



Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers

THE PROBLEM

The impact of child abuse and neglect is felt most strongly among the very young. Infants and toddlers are the most vulnerable to the effects of maltreatment. Its impact on their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical health can have life-long implications if not properly addressed. Research shows that young children who have experienced physical abuse have lower social competence, show less empathy, have difficulty recognizing others' emotions, are more likely to be insecurely attached to their parents, and have deficits in IQ scores, language ability, and school performance.ⁱ Without intervention, by the time these children reach school age, they will also likely be at risk for social problems and learning deficits. Compounding the problem, one-third of the individuals who were abused and neglected as children can be expected to abuse their own children.ⁱⁱ According to one longitudinal study, being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59 percent, as an adult by 28 percent, and for a violent crime by 30 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ Abused and neglected children were also more likely to have mental health concerns (suicide attempts and posttraumatic stress disorder); educational problems (extremely low IQ scores and reading ability); occupational difficulties (high rates of unemployment and employment in low-level service jobs); and public health and safety issues (prostitution in males and females and alcohol problems in females).^{iv}

These risks become particularly worrisome when coupled with the fact that **infants are the fastest growing category of children entering foster care in the United States.**^v Twenty percent of the child welfare population is comprised of infants under the age of one.^{vi} Nearly 40 percent of very young children in foster care are born low-birth weight or premature or both, two factors which increase their likelihood of medical problems and developmental delay.^{vii} More than half suffer from serious health problems and over half experience developmental delays, which is four to five times the rate found among children in the general population.^{viii} Once they have been removed from their homes and placed in foster care, infants and toddlers are more likely than older children to be abused and neglected and to stay in foster care longer.^{ix} Reunification rates are lowest among children who enter placement between birth and 3 months of life.^x Separation from parents, sometimes suddenly and usually traumatically, coupled with the difficult experiences that have precipitated out-of-home placement, can leave infants and toddlers dramatically impaired in their emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. However, research confirms that the early years present an unparalleled opportunity to help these high-risk children.

AN INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE MODEL IN THE MIAMI-DADE JUVENILE COURT

Juvenile and Family Court Judges are responsible for the well-being of the children in their courts and can be powerful agents of change. In fact, judges have an opportunity, perhaps the last one for these most vulnerable infants and toddlers, to focus on healing in the process of adjudicating the case.^{xi} Judges are able not only to order that infants and toddlers receive the services and supports they require, but are also in the unique position of being able to mobilize the public and private resources that can help to meet the needs of these vulnerable children. But judges can only make good decisions and mobilize the necessary resources for children if they have adequate information. Too often, their decisions are not informed by the science of early childhood development.

Judge Cindy Lederman and Dr. Joy Osofsky have partnered to develop a groundbreaking effort to address the well-being of infants and toddlers involved in the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court. In this court, all infants, toddlers and their mothers receive screening and assessment services. All babies are screened for developmental delays and referred for services. A parent-infant therapeutic intervention is available to a select number of mothers. An Early Head Start program connected to the court is the nation's first designed specifically to meet the needs of maltreated children. **Three years of data in the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court show substantial gains in improving parental sensitivity, child and parent interaction, and behavioral and emotional parental and child responsiveness. The children showed significant improvements in enthusiasm, persistence, positive affect and a reduction of depression, anger, withdrawal and irritability. There have been no further acts of abuse or neglect, and 100 percent of infants were reunified with their families.**

BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS IN MIAMI-DADE: MULTIDISCIPLINARY COURT TEAMS

Research is confirming the effectiveness of the approach used in the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court. While this model in Miami-Dade is unique, **judges around the country are learning about this work and have expressed interest in replicating similar models in their own communities.** In order to help communities build on the success of this model, Judge Cindy Lederman and Dr. Joy Osofsky, in conjunction with ZERO TO THREE, propose the development of multidisciplinary Court Teams in selected Congressional Districts to raise awareness, increase knowledge and skills, and change practice regarding the needs of maltreated infants and toddlers and their families involved in the child welfare system. Court Teams, co-led by a judge and a child development specialist, will lead systems change and services improvement to better support the needs of infants and toddlers involved in the child welfare system.

The goal of these Court Teams is to bring knowledge, skills and services to juvenile and family courts around the country. And the establishment of the Court Teams will bring the science of early childhood development into the courts. These community-based Court Teams will bring together key community leaders such as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), Guardians *Ad Litem*, and child welfare, health and child care professionals to develop a comprehensive approach to address the complex needs of these infants and toddlers and their families. The Court Team project will provide a child development specialist in each selected community in order to build capacity and provide the necessary resources to support systemic change.

Key activities of this project, when funding has been secured, will include: the development of a training curriculum and other materials (both print and video); selection of Court Team sites; training for all Court Teams on the science of early childhood development; and individualized technical assistance for the Court Teams. The project will result in increased coordination of services for infants and toddlers, new services for very young children, new products and materials relating to the needs of infants, toddlers and their families involved in the judicial system and an on-line clearinghouse of resources available to all Court Team sites and to other professionals concerned with improving outcomes for these vulnerable children.

Contact

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^{iv} Ibid

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