

Child welfare plays a critical role in providing direct oversight and helping families navigate changes, with an intentional and consistent focus on children’s needs. Shifts in child welfare practice toward a holistic view of the family can impact direct family engagement and, ultimately, system practice and policy changes — driving alignment across supportive family systems. The role of child welfare leadership in the Safe Babies approach is critical to making such shifts happen.



The “why” behind the role of child welfare leadership in the Safe Babies approach

- The science of early development shows that the first three years of life are a critical window of opportunity for promoting children’s health and well-being.^{1,2}
- Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships are foundational to promoting healthy development and, in cases where children encounter adverse experiences, are supportive of their recovery.
- In the traditional child welfare system, when children are removed from home, they and their parents experience the trauma of separation, a court process that can be adversarial and punitive rather than collaborative and resiliency building, and services that can be uncoordinated and do not meet urgent needs.³
- Families of children who come to the attention of the child welfare system and are at risk of removal cannot always access appropriate services and supports that sufficiently build protective factors, with the children’s developmental needs remaining unidentified and unaddressed.^{4,5}
- Missed opportunities to intervene in an effective and timely way to support children’s developmental health during the critical period of early development can lead to negative, long-term physical, psychological, and behavioral outcomes.⁶
- There are also opportunities frequently lost in terms of strengthening families to promote healthy development, including with siblings or subsequent children, as well as to promote family health and well-being.
- Given that the child welfare sector has historically focused on promoting child safety, it is becoming increasingly recognized that infants and very young children require safe and secure relationships and the supports to achieve these relationships.
- Child welfare can enhance current practice with an intentional focus on babies and toddlers. A practice shift to center very young children may be required, which can improve consistency with the well-being practice area of current child welfare approaches.⁷

1 Center on the Developing Child. (n.d.). *What is early childhood development? A guide to the science (ECD 1.0)*. Harvard University. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/what-is-early-childhood-development-a-guide-to-the-science/>

2 ZERO TO THREE. (n.d.). *Early development*. <https://www.zerotothree.org/issue-areas/early-development/>

3 upEND Movement. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://upendmovement.org/resources/>

4 Dettlaff, A. J., Weber, K., Pendleton, M., Boyd, R., Bettencourt, B., & Burton, L. (2020, September 6). It is not a broken system, it is a system that needs to be broken: The upEND movement to abolish the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14(5), 500-517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1814542>

5 Center for the Study of Social Policy. (n.d.). *Child welfare*. <https://cssp.org/our-work/focus/child-welfare/>

6 Jordan, E., Vandivere, S., & Gross, E. (2022, June 7). *Alignment between early childhood and child welfare systems benefits children and families*. ChildTrends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/alignment-between-early-childhood-and-child-welfare-systems-benefits-children-and-families>

7 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (n.d.). *Well-being*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/well-being/>

The Safe Babies approach recognizes that there is variation in the structure and operation of each state's child welfare system. These variations make it challenging to adequately capture the titles, terms, and context for each state and community. To address this challenge, the Safe Babies approach identifies child welfare leadership at three levels:

CHILD/FAMILY LEVEL:

Leadership is the frontline worker directly interacting with and supporting a family — often referred to as a caseworker.

SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL:

Leadership is the role that oversees a local office or region and is responsible for identifying the challenging trends families experience, coordinating and aligning with early childhood systems, and acting to improve outcomes for families.

STATE LEVEL:

Leadership is the role that interfaces with the federal Administration for Children and Families, works to change policy and practice by analyzing data trends and stories from the field, and responds to changes from their state legislature.

Child welfare leadership in the Safe Babies approach has essential functions at each of these levels. These responsibilities are part of Safe Babies child welfare partners' regular job duties and reflect an enhanced capacity to specifically support infants, toddlers, and their families.

The Safe Babies approach enriches and supports all child welfare leadership in accomplishing their individual and collective goals with families, including increasing safety, permanency, and well-being while working in partnership with the community to help families reach the best possible outcomes.



Essential Functions and Practices: CHILD/FAMILY LEVEL



Child welfare leadership at the child/family level in the Safe Babies approach refers to the frontline worker who provides case oversight and partners with children, parents, other family members, and resource caregivers. The essential functions of this role promote researched and aligned practices in family engagement, trauma-responsive care, and cross-sector collaboration. These functions are primarily realized through a role in frequent, quality Family Team Meetings and the engagement of families with services that best meet their needs.

As frontline workers are able, they may also participate in the Active Community Team, where they can build and maintain partnerships with broader early childhood and promotion services and support systems. Frontline workers may also share their experiences with community partners to improve equitable access to comprehensive prevention, early intervention, and therapeutic services and supports for all families with very young children in the community.

CHILD/FAMILY LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
Engaging Parents in the Case Process	Championing equitable program access for families that could be involved in the Safe Babies approach, including universal support of all eligible families entering Safe Babies when child welfare is a referrer
	Supporting clarity with families about the community coordinator's role and responsibilities
	Listening to parents' strengths and needs and helping elevate their voices in practice
	Ensuring that parents and children are referred to appropriate services and supports, including having parents as key partners in both service provision and court-ordered services
Engaging Family and Their Supports in the Safe Babies Approach	Actively participating in Family Team Meetings (FTMs)
	Ensuring parental access to FTMs, including any supports necessary to enable participation (e.g., virtual access or in-person supports)
	Maintaining a focus that prioritizes the needs of infants and toddlers in service acquisition (i.e., thoughtfully considering what infants, toddlers, and their families are being asked to do as a part of case planning)
Advancing Equitable Family Health and Well-Being	Intentionally focusing on helping develop personal capacity for reflective practice, including a focus on racial equity
	Reinforcing a strengths-based, healing approach that builds positive childhood experiences and protective factors during all communication with families

Essential Functions and Practices: SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL



Child welfare leadership at the site/community level in the Safe Babies approach refers to the professionals supporting coordination of efforts for streamlined and supportive interactions with all families. This includes building a strong partnership with the local judiciary to create a system of supports to improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, and their families, as well as developing supports in the

community that benefit families and promote optimal child development. The essential functions of this role promote researched and aligned practices in trauma-responsive care and cross-sector collaboration. These functions are primarily realized through a role in the Active Community Team and Site Implementation Team.

SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
<p>Collaboratively Leading the Safe Babies Active Community Team (ACT)</p>	<p>Working in close collaboration with the Safe Babies Community Coordinator and judge to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify community partners/collaborators and parents and extend invitations to participate in the ACT Plan and prepare for ACT meetings (e.g., scheduling; setting agendas; and identifying trends, needs, and issues to discuss) Review Safe Babies data for continuous quality improvement
	<p>Taking a leadership role during ACT meetings by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framing the work as collective leadership and emphasizing the need for cross-system collaboration to support very young children and their families Setting the tone for collaborative dialogue, information sharing (e.g., aggregate/de-identified data), and solution finding Advancing equity for children and families by identifying and addressing disparities in and barriers to needed services and supports <p>(In some communities, it may make sense for the ACT to be purposefully integrated into an existing early childhood coalition. In such cases, child welfare leadership supports the integration and serves as an active participant.)</p>
	<p>Supporting critical connections across local initiatives and using data to engage community leaders around trends and needs specifically for children ages 0-3 and their families who are involved in the child welfare system</p>

Essential Functions and Practices: SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL



SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
<p>Collaboratively Supporting Implementation of the Safe Babies Approach</p>	<p>Working in close collaboration with the Safe Babies Community Coordinator, the Safe Babies judge, and professionals from other key sectors to support the Safe Babies approach, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Championing the Safe Babies approach • Developing and sustaining operational strategies (e.g., frequency of Family Team Meeting hearings, centering of parent voice in planning and solution finding) • Using data to identify implementation challenges and inform solution finding • Strategizing with partners for sustainability of the Safe Babies approach
<p>Building Community Partnerships that increase coordination, alignment, and integration of services and supports</p>	<p>Championing the Safe Babies approach to community partners, including new professionals, parent leaders, and parent partners/peer mentors</p>
	<p>Reaching out to traditional and non-traditional services and supports to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify available and/or needed assessments, evidence-based services, and supports (concrete resources) for Safe Babies infants, toddlers, and their families • Share information about Safe Babies and the unique needs of infants, toddlers, and their families • Develop partnerships and connections that support strong referral linkages, program alignment, and peer-to-peer learning
	<p>Participating in other local or state initiatives that focus on advancing community capacity to address the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families</p>



Essential Functions and Practices: SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL



SITE/COMMUNITY LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
Advancing Equity across the systems serving infants, toddlers, and their families	Developing a personal and systemic approach to racial and health disparities through reflection about their leadership role, and utilizing this approach to support families who experience disparities
	Supporting community strategies that promote equity in the child welfare system
	Sharing information with ACT partners about racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare (e.g., current research, policy, evidence-based services, and best practices)
Promoting Continuous Quality Improvement	Identifying and interpreting data (e.g., bringing child welfare community information and family stories to the ACT) to determine knowledge needs and assets or available community services/supports
	Communicating to the ACT any data/reports that capture service/system gaps and barriers that children and families may be experiencing so that child welfare professionals can advocate for programs and services and statewide work



Essential Functions and Practices: STATE LEVEL



Child welfare leadership at the state level in the Safe Babies approach refers to those professionals who lead the integration of multi-system efforts to support families with young children, as well as policy change efforts to ensure that daily practices align with family needs. The essential functions of this role include promoting researched and aligned practices in cross-

sector collaboration, building systems that support trauma-informed care, enhancing protective factors with targeted universalism, and centering the voices of parents with lived experience to support family engagement. These functions are primarily realized through a role in the State Advisory Group.

STATE LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
Actively Participating in State Advisory Group Meetings	Collaboratively building a system of supports to best serve children and families with infants and toddlers
	Developing strategies to address the goals of the State Advisory Group
	Sharing information about policy and practice, data trends, and state-level plans (FFPSA Prevention Plan, PIP, CFSR, APSR) to align with other partners
Building Community Partnerships that increase coordination, alignment, and integration of services and supports	Communicating effectively about the alignment of and need for services for families involved in the Safe Babies approach with community partners, including new professionals, parent leaders, and parent partners/peer mentors
	Reaching out to traditional and non-traditional service and support providers to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop enhanced capacity for family serving systems • Understand family needs and partner with community organizations to deliver culturally responsive and culturally specific services
	Participating in other local or state initiatives that focus on advancing community capacity to address the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families



Essential Functions and Practices: STATE LEVEL



STATE LEVEL	
Essential Functions	Practices
Advancing Equity across the systems serving infants, toddlers, and their families	Intentionally supporting and prioritizing services for families who experience disparities, as well as supporting strategies to promote equity at a system level
	Sharing and providing interpretation of information about racial and ethnic disparities with partners (e.g., current research, policy, evidence-based services, and best practices) with the State Advisory Group
Promoting Continuous Quality Improvement	Identifying and interpreting data (e.g., from child welfare and/or the Safe Babies database) and family stories to assess knowledge needs and assets or available state services/supports
	Communicating to the State Advisory Group and State Leadership Team any data/reports that capture service/system gaps and barriers affecting children and their families