



# ZERO TO THREE®

May 2012 Volume 32 No. 5

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*Journal of ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*

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## Parenting From a Distance

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Promoting Connections During  
Parental Deployment

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Co-Parenting During Separation  
and Divorce

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Supporting Hospitalized Children  
in Foster Care

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Parenting From Prison

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### **Also in This Issue:**

Evaluation Findings for the Safe Babies  
Court Teams Project

## THIS ISSUE AND WHY IT MATTERS

This issue of *Zero to Three* focuses on situations in which parents and children experience prolonged or repeated separations and on how to support emotional connections during these stressful circumstances. As described in the articles in this issue, parent and child separation can occur for a number of reasons, such as parental separation and divorce, hospitalization, incarceration, foster care, and military deployment or other work-related relocation. Whether family separations are short- or long-term, voluntary or forced, the circumstances of the separation will have an impact on how children cope, as well as the types of resources available to help. For example, there are relatively few resources when the separation is due to hospitalization or foster care, but numerous resources for children whose parents face military deployment.

The limited cognitive and verbal skills of very young children add a level of complexity to the situation that requires sensitive and knowledgeable responses from the adults in the child's life. Thus, a child's separation from a parent or other primary caregiver during the earliest years of life must be considered in the context of early social and emotional development and the unique needs and capacities of infants and toddlers. The scientific knowledge base is slowly building to better understand the impact and needs of very young children who experience separation and loss during the peak period for developing strong, secure attachments to their primary caregivers. Researchers and practitioners know that separation involves loss and grieving, and children grieve in different ways than adults. However, well-meaning caregivers may not recognize the signs of grieving in a young child or may find it difficult to acknowledge the suffering of very young children. Above all, children need comfort, safety, and security when facing a family separation. Fortunately, supportive and well-informed adults can guide children through these situations and teach them valuable coping skills for managing difficult emotions and challenging life circumstances. We hope this issue of *Zero to Three* makes a difference in what you know and do for the children in your care.

As always, we welcome Letters to the Editor and are eager for your feedback. Let us know what you think of this issue, what topics you would like to see covered in future issues, and how we can better support your work with young children and their families. I hope to hear from you!

Stefanie Powers, Editor  
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### [www.facebook.com/ZerotoThreeJournal](http://www.facebook.com/ZerotoThreeJournal)

The *Zero to Three* Journal Facebook page provides a place for *Zero to Three* readers to enrich their learning by offering the opportunity to connect with colleagues around the world who share an interest and passion for improving the lives of infants, toddlers, and their families. Join us on Facebook to pose questions, engage in discussion, find resources, and stay up-to-date on the latest news and information from the *Zero to Three* Journal.



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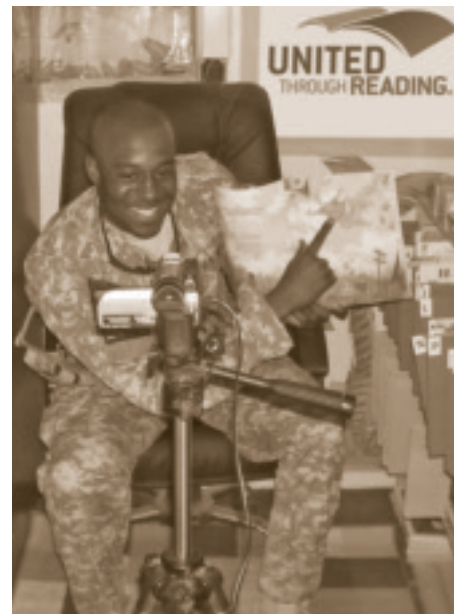
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# Moving Young Children From Foster Care to Permanent Homes

## *Evaluation Findings for the ZERO TO THREE Safe Babies Court Teams Project*

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America's youngest children experience the highest rates of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008, 2011; Wulczyn, Hislop, & Jones Harden, 2002). Maltreated infants and toddlers live in unstable homes at a critical point of their development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). They are at risk for insecure attachment that can lead to emotional withdrawal and, eventually, behavior issues such as poor self-regulation (Wulczyn et al., 2002; Zeanah, Boris, & Lieberman, 2001). Despite these risks, infants typically stay in foster care for longer periods than older children (Wulczyn, Chen, Collins, & Ernst, 2011).

The Safe Babies Court Teams Project (formerly known as the Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers Project) is a systems-change initiative designed to address the needs of young children in foster care. ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families (ZTT) developed the project and oversees implementation at the local level. This article summarizes findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of the Court Teams Project. The study examines the effect of the initiative on time to permanency. In this study, *time to permanency* is defined in two ways: (a) length of time before a child is placed in what ultimately becomes the permanent home and (b) length of time before the child is discharged from foster care.

### Safe Babies Court Teams Project

THE ZTT COURT Teams Project is a community-based initiative that targets infants and toddlers less than

3 years old entering the child welfare system. The project has three main goals:

- Reduce the time until children are in a permanent home, that is, decrease time to permanency.
- Improve the well-being of young children in foster care, including meeting developmental needs, fostering a secure caregiver relationship, and encouraging family involvement with the child.
- Reduce the recurrence of substantiated reports of abuse and neglect.

In conjunction with their Court Teams advisory committee, the ZTT national office has developed a Court Teams model for implementation at the local level designed to meet these goals. Initially inspired by early childhood-focused activities in the Miami-Dade County, Florida, courts, the model eventually evolved into a broader approach

### Abstract

This article summarizes an evaluation of the Safe Babies Court Teams Project. The study compared children in the Court Teams Project at the four initial sites ( $n = 298$ ) with a nationally representative sample of young child welfare participants ( $n = 511$ ) from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). The Court Teams Project has a significant effect on how quickly children exit foster care: Children participating in Court Teams leave foster care nearly 3 times as fast as the comparison sample. Findings also suggest that children in the Court Teams Project experience a different pattern of exits from foster care: Reunification is most common for Court Teams children (38%), whereas adoption is most prevalent for the comparison group (41%). Children in Court Teams appear to leave foster care faster regardless of the type of exit. Findings from interviews suggest that parental compliance with the service agreement heavily affects the case outcome. Both judicial approach and the monthly case reviews appear to contribute most to reducing time to permanency.



that was more easily implemented in a variety of environments and that includes evidence-based practices related to parent education and child-parent psychotherapy (Hafford & DeSantis, 2009).

The model comprises several major program components. Judicial leadership is the first component: ZTT works closely with National Council of Juvenile and Family Court judges to identify judges interested in bringing a court team to their community. Once funding is secured for a local site (typically through the U.S. Department of Justice), the ZTT national office works with the judge to hire a community coordinator, the second program component. The coordinator fulfills many roles, including forging a supportive working relationship with local professionals involved in the child welfare system, such as the county Department of Social Services or child protective services (CPS) case workers and supervisors, attorneys, court-appointed special advocates (CASA), and so on. The coordinator also learns about a variety of services for children and parents in the community. The judge and the coordinator work together to recruit child welfare representatives and service providers to participate in the local court team (the third program component). This court team is charged with identifying the needs of young children in the local child welfare system and developing a plan for addressing these needs (Hafford & DeSantis, 2009; McCombs, 2007).

The local plan incorporates the remaining components of the Court Teams model. For instance, the team decides how to implement monthly case reviews, a key piece of the model. ZTT requires that sites have a process for discussing cases monthly, to ensure each case is active and progress is continual. Reviews can take the form of court hearings or family team meetings. The plan also incorporates the remaining components of the Court Teams model, including referral to child-focused services, mental health intervention (i.e., child-parent psychotherapy), evidence-based parenting education, and ZTT national office activities (i.e., training and technical assistance, resource materials, and program monitoring and assessment). The court team meets regularly to review progress (Hafford & DeSantis, 2009; McCombs, 2007).

The local court team determines how children will be selected to participate in the program. Across the first four Court Teams sites, nearly all child welfare cases of children less than 3 years old assigned to the Court Teams judges have entered into the program. Assignment to judges is based on age (e.g., all infants and toddlers are assigned to the Court Teams judge in a county) or random assignment, depending on the site. Most sites work to maintain an active caseload of 20 to

25 cases at any time, although only one site is known to have actively put a temporary hold on taking new cases at one point because of community coordinator overload. Only one case in these original sites is known to have refused participation.

The initiative began in 2005. Twelve projects have been funded to date. Four of these projects have cases that reached permanency by the end of 2009.

### *Time-to-Permanency Outcome*

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) considers a child to have reached permanency when he is released from foster care and reunified with a parent or caregiver, legally adopted, placed with a relative who becomes the legal custodian, or lives with another type of legal guardian (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). The Court Teams Project seeks to decrease the time required before the child is officially discharged from foster care and achieves permanency as defined above. In addition to this time to “official” permanency, ZTT considers permanency from the child’s perspective. The young child may be unaware of the official determination date but will always be quite sensitive to a change in caregiver. Thus, the program also considers permanency in terms of how much time passes before the child moves into what ultimately becomes the permanent home. This is dubbed “move-in” permanency. For example, a child may move in with Grandma on day one. If Grandma becomes the permanent caregiver, then time to move-in permanency is quite short. The emphasis is on seeking an early foster care placement that could eventually become a permanent home (such as with a relative or a foster/adopt home) if reunification with parents is not possible. This focus on placement in a potential permanent home shortens the window in which the child is in flux, thereby increasing the likelihood that she can develop a positive attachment with the long-term caregiver.

### *Evaluation Methods*

THIS EVALUATION USED both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the statistical study, researchers compared children who participated in Court Teams ( $n = 298$ ) with a nationally representative sample of young child welfare participants ( $n = 511$ ), and then used a statistical method called “propensity score matching” to balance out the differences between the groups. After propensity score matching there were no statistically significant differences between the Court Teams cases and the comparison cases.

The ZTT Court Teams sample included all children in the initial four sites who entered

the project by December 31, 2009. The community coordinators routinely collected data from the CPS family service plan, from information shared at monthly case review meetings and court hearings, as well as from conversations with case workers and service providers. The study used data collected through September 2010, representing a follow-up period of 1 year or more for 94% of ZTT cases.

The researcher drew a comparison group from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a nationally representative, longitudinal study of children involved in the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

This analysis used the child welfare worker data in order to most closely reflect ZTT’s own reliance on child welfare data collected from CPS/professional sources. The researcher selected the comparison group based on the criterion used for ZTT enrollment, namely, experience of a child welfare-supervised out-of-home placement before age 3 years. All NSCAW cases had a follow-up period of 1 year or more.

The researcher also conducted one-on-one, open-ended phone interviews with the coordinator in each of the four sites to begin to understand how the initiative affects time to permanency. Each interview focused on how key actors in the program (the judge and the community coordinator) responded to a series of cases and how other program components (such as the monthly case reviews) were implemented for these families. The interviews included discussion of a total of 46 cases across the sites.

### **The Effect of the Court Teams Project on Time to Permanency**

THE ZTT SAFE Babies Court Teams Project had a significant effect on how quickly children exit the foster care system. Children who participated in Court Teams exited foster care 1 year earlier, on average, than a nationally representative group of children from the NSCAW longitudinal survey. Children in Court Teams left foster care in just over 1 year (median 12.6 months), whereas the comparison group exited foster care in just over 2 years (median of 25.0 months). When we controlled for differences in characteristics between the two groups that might explain these results, we found that children in Court Teams left foster care nearly 3 times as fast as the comparison group (McCombs-Thornton & Foster, 2012).

The initiative also appeared to have a significant effect on how children exit foster care. Young children typically exit foster care in one of four ways: reunification, adoption, relative guardianship, or nonrelative legal

guardianship (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Children who experience reunification usually spend less time in foster care than children who are adopted. The effect of the program on time to permanency was in fact explained somewhat by differences in types of exits. Reunification was the most common type of exit for ZTT children (38% ZTT vs. 29% NSCAW), whereas adoption was most frequent for NSCAW children (15% ZTT vs. 41% NSCAW). The analysis found, however, that children involved with Court Teams spent much less time in foster care regardless of the type of exit. Of children who were reunified, those in the Court Teams Project exited foster care 8 months faster on average. Among those who were adopted, children in Court Teams left foster care 10 months sooner on average. Of children who reached permanency with a relative guardian, children in Court Teams exited foster care 3 to 4 months faster on average. And among children exiting to a nonrelative guardian, children in Court Teams left foster care an average of 10 to 13 months quicker (McCombs-Thornton & Foster, 2012).

### Key Court Teams Components

**T**HE STATISTICS SHOW a strong effect of the Court Teams Project on reducing time in foster care. However, they do not indicate which parts of the project are most important for reducing this time. Researchers conducted interviews with the

community coordinators in each of the four sites to begin to understand how the project works to reduce time to permanency.

### Role of the Parent

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the parents' decision to comply with CPS requirements is a major determining factor in the case outcome. When CPS assumes temporary custody of the child, one of the first steps is to develop a service plan (also called the "service agreement," "case plan," or "family plan of service" in the Court Teams sites). The case worker typically meets with the parents to understand their service needs and barriers to creating a safe home for the child. The service plan reflects these needs, clearly outlining the interventions in which parents are required to participate. Whether parents comply with the services ordered in the service plan is at the center of the permanency process. Their decision to comply with the service plan ultimately influences the direction of the case and the final case outcome. Figure 1 shows how the parents' approach to the service plan affects the case outcome. As one community coordinator put it:

*The case closes when CPS says the parents have completed the service plan, they've done everything we've asked them to do. We have a place for the children, a permanent place for the children, the case is closed. . . . It is like a*

*contract with CPS and the parent. You do what you are supposed to do; you get your children back.*

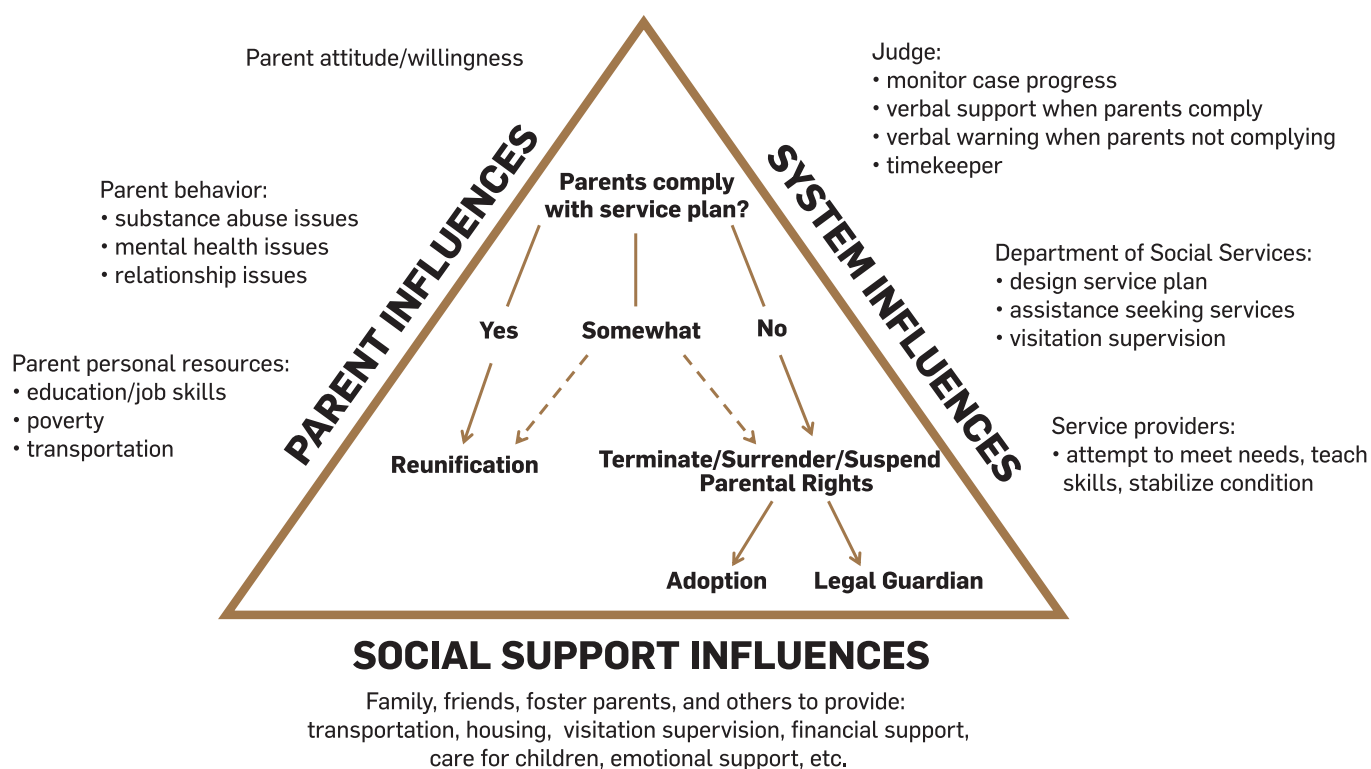
When parents comply, the case usually ends in reunification. Parents who do not comply generally lose or give up their parental rights, leading to adoption or legal guardianship. Parents who comply somewhat but not to the full extent tend to draw out the case even longer. Parental approach to compliance is therefore linked to how children exit foster care, which, in turn, is linked to time to permanency.

A variety of factors influence the parents' behavior in complying with the service plan. Analysis of the qualitative data yielded three main influences on the parents' approach to compliance, namely, their own parental attributes, the availability of social support, and the child welfare system. Figure 1 illustrates these central factors that affect the parents' decision and capacity to comply.

### Role of the Safe Babies Court Teams

With the parents' behavior being key to the outcome, how does the ZTT Court Teams Project influence time to permanency? Figure 1 suggests that the ZTT Court Teams could ultimately decrease time to permanency by directly influencing the parents' decision to comply with the service plan and indirectly through influencing their social support network, case workers, and service providers.

**Figure 1. Key Influences on Parents' Approach to Complying With the Service Plan**





service plan and appear to be taking steps to change their behaviors, the judge can be very encouraging. There were many examples of judicial support shown to the parents, as in this case:

*[The judge] was very supportive and really wanted the children with their mother. And, you know, basically would encourage her and would actually praise her and tell her she was doing a good job and tell her to keep it up . . . assuring her we were going in the right direction. . . . [The judge] is very good about praising when you've made progress on your service plan and you're doing what you're supposed to do.*

There are other parents who show little sign of overcoming their addictions and destructive behaviors. Judges often refer to the passing time to encourage the parents to act. "We're running out of time" was a consistent comment from the bench across the sites. In addition, when the CPS worker and service providers share in court that the parents are not complying, the judge may be much more directive, as in the this case:

*So the judge was pointing this out to this mother, that "You know, all of this stuff is in place, and anytime that somebody set something up for you and gets you what you need, it gets sabotaged by this volatile relationship that you have [with the dad]. It circumvents everything that everybody is trying to do. And you don't take advantage of it. And you have to make a decision for yourself if you're going to choose this relationship or if you're going to choose your children." And the end result is that she chose the relationship.*

### **The Court Teams Project seeks to decrease the time required before the child is officially discharged from foster care and achieves permanency.**

Analysis of the interviews revealed that two of the Court Teams model components appeared to be most directly related to time to permanency: the judge and the monthly case reviews. Table 1 shows how these components work to speed up the permanency process.

#### ***Role of the Judge***

The judges in the four Court Teams jurisdictions use different approaches in the courtroom. Some mainly react to the information shared during the hearing. Others ask many questions about parental compliance, the child's well-being, and the

overall progress of the case. Regardless of the style, each judge uses her authority to directly encourage the parent to comply. The judges also try to support and motivate key influences on the parents' compliance, namely the temporary caregiver and family (social support influences) and the case worker and service providers (systems influences).

Much of the judges' attention in the courtroom appears to center on the parents. Community coordinators described how each judge displayed both encouragement and firmness, as warranted, toward the parents. When the parents are complying with the

**Table 1: Effect of ZERO TO THREE Court Teams Program on Key Influences Affecting Parental Compliance With Service Plan**

<b>Key ZTT Court Teams Component</b>	<b>Parental Influences</b>	<b>Social Support Influences</b>	<b>Systems Influences</b>
<i>Judicial leadership</i>	Motivate parents to act/continued encouragement Order additional services or activities, or facilitate getting needs met, or both Point out how relatives, case workers, and providers have helped; may ask them for more effort in helping the parent get services Model for the parents the importance of child well-being* Order increased visitation* Increased focus on the timeline	Thank temporary caregivers Ask how they are doing caring for the child; what needs they have Give family members opportunity to comment in court on what they have observed between the parent and the child since the last court hearing Increased focus on the timeline	Point out all the case worker and providers have done for the parent and the child; encourage professionals to continue Order additional services or activities as needed; may require case worker or service provider to do a specific task on behalf of parent or child Motivate case worker to act if they have not Increased focus on the timeline
<i>Monthly Case Reviews</i>	Very frequent and regular opportunity for judge to hold parents accountable May motivate parents to comply more quickly to avoid warning from judge at next fast-approaching hearing	Opportunity for temporary caregivers, visitation supervisors, and family members to communicate their needs and have them met quickly, often because of judicial intervention	Keep all involved parties on task Requires key actors to respond faster; do not procrastinate Illuminate case direction and likely outcome more quickly

\* May not be directly related to parental compliance, but may help remind parents of benefits of complying



No matter the approach, in all cases, the judges appear to be quite consistent and clear. The recurrent message to the parents is that they need to change their behavior and comply with the service plan to get their children back—time is ticking.

Although much of the judges' focus is on the parents and how they are complying with the service plan, the judges also direct some of their attention to the other key influences on the parents' decision to comply, namely, their social support network and the professionals involved in the case. Judges routinely carve out time for the relatives and foster parents (often one and the same) to speak about the case. In addition to informing the judge how the child's needs are being met, the coordinators thought that giving the caregiver the floor might help highlight for the parent the importance of the child's well-being.

Lastly, judges also appear to be the timekeepers on a case, setting expectations for the case worker and service team to guide the case to permanency within a certain time period. Three of the community coordinators specifically mentioned the role of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in pushing cases along. Judges appear to vary in how they fulfill this timekeeper role. One community coordinator noted that the judge in her site sets clear expectations for the case worker to present recommendations on a permanent placement by the 6-month mark. Another coordinator described her judge as making sure all reasonable efforts had taken place and giving parents many opportunities to get their children back.

### Monthly Case Reviews

Each local court team reviews the progress of the case on a monthly basis. The intent of the monthly reviews is to help move the case along. The Court Teams program model does not specify exactly what this process should include in each site. Instead, the local court team must develop a plan for the monthly reviews appropriate for their environment. Three of the four sites meet this requirement by holding formal monthly hearings. The fourth site holds hearings about every 6 weeks, with family team meetings in between each hearing. Prior to the Court Teams Project, community coordinators noted that hearings were held only about every 3 months across the sites.

Hearings involve nearly all of the key players in the case. The judge and other court employees, community coordinator, child welfare system professionals, the family, and the temporary caregiver participate in the hearings. Child welfare system professionals include the case worker, case worker supervisor, attorneys, and, if available in the site, guardians ad litem (a child's courtroom



**Children who experience reunification usually spend less time in foster care than children who are adopted.**

advocate), and CASA volunteers. Service providers typically submit a report to the court on the parents' participation in service, although sometimes the providers are called to testify in court. The child may or may not attend the hearing, depending on whether the temporary caregiver brings the child to court. As one coordinator noted, "the judge likes to see the child at least once at the beginning of the case."

The court hearing is the only contact that judges have with the families. Judges generally are not able to speak about the case outside of court. Therefore, the monthly hearings are the mechanism the judge uses to influence the parent, the social network, and the systems professionals.

Community coordinators were quite consistent in their description of the role of the monthly hearings. Across the sites, the monthly case reviews were described as filling two main roles: (a) helping to keep the parents and professionals "on task" and (b) showing the judge and CPS whether and how the parents are complying with the service plan.

Community coordinators spoke about staying on task most commonly in regards to the staff on the case. For instance:

*Everybody stayed on task because they knew we were gonna be staffing and we were going to be in court. So there was no room for, for example, making a referral a week before we go to court because we were always going to court. So everybody was pretty much able to stay on task because we were going so much. . . . We all can be procrastinators, but if you know you'll be in court every month and you'll be staffing every*

*month, you're gonna do what you're supposed to do because that question will be asked every month.*

Some of the community coordinators noted the influence of the monthly court hearings on the parents as well. As this coordinator reflects:

*Because usually CPS cases, the hearings are every 90 days, but with this, the parents know that they have to be in court every month. It gets them motivated to get on the ball so they don't have to go to the judge in 30 days to explain to the judge why they haven't done what they are supposed to have done 30 days prior. So maybe it just kind of keeps them motivated to complete the service plan.*

All community coordinators indicated that progress with the service plan was discussed at every monthly case review or hearing. One described the purpose of the monthly hearings:

*The purpose was basically to keep a handle on the progress or lack of progress in the case. And what progress was being made and if there was no progress being made, why. And who was responsible. And if there's anything that needed to be done to move the case along.*

The monthly case reviews allowed the judge and CPS to more quickly deduce the parents' intent. Are they going to comply with the service plan? Are they going to change their behavior so they can provide a safe and stable home for the child? As one coordinator noted:




*The case reviews can help in one of two ways. In this particular case it helped CPS determine that they needed to go on with TPR [termination of parental rights], to terminate the rights because you're coming in every month and you're showing no progress, no progress, no progress. . . . Either it's gonna help get home faster or help CPS determine where we need to go on with the concurrent plan, termination of parental rights.*

In other cases, the monthly hearings provided information “the judge needed to assure [the judge] that [the mom] would be capable of taking care of her children.”

## Conclusion

**T**HE ZTT SAFE Babies Court Teams Project appears to have a significant effect on how quickly children exit the foster care system. The judge and the

monthly case reviews seem to be the key program mechanisms for moving cases more swiftly out of foster care. Although the results are affirming, they should be viewed in moderation. The statistical analysis, for instance, considers only the first episode in child welfare and doesn't account for cases that may have experienced further abuse and then reentry into the system. There also may be additional variables that could explain the time-to-permanency outcome that were not included in the analysis. In addition, the analysis of which program components are linked to time to permanency is limited by the reliance on feedback from the community coordinators and by the fact that only one person reviewed the data. Even with these limitations, the ZTT Court Teams Project offers a promising approach to accelerate and foster a permanent home for young children. 

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