

Court Teams for Maltreated Infants & Toddler: The Fort Bend County Experience

Judge Ronald R. Pope
328th District Court

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Portrait of Infants and Toddlers in Foster Care in the U.S.

- Largest cohort of children in care
 - 16% are infants
 - 34% birth to three
- More likely to be abused and neglected
- Remain in placement longer
- 33% return to placement
- 77% of child fatalities occur under age 4



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Portrait of Infants and Toddlers in Foster Care in the U.S.

- Lower rate of reunification
- Children awaiting adoption spend more than 3 years in foster care
- Developmental delay is 4 to 5 times greater than children in the general population
- Some 460,000 babies have prenatal exposure to drugs
- Substance abuse is a factor in removal for the majority of cases

21% of all children in foster care were admitted prior to their first birthday

Once removed from their home, infants stay in foster care longer and are more likely than older children to be abused and neglected

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Portrait of Infants and Toddlers in Texas

- In FY07, there were 71,344 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect. 27,029 cases (38%) were children three years and younger.
- In August 2007, 6,807 children under the ages of 5 were in the foster care system.

• Source: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services 2007 Data Book

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Impact of Maltreatment on Young Children

- Increased rates of aggression
- Insecure relationship with primary caregiver
- Decreased language and IQ scores
- Anxieties, fears, sleep problems
- Increases likelihood of juvenile delinquency and adult criminality

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Impact of Maltreatment on Young Children

Maltreatment interferes with the healthy development of synaptic connections in the brain.



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Impact of Trauma Mediating factors

- Age
- Developmental stage
- Temperament
- Availability of sensitive caregiver
- The event itself
- Social environment

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What We Know

- High risk for poor developmental outcomes
- Developing brain can compensate
- Early intervention increases odds for favorable outcomes



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What We Know

- Early environments matter
- Human relationships are the building blocks of development
- The course of development can be altered in early childhood by effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection

From Neurons to Neighborhoods, 2000

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EXPERIENCES

Early Experiences Matter

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COURT TEAMS FOR MALTREATED INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- Federally-funded pilot program in 4 local communities:
 - Fort Bend County, TX
 - Polk County (Des Moines), IA
 - Forrest County (Hattiesburg), MS
 - Orleans Parish, LA
- 3 new sites for 2009
 - San Francisco, Ca
 - Honolulu, HI,
 - Omaha, NE

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Court Teams Goals

- Reduce recurrence of maltreatment
- Improve outcomes for maltreated infants and toddlers
- Change local systems

Model for practice based on science

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Core Components of Court Team Model

- Judicial Leadership
- Partnership with child development/mental health professional – Community Coordinator
- Community Court Team
- Monthly case reviews
- Child focused services
 - Medical home
 - Part C
- Parent-child contact (visitation)

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Core Components of Court Team Model

- Continuum of mental health services
 - Assessment of the parent-child relationship
 - Parenting education programs
 - Visit coaching (therapeutic visitation)
 - Psychoeducational parenting interventions
 - Child-parent psychotherapy
- National support (training and technical assistance, evaluation, resource materials)

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Fort Bend Court Team Community Partners

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CASA• County Attorney• Child Protective Services• Court Appointed Attorneys• Substance Abuse Tx• Early Childhood Intervention• Mental Health Providers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community foundation• Early Head Start• Parenting education• Women's Center• Private foster care agencies• Private child serving agencies• County representatives |
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Fort Bend Court Team Practices for Improving Child Outcomes

- Frequent visitation / parent contact – visitation is one of the best predictors of successful family reunification (every additional day of visitation triples the odds of achieving permanency within a year)
- Stability of placement - infants and toddlers need stable and nurturing relationships
- Evidence based mental health interventions and parenting education - infants and toddlers in child welfare are disproportionately exposed to trauma and at risk of development of mental health disorders and other disabilities

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Fort Bend Court Team Practices for Improving Child Outcomes

- Front loading of services for children and families
- Continuum of services for families
- Increased oversight and accountability – monthly hearings

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Fort Bend Court Team Accomplishments

- **Reductions in out-of-home placements**
- **Increase in parent-child visits**
- **Increase in relative/ kinship placements**
- **Increase referrals and coordination with Part C services**
- **Improved access and coordination of services**

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Fort Bend Court Team Accomplishments

- Improved communication among providers, child welfare and the court
- Enhance provider capacity (professional development)
- Increased Oversight – court hearings every 30 days
- Increased knowledge among stakeholders
- Focus on front loading of services for children and families (including substance abuse treatment for families)

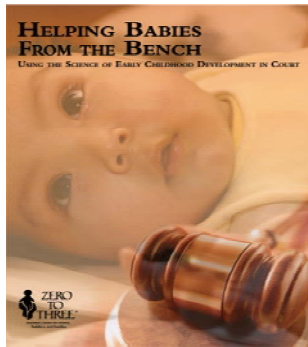
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CASE EXAMPLE

At age 14, Evelyn left her parents' home to live with her boyfriend. At 15 she had her first baby. Three years later she came to the attention of CPS when her second child was born weighing 3 pounds with cocaine and marijuana in her system. Both children were placed with their paternal grandparents while Evelyn struggled to deal with the substance abuse that had dominated her life for years. Given her own history with CPS as a child, her drug abuse, and her lack of independence from her boyfriend, no one was hopeful that she would regain custody of her children. Finally after 8 months and extensive coordination of services, Evelyn entered an in-patient substance abuse program and graduated. She attended in-patient treatment for about 2 months and was discharged to a halfway house. Seven months after entering treatment, her children were returned to her. She was able to develop a strong support system including a connection with a faith-based organization that provided furnishings for her apartment. She found a full-time job, an apartment, and child care. She remains drug free.

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Outreach and Training



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