

# How to Use *A Guide to Implementing the Safe Babies Court Team Approach*

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The greatest opportunity for influencing a child's life begins at birth. This science-based perspective is the very force that drives the mission and work of ZERO TO THREE. The prenatal period lays a critical foundation for the future, with many factors—such as nutrition, chemicals, socioeconomic status, and infections—influencing healthy fetal brain development. Then, from a baby's first breath, literally trillions of neural connections are being formed. As the brain "fires up" for learning, it is equipping infants and toddlers with an unparalleled capacity for emotional, social, physical, and intellectual growth. A baby's relationships and experiences with parents and other caregivers form the foundation on which cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and moral development is built. These first relationships predict an individual's future academic course and life success (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Every 6 minutes, a baby or toddler in America is removed from his parents' care because of alleged abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). At a time when these children are first exploring the world, when their lives as learners are just beginning, they are learning that the world is a dangerous and frightening place. Their brains are assaulted by stress hormones that can diminish their IQs and social interactions. Their need to find safe, trusting relationships overrides their curiosity. Their future and the future of their communities are compromised. These young children, a disproportionate percentage of whom are children of color, are often overlooked in the range of approaches designed to improve the early learning environments for children who are poor. Yet, they are the most at risk for damage from cognitive, developmental, emotional, and physical delays or disabilities that will sabotage their ability to have healthy, productive lives.

Despite this grim forecast, research confirms that the early years present an unparalleled window of opportunity to effectively intervene with very young victims of maltreatment (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Research-informed decision making combined with developmentally appropriate services 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, special education services, criminal behaviors, welfare dependence, substance abuse, and medical care for illnesses (both mental and physical) that are common among adults who were maltreated as children (Felitti, 2002; Malbin, 2004; Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Yet, the child welfare system is not guided by what science says babies need. As a result, what often unfolds is a developmental disaster for babies.

In our efforts to revolutionize the way communities work with these marginalized families, ZERO TO THREE, in partnership with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, developed the Safe Babies Court Team approach. This groundbreaking approach has been implemented in communities in 12 states and has drawn the concerted interest of teams in at least 12 more. Research findings to date demonstrate reductions in repeat maltreatment and the time very young children spend in foster care.

The purpose of ZERO TO THREE's *A Guide to Implementing the Safe Babies Court Team Approach* is to provide guidance to individuals in communities who want to better serve infants, toddlers, and their families within the child welfare system. The guide offers instruction for implementing a cooperative and dynamic structure of collaboration as well as creating partnerships among judges, families, and teams of professionals. These collaborative efforts work toward goals important to all: connecting babies and their families with the support and services they need to promote healthy child development while ensuring speedier exits from the system.

This guide does not promote a "one-size-fits-all" solution to the challenges faced by families within the child welfare system or by the system itself. The fundamentals of the Safe Babies Court Team approach can and must be tailored to the local community to ensure effectiveness.

*A Guide to Implementing the Safe Babies Court Team Approach* includes 12 chapters that cover a comprehensive list of topics important to implementing the Safe Babies Court Team

approach. We have published it online so that new material can be added as we expand our knowledge base and update information that becomes outdated. We have included a wide array of forms, checklists, and examples to bring the work to life in a tangible way that supports your ability to put our words into action. The table of contents provides a comprehensive list of all exhibits, some of which are mentioned in the appropriate chapter and others that are listed as “Additional Resources” for that chapter. Key pieces of information are highlighted in boxes to visually call your attention to important messages.

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I also want to thank you for your interest in this guidebook. ZERO TO THREE is about making connections that strengthen families, improving the lives of babies and toddlers, and ensuring all children get a healthy start in life. My colleagues and I have seen firsthand how the Safe Babies Court Team approach does just that. By working together, we will build community capacity to improve the lives of infants, toddlers, and their families.

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