these children experience and give them a chance for the future. They do not want to see these children grow up and return to their courts as abusive or neglectful parents – a situation that is too frequently the case. But judges need to know more about how babies and toddlers develop – a science they do not learn in law school. They need to have available in their communities solutions for these children that are validated by research. They also need community partners who share their urgency to take advantage of opportunities for early intervention, when young children first come to the notice of the courts.

What is the need?

Child welfare systems are not meeting the needs of the children who rely on public intervention to protect them. The federal government, through Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR), monitors the states' performance on 14 child welfare outcomes. These outcomes include seven measures addressing safety, permanency, and children's well-being; and seven outcomes focused on system readiness (e.g. statewide information systems, case review systems, and training). In a study examining 19 states' CFSR performance, no state achieved all specified outcomes. All were failing to meet the outcome related to the provision of physical and mental health services.

The problems of child welfare systems are magnified when infants and toddlers are involved. The quality of their entire lives – at home and in foster care – is deeply troubling. Children between birth and three years have the highest rates of victimization. Although infants only account for 5.6% of the child population, they represent double that percent of all child maltreatment victims. Children ages 3 and younger are also 34% more likely to be placed in foster care than children ages 4 to 11.

Infants and toddlers whose families have been the subject of a maltreatment investigation are at great risk of compromised development. Approximately 42% of them are developmentally delayed, many of them so delayed that pediatricians consider them developmentally impaired. Despite this high likelihood of delays, fewer than one in ten currently receives treatment for developmental problems, and more than a third are not even immunized. From birth to age five, children develop their social, emotional, cognitive and moral capacities more rapidly than at any other time in life. Science tells us the foundation for how--and how well--they think, learn, control their emotions and relate to others for the rest of their lives is built upon their early experiences and relationships. Abuse and neglect in the early years can have permanent, devastating effects, if not actively treated. Long-term negative outcomes include school failure, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and the continuation of the cycle of maltreatment into new generations. Judges have the power to change these young lives. They can order research-proven interventions, if communities are equipped and organized to respond.

A SOLUTION:

A new federally funded pilot program combines judicial muscle with child development and mental health community partners so that babies and toddlers are given the attention and life-changing help they need. In each of five communities – Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Fort Bend County, Texas; Hattiesburg, Mississippi; Des Moines, Iowa, and Orleans Parish, Louisiana – a judge is partnering with a child development specialist to create a team of child welfare and health professionals, child advocates and community leaders who provide services to abused and neglected infants and toddlers. By working together (with support and training from the national nonprofit organization ZERO TO THREE) these teams are developing and enacting comprehensive approaches to meet young children's complex needs, swiftly and effectively.

The work of the court teams is based on a model established by Judge Cindy Lederman and psychologist Dr. Joy Osofsky in the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court. In Miami-Dade, babies and toddlers are screened for developmental delays and chronic health problems as soon as they come to the court's notice. In partnership with the University of Miami's Linda Ray Center, Judge Lederman and Dr. Osofsky, together with Center Director Dr. Lynne Katz, have developed parent/child interventions that have healed troubled relationships and allowed many children to live safely with their parents. This ground-breaking project has inspired great enthusiasm among judges nationally who are looking for ways to break the cycle of neglect.

What are the Court Teams accomplishing?

Each of the pilot communities involved in a Court Team project assesses its needs and sets its own priorities. They are educating court and community members about the needs of abused and neglected infants, toddlers and young children. They are working to enhance and better coordinate services for these children and their families. Court orders for cases involving young children are now being written to include the children as well as the parents, and monthly reviews are ensuring that court-ordered referrals are implemented as ordered. Ultimately, they hope to prevent young children from being abused or neglected, and reduce their numbers in foster care.

What will happen next?

The five pilot courts and communities will work towards their local goals and institute changes to achieve those goals. ZERO TO THREE, which focuses on early childhood development, will provide training for judges, attorneys, court personnel, and court teams in the science of early childhood, provide technical services, and arrange for the five teams to meet and share their best practices. ZERO TO THREE will add to the Court Teams web site pages specific to each Court Team site. Materials to build and support court teams nationally will be developed throughout the life of the project.

How can I get more information?

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