



The Safe Babies Court Team Approach

Changing the Trajectories of Children in Foster Care

Why do we need interventions to help babies and toddlers in foster care?

- All children in foster care are at risk for poor developmental outcomes, but these risks are heightened for the youngest children.
- Science tells us that **85% of brain growth** happens in a child's first 3 years. This is also a time when babies learn to trust adults and form secure attachments to their caregivers. Spending a long time in care without a permanent and safe caregiver is therefore detrimental to both brain development and attachment.
- Judges can promote the healthy development of babies and toddlers in foster care by helping them reach safe and permanent homes in a timely fashion, and by championing best practices for supporting the health and well-being of both children and their families.

What is the Safe Babies Court Team approach?

- ZERO TO THREE created The Safe Babies Court Team[™] (Safe Babies) approach to reduce the amount of time babies and toddlers aged 0 to 3 spend in foster care before reaching a safe and

permanent home, and to support the long-term well-being of children and families.

- The approach is implemented at the local level and includes national supports from ZERO TO THREE such as trainings and ongoing technical assistance for each site. This includes trainings for judges about the science of child development and the impacts of trauma.
- The local Safe Babies Court Team implements the approach with support from the following members:
 - ❖ A judge who will champion the effort
 - ❖ A community coordinator who manages the day-to-day work
 - ❖ A Community Team, which meets monthly and includes a diverse set of child welfare stakeholders in your community
 - ❖ A Family Team, which includes biological families, foster families, attorneys, social workers, case workers, court-appointed special advocates (CASAs), and so on, and meets monthly to discuss the needs of each specific family and case
- Together the judge, community coordinator, Community Team, and Family Team implement the Safe Babies approach.

What is the judge's role in implementing the Safe Babies Court Team approach?

- Judges champion the implementation of the Safe Babies approach within their community.
- Judges use trauma-responsive practices to engage families and to create a less adversarial courtroom, setting the tone for the entire court team.
- Judges support community trainings and professional development.
- Judges convene key stakeholders to jointly enact change within the local child welfare system.



What are community coordinators and how do they support the implementation of the Safe Babies Court Team approach at the local level?

- Each Safe Babies Court Team has its own community coordinator, ideally in a full-time capacity.
- The community coordinator supports the judge in implementing the Safe Babies Court Team approach.
- The community coordinator recruits stakeholders from the community to collaborate on making system-level changes. The community coordinator develops trainings for these stakeholders and facilitates their convenings.
- The community coordinator also supports maltreated babies, toddlers, and their families by facilitating monthly Family Team meetings to ensure parents have a voice in their child's case and can find community supports and resources to meet their needs.

How does the Safe Babies Court Team approach engage stakeholders?

- Each site maintains an active Community Team that brings together community leaders and professionals who are committed to strengthening their communities and enacting system-level change within their local child welfare system.
- The community coordinator leads the Community Team, in partnership with the judge who oversees Safe Babies cases.
- Team members include child welfare agency leaders, attorneys, CASAs, mental health professionals, substance use disorder providers, early childhood learning and education providers, and any other professionals who engage with families and are committed to changing the child welfare system.
- At monthly meetings, Community Team members collaborate to make more resources in the community available to the Safe Babies families, discuss and resolve any barriers affecting the families, and review site-specific outcome data, all with the overarching goal of carrying out positive structural change within the local child welfare system.
- Each site engages in continuous quality improvement through network supports provided by ZERO TO THREE.

How does the Safe Babies Court Team approach engage and support families?

- Each family has its own unique Family Team, which is responsible for supporting them in ways that are more intensive than is usual in the child welfare field.
- The Family Team includes family members, their support persons and attorneys, the child welfare caseworker, foster parents, and clinicians, all of whom support the family's unique needs.
- The dedicated monthly meeting time allows Family Team members to communicate and interact with each other frequently and quickly solve any emerging problems. The frequent contact keeps families fully engaged and supported while their infant or toddler is in foster care or in the home under court supervision.
- The Family Team links families quickly with needed services, improves shared problem solving among all team members, and facilitates sensitive communication during what can be a very emotionally charged and traumatic time for families.
- Ultimately, the aim of the Family Team meetings is to create an environment in which families, foster parents, and child welfare staff can collaborate on promoting child and family well-being and working toward a permanent placement for the child.



Does the Safe Babies Court Team approach improve outcomes for babies and toddlers?

A recent independent evaluation was conducted by the [American Institutes for Research](#) in three Safe Babies sites: Little Rock, Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Des Moines, Iowa. This evaluation found that cases that were randomly assigned to a judge who used the Safe Babies Court Team approach had better outcomes. The specific findings were as follows:

- Safe Babies cases had final legal permanence about 4 months sooner than control cases.
- Cases with access to all components of the Safe Babies approach had lower rates of recurrence of abuse or neglect: 1% with the full Safe Babies court team versus about 6% to 7% in cases with just the trained judge or control judge.
- Long-term follow-up interviews suggested that Safe Babies children and their families were doing well after they exited foster care, reporting high levels of child and family well-being for up to 2 years after case closure.

What do the research findings mean for you?

- This study provides evidence that the Safe Babies approach has a positive impact on maltreated babies, toddlers, and their families. Cases assigned to judges trained in the Safe Babies approach exited foster care sooner than cases assigned to a control judge. The impact on time to permanency was statistically significant and substantively meaningful.



- These findings are meaningful for babies and toddlers in particular, because having a safe and permanent home is key to forming healthy attachments and fostering healthy child development.
- Spending less time in foster care also results in cost savings for the state.

What to do if you want to bring the Safe Babies Court Team approach to your courtroom

- If you are interested in learning more about the Safe Babies Court Team or bringing this evidence-based approach to your courtroom, we would love to hear from you! You can contact Janie Huddleston (JHuddleston@zerotothree.org) for more information about how to get started.
- You can also check out ZERO TO THREE's website for more information on the [Safe Babies Court Team Approach](#).
- For more detail about the recent evaluation, you can check out the [report](#) or reach out to Dr. Ann-Marie Faria (afaria@air.org or 202-403-5356).