



Safe Babies
A Program of ZERO TO THREE™

The Safe Babies Approach: Core Components

Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

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APPROACH OVERVIEW

Objective: Keeping families together by igniting collective action across states and local communities to meet the urgent needs of babies and toddlers.

Safe Babies, a program of ZERO TO THREE, uses an innovative, team-based approach to apply developmental science and infant-early childhood mental health (IECMH) principles to meet the urgent needs of babies and toddlers under court jurisdiction. The centering of the baby’s emotional and developmental needs transforms child welfare into a system that strengthens child and family well-being.

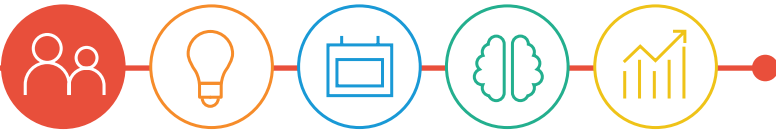
Areas of Focus Rooted in IECMH



Core Components At-A-Glance

1. Judicial, Child Welfare and Attorney Leadership
2. Community Coordinator
3. Active Community Team
4. Family Team Meetings
5. Parent Leadership
6. Connecting Infants, Toddlers and their Families to a Continuum of Wraparound Services
7. Partnering with Families
8. Nurturing Parent Relationships and Building Social Supports in the Community
9. Frequent, Quality Family Time
10. Concurrent Planning
11. Continuous Quality Improvement

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIVE AND PROACTIVE TEAMWORK



OBJECTIVE: Ensuring families' individualized needs are met by promoting coordination across communities, finding creative solutions, and removing structural barriers that limit access to supports and opportunities.

Core Component 1: **Judicial, Child Welfare, and Attorney Leadership**

WHY: These roles demonstrate leadership by using their decision-making influence to drive change and set the tone for the team, including centering the developmental needs of the young child. They engage in ongoing learning, reflection, and collaboration.

Similar functions across these roles include:

- Modeling strengths-based, trauma-responsive engagement with families
- Building strong collaborative relationships centered on trust, transparency, and empathy
- Collaboratively supporting implementation of the Safe Babies approach through engagement in the Site Implementation Team
- Carrying out designated roles in Active Community Team meetings (Judges and child welfare co-lead with the Community Coordinator, and attorneys actively participate.)
- Being a champion for infants, toddlers, and their families, including spreading the word about the importance and value of the Safe Babies approach

● [Check out the Judges and Judicial Officers Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)

● [Check out the Child Welfare Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)

● [Check out the Legal Roles Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)



Core Component 2: Community Coordinator

WHY: The Community Coordinator is a unique role with essential community and family-level functions. This full-time position works with up to 20 families at a time due to the intensity and expansive nature of the role. It is not case management.

The role is responsible for:

- Building linkages across systems so that services are better aligned and coordinated
- Providing a consistent and strong voice for the urgent developmental needs of infants and toddlers, including the critical role of early caregiver-child relationships
- Elevating the parental voice throughout the child welfare process

● [Check out the Community Coordinator Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)



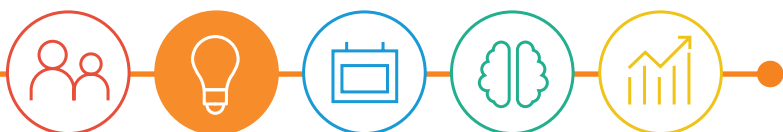
Core Component 3: Active Community Team

WHY: The Active Community Team (ACT) brings community partners together to improve access to comprehensive prevention, early intervention, therapeutic services, and supports for families with very young children.

- The ACT works together to find community solutions for barriers and trends identified at the family level to yield broader systems and policy change. This may include multidisciplinary workforce trainings, funding opportunities for new or expanding existing services, and improvement of referral processes to community services, resources, and supports.
- If an existing early childhood coalition is engaged in similar efforts in the community, it is acceptable to integrate the work of an ACT into the already active coalition.
- If the ACT is a new coalition formed by the Safe Babies team, it is collaboratively led by the Judge, Child Welfare Leadership, and the Community Coordinator.

● [Check out the Active Community Team Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)

ENHANCED OVERSIGHT AND COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING



OBJECTIVE: Enhancing judicial oversight with more frequent court hearings and engaging families as partners guided by respect, kindness, and compassion

Core Component 4: Family Team Meetings

WHY: Family Team Meetings (FTMs) engage families in collaborative, proactive planning that puts young children’s developmental needs for safe, stable, and nurturing early caregiving relationships, as well as the individualized needs of each family member, at the center of decision-making. This makes FTMs different than typical staffings.

The key roles of the approach are meaningfully involved in FTM success:

- The Judge does not attend these meetings but has a key role in setting clear expectations for the importance of FTMs that result in preparedness for court, meaningful reasonable efforts (i.e., services and supports that meet specific developmental needs of the child and the comprehensive needs of the family), and follow-through.
- The Community Coordinator or an external facilitator manages the FTMs, which are facilitated by a skilled and neutral facilitator. (In some cases, this is the Community Coordinator.)
- Parents are essential participants in FTMs, with professionals actively supporting parental confidence, motivation, and capacity for self-advocacy in a shared planning process. Attorney and child welfare caseworkers are vital participants in FTMs, and each have essential functions that help make these meetings successful.

● [Check out the Family Team Meeting Definitional Tool for Key Activities](#)



Core Component 5: Parent Leadership

WHY: Parents who have experienced engagement with the child welfare system are an essential asset to enhance that system with a focus on family well-being. In Safe Babies, we identify **Parent Mentors** and **Parent Leaders** as key roles that keep the baby, parent, and parent-child relationship at the center. Parent leaders work at the community, state, and national levels to integrate their parents' voice into policy and practice. Parent Mentors support parents at the family level to navigate their child welfare process. Parent Mentors are well-informed about community resources. Though the roles each serve a different purpose, a parent with lived experience can serve in both capacities. Starting as a Parent Mentor influences and shapes your experience as a Parent Leader.

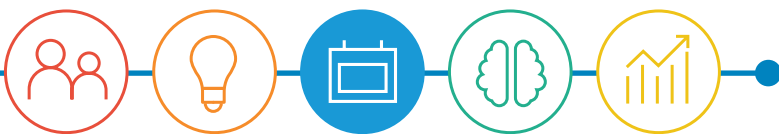
It is recommended that FTM's occur monthly for each family in the Safe Babies approach. The key roles of the approach are meaningfully involved in FTM success:

- Parent Mentors provide mentoring to parents navigating the child welfare system by increasing their understanding and insights regarding expectations while involved in the process of child welfare cases.
- Parent Mentors demonstrate parent support by attending family team meetings, making connections and modeling interactions with service providers, supporting them before and after court hearings, and influencing resiliency by connecting parents to resources.
- Parent Mentors contribute their experience and insight to tailoring family needs within the supportive services of the Safe Babies Team
- Parent Leaders give voice to parent experience in early childhood and family systems.
- Parent Leaders build upon their knowledge and skills to take on meaningful leadership roles within programs, agencies, and communities.
- Parent Leaders help to evolve practices where limitations are experienced by families served (i.e. long waitlists, family time needs/concerns, etc.) by contributing context from a lived experience lens. Their integrated community, state, and national level work informs and influences so that practice change impact will benefit families.

- Parent Leaders bridge the gap and promote shared understanding between families and other professionals in the decision-making process to support best practices.
- Parent Leaders utilize their platform to build upon their knowledge and skills at a systems level, while taking on leadership roles within programs, agencies, and communities

● [Check out the Parent Leader resources on our website](#)

EXPEDITED, APPROPRIATE, AND EFFECTIVE SERVICES



OBJECTIVE: Ensuring services for babies and their families are timely and comprehensive while recognizing their unique experiences and the intergenerational impact of life challenges



Core Component 6: Connecting Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families to a Continuum of Wraparound Services


WHY: Consistent and nurturing caregiving relationships are essential for infants' and toddlers' healthy development. By meeting the holistic needs of babies and their families, we strengthen these relationships, leading to strong infant and early childhood mental health.

While the Active Community Team works at the community level to expand services and supports for families, the Judge, Community Coordinator, and Family Team ensure that the needs of each infant/toddler and their family are systematically and fully identified as early as possible, as well as that referrals are made in a highly individualized way to address specific needs with effective services and interventions.

This happens through:

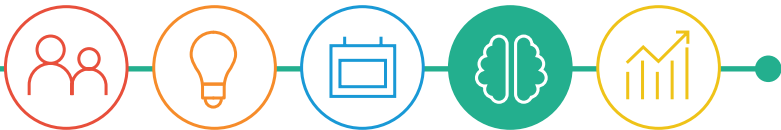
- Establishing frequent review hearings or other touchpoints in recognition of the urgency of developmental needs in infancy and early childhood
- Expediting referrals for screening, assessment, and services for infants/toddlers and parents as early in the process as possible—and regularly reviewing timing, appropriateness, and effectiveness of services they are referred to/receiving

- Identifying and addressing the comprehensive and holistic needs of the family through screening and assessment; prioritizing basic, concrete needs; and scaffolding subsequent services
- Ensuring timely, effective, individualized wraparound services and supports for parents and infants/toddlers
- Prioritizing age-appropriate, evidence-based interventions in referral-making, including those with promising research evidence
- Referring families to culturally relevant services and helping parents understand the purpose and short- and long-term benefits of each service to which they are referred
- Seeking creative solutions that address silos and barriers to services, resources, and supports for the family through partnerships and connections that support strong referral linkages, program alignment, and peer-to-peer learning
- Regularly monitoring case data to ensure that infants/toddlers and their families are receiving all necessary supports and services and that the case is progressing



“Strong caregiving relationships are essential for the health and well-being of infants and toddlers, while ensuring that the holistic needs of babies and their families are met bolsters infant and early childhood mental health.”

TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE SUPPORT



OBJECTIVE: Responding to trauma with a healing approach while recognizing the resilience of parents and understanding the hardships facing families with young children

Core Component 7: Partnering With Families

WHY: Within the approach, fostering a compassionate climate in all collaborative and interactive spaces with families (including court, Family Team meetings, and structured family contact) establishes a focus towards healing and holistic support, rather than a punitive, compliance-driven approach. Empowering parents as the experts in their own family promotes transparency and trust.

- Centering the infant/toddler-parent relationship and considering the developmental needs of family members and infants/toddlers, through a mental health-informed lens
- Engaging and valuing parents with kindness and respect in all interactions and celebrating success and change through parents' eyes
- Allowing pauses and reflective conversation during interactions and case planning, and responding with empathy and compassion to parents' histories of trauma/adversity and underlying mental health issues
- Increasing awareness of the cultural worldview of families
- Empowering parents by creating opportunities to increase their capacity for self-advocacy, confidence, and motivation
- Practicing "nothing about them without them"
- Building parental resilience and improved functioning with appropriate supports that are responsive to individual parent needs and desires
- Shifting perceptions and stigma about substance use disorder by recognizing it as a complex, recurring medical condition that necessitates a therapeutic approach



Core Component 8: Nurturing Parent Relationships and Building Social Supports in the Community

WHY: Healthy community connections and relational support set an opportunity for families to self-advocate and create pathways for resiliency. The intent is to introduce or reconnect with supports that encourage health and well-being beyond their child welfare experience.

- Supporting parents in making social connections and building strong, enduring social supports
- Creating formal and informal opportunities for mentoring relationships and social supports for parents within their community and cultural circle
- Developing peer support networks to help parents navigate the child welfare system, health networks, and courts (where relevant), as well as support recovery from substance use disorder
- Broadening knowledge of the value of co-parenting and implementing strategies for building co-parenting relationships between parents and resource families
- Creating relational connections/partnerships with prevention programs designed to support family health and well-being



Core Component 9: Frequent, Quality Family Time

WHY: The primary purpose of family time is to maintain and strengthen the parent-child relationship, which is particularly important for the development of infants, toddlers, and young children. For parents, family time is intended to enhance the ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to their children, better equipping them to develop appropriate parenting behaviors.

- Supports interactions that strengthen the child-caregiver dyad, utilizing recognized strategies and various degrees of oversight to support the parent-child attachment
- Is carefully planned to minimize anxiety and stress, and to prevent re-traumatization, for both children and parents
- Occurs as soon as possible to support the child's attachment needs
- Takes place in the child's natural and familiar environments, where children and their parents can enhance developmental and relational growth through guided interactions or play opportunities
- Provides mentoring and modeling to parents that strengthens their sense of agency and capacity for nurturing, protective caregiving



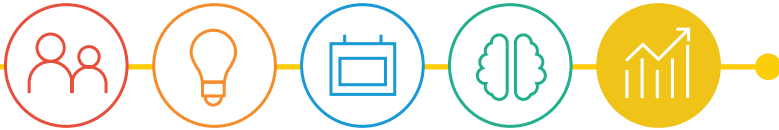
Core Component 10: Concurrent Planning

WHY: It is important that each family has a thoughtful, individualized plan that emphasizes stable, nurturing relationships to help the young child heal from trauma and minimize further attachment disruptions.

- Parents are actively engaged in planning for a feasible alternative permanency plan, should one be necessary, beginning on Day 1.
- The focus of the concurrent plan is on protecting early caregiving relationships, addressing protective factors, and ensuring proactive efforts to promote reunification or other lasting permanency outcomes for the child.
- All interactions with parents are strengths-based, respectful, transparent, and compassionate.



CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT



OBJECTIVE: Driving and sustaining best practices to foster reflection instead of reactivity, allowing the space for families and professionals to grow, adapt, and change based on effective data and evaluation

Core Component 11: **Continuous Quality Improvement**

WHY: Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is a key driver of effective implementation and sustainability. It relies on systematically collecting, monitoring, and using data to identify trends, develop priorities and strategies, and measure and document progress. Each role and team within the Safe Babies approach has a responsibility to engage in CQI individually and in partnership with the other roles, teams, and community partners working to improve systems for infants, toddlers, and their families.

- The Community Coordinator or other designee at the site collects and enters program data into the national Safe Babies Database and/or other databases that can be used for CQI.
- The Site Implementation Team reviews Safe Babies program data to engage in CQI around case processes and outcomes.
- The Family Team engages in reflective practice as part of the case review process and uses insights gained on themes to identify areas for process and systems improvements.
- The ACT reviews aggregate Safe Babies program and community data to engage in CQI that contributes to early childhood systems change.
- Each key role and team engages in CQI to reflect on, make progress towards, and monitor effectiveness in carrying out their essential functions and practices.
- CQI data stories are shared with other communities for peer learning and with legislators and funders for sustainability.



GLOSSARY

AREAS OF FOCUS DEFINITIONS

Interdisciplinary Collaborative and Proactive Teamwork

Professionals working together and in partnership with families to identify and address needs of infants, toddlers, and their families as early as possible. This is both at the child and family level by addressing barriers to services and supports for individual families served by Safe Babies and at the community level by improving access to services and supports for all families with very young children in the community.

Enhanced Oversight and Collaborative Problem Solving

Enhance judicial oversight by increasing the frequency of court hearings to ensure timely review and accountability. Together with frequent and regular family team meetings, this approach actively engages families and Parent Mentors as collaborative partners in the process. This engagement is grounded in principles of respect, kindness, and compassion, fostering trust and promoting positive outcomes.

Expedited, Appropriate, and Effective Services

Expedited access to appropriate services is necessary to support the baby's mental health and repair ruptured attachments with primary caregivers. With rapid connection to timely services that match family needs, the family can begin their healing and recovery process. Initial screening and assessment for health, infant and early childhood mental health, and other needs is critical as an entry point to additional treatments and interventions. A comprehensive system includes a range of qualified providers who can assess the child, adult, and relational factors, recommend treatment services, and provide direct treatment/intervention. Following assessment, with the support of the local Safe Babies team, families can quickly access a high-quality continuum of care, including infant and early childhood mental health services, multigenerational supports, adult mental health/substance use treatment, pediatric care, early intervention services, among others.

Trauma-Responsive Support

Trauma-responsive support is about changing practices so they are trauma-informed. It moves beyond just knowing about trauma and its effects to actively applying that knowledge by creating safe, nurturing environments supported by caring policies and practices for infants, young children, families, and each other. Focusing on choice, trust, collaboration, relationships, and resilience fosters healing and prevents re-traumatization for everyone with a trauma history, parents and professionals alike, whether that history is known or not.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

CQI is an ongoing process of problem solving where a team identifies a problem or a goal, creates and tests strategies to improve the problem or achieve the goal, routinely studies the results and small adjustments to improve outcomes.

OTHER DEFINITIONS

Active Community Team (ACT)

Brings community partners together to improve access to comprehensive prevention, early intervention, and therapeutic services and supports for families with very young children. This work can be thought of as building a strong early childhood system that aims to reach all children and families with needed services and supports.

Concurrent Planning

Working toward two permanency plans – reunification and adoption by the substitute caregivers – simultaneously. If implemented from day one, this strategy reduces multiple placements by ensuring that the first placement is the last placement if reunification with the birth family does not succeed. Multiple visits for parents and children each week, critical for the formation of strong relationships between parents and very young children, also significantly increases the odds that a baby in foster care will reach permanency within a year.

Family Team Meeting (FTM)

Engage families in collaborative proactive planning that puts young children’s developmental needs for safe, stable, and nurturing early caregiving relationships, as well as the individualized needs of each family member, at the center of decision-making.

National Safe Babies Database

A tool ITCP programs can use to capture child and family level information on key program metrics (e.g. placements, services, permanency), as well as run customized reports and view real-time dashboards.

Parent Mentor/Parent Partner (Family Level)

Parents with lived experience in the Child Welfare system having navigated their own case. Supporting the parent in navigation of the child welfare system by:

- attending family team meetings with the parent
- attending court hearings
- transportation to appointments
- help the parent make calls to schedule services
- participate with the Site Implementation Team

Parent Leader (System Level)

A parent leader is a person with lived experience that gives voice to the parent experience in the early childhood system, integrates parent voices into policy and practice, and increases collaborative decision making. A parent leader does this by:

- participating in the local Active Community Team
- serving on a State Advisory Group
- has frequent communication with parent mentors regarding themes occurring at the family and site level
- may participate or advise the local Site Implementation Team

Reflective Practice

A tool that invites us to pause and slow down to become aware of thoughts, feelings and reactions that arise in everyday interactions. We explore real life experiences in a mindful and introspective manner so that we can learn from them. Essentially, it's all about being present and aware. Learn more about reflective practice [here](#).

Resource Parent (and/or Families)

Refers to whoever is caring for the child while in out-of-home care. This can include a Licensed Foster Parent, an Active Kinship (relationship with family) caregiver, or a Relative caregiver

Site Implementation Team

Research on implementation best practices has shown that for positive program outcomes to be achieved and sustained, programs must be supported at all levels. This means that the professionals on the front line—those directly supporting children and families at the Safe Babies site—cannot do it alone. They need a coordinated group of experts with a variety of perspectives and levels of authority to ensure that the system is supporting, rather than creating challenges for, the frontline professionals implementing the Safe Babies approach and the families they serve.