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Case Study: SWOT Analysis of the Early Childhood Court (ECC) of Pasco County, Florida

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BACKGROUND

Florida's Early Childhood Court (ECC) began in 2014¹ using evidence-based and evidence-informed practices to foster early development to ensure a strong start for children and their families.² The program's success is based on strong collaborations among stakeholders: keeping these community members vested in childhood development, research, and the needs of the community. The mission of the ECC is to ensure that child safety and well-being needs are met, to expedite permanency while diminishing recurrence of maltreatment, to prevent and eliminate the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment, and to repair trauma and relationships.³ In 2015 the Quality Improvement Center for Research-based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (QIC-CT) provided a grant to fund training and resources for ECC sites for an evaluation. Initial data indicate that the ECC sites are making progress. In 2016, children in the ECC sites went home 71 days earlier than non-ECC children; cases were closed more than 100 days earlier than non-ECC cases; and 3.38 percent of ECC children were removed again after case closure compared to 3.86 percent of non-ECC children. Considering the novelty of this program, these statistics are promising.

The success, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis helps organizations identify areas for future development and vulnerability.⁴ This strategic tool can help determine areas that are hindering progress, particularly in new programs, like the ECC. The SWOT analysis is a participatory activity, engaging stakeholders in introspective reviews.³ The current study aimed to engage the Pasco County's ECC's primary stakeholders to explore the factors they believe contribute to the success of their service delivery model, which should help to identify the key characteristics of the ECC program. Two research questions are being explored: 1) What do the key stakeholders informed in the ECC believe are critical building blocks to ECC success across a SWOT continuum? 2) To what extent do ECC staff practice the principles of trauma-informed care?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study, which partnered with the Florida Institute for Child Welfare and the Pasco County ECC, utilized a snowball sampling methodology to identify key ECC stakeholders. The snowball technique resulted in a final sample of 12 female respondents who reported an average of 16.7 years of experience, with more than half of the respondents reporting specific trauma-informed care training (67%). A mixed-methods design was utilized to collect quantitative data compiled from responses to the Trauma Informed Core Principles-Observation Tool, a 13-item instrument scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = lowest; 5 = highest) based on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) guiding principles of trauma-informed care,⁵ and two process related meetings (ECC session and monthly ECC community stakeholder meeting) that were rated based on the ECC core tenants utilizing a trauma lens to focus on engagement efforts. Qualitative data from structured face-to-face and phone interviews, were created by the research team and reviewed for adherence to the SWOT methodology and designed to elicit interactive discussions among stakeholders.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, stakeholders were able to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the ECC. The results from the structured interviews indicated clear themes that suggest the Pasco County ECC is focused on the best interests and needs of the child; is trauma informed, utilizes an infant mental health expert; has dedicated judicial leadership; and operates with strong collaboration between stakeholders. The quantitative findings suggest that the Pasco County ECC is utilizing trauma-informed care principles as intended, supporting the qualitative findings. These results are aligned with the goals of the ECC model and match the core components of the ECC model, suggesting that the Pasco County ECC is engaging in procedures that match the best practices in trauma-informed care.

¹ Florida Courts. (2017). Early Childhood Courts. Retrieved from <http://www.flcourts.org/resources-and-services/court-improvement/problem-solving-courts/early-childhood-court.stml>

² QIC-CT. (2015). About the QIC-CT. Retrieved from http://www.qicct.org/about_qic_ct

³ Florida State University. (2015). Florida's Early Childhood Court: Improving outcomes for infants and toddlers in Florida's dependency court. Retrieved from <http://cpcip.fsu.edu/babyCourt/resources/Early%20Childhood%20Manual%204172015.pdf>

⁴ Blayney, D. W. (2008). Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2793972>

⁵ SAMHSA. (2014). Guiding principles of trauma-informed care. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/samhsaNewsLetter/Volume_22_Number_2/trauma_tip/guiding_principles.html

KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

Quantitative: The findings that rated high on impartiality, transparency, and trust speak to the quality of judiciary leadership, dedication, and stakeholder collaboration. The low-rated options—controlled-choice, prohibition-empowerment, power-differential-power-balance—were rated only slightly lower than the other principles. However, each of the low-rated principles dealt with the power dynamic indicative of the courtroom setting (see Table 1).

Table 1. Trauma-informed Core Principles-Observation Tool Results

Item	Mean	SD
Covert-Transparency ^a	4.65	0.63
Distrust-Trust	4.64	0.67
Isolation-Self Help	4.42	0.65
Historical Stereotypes-Historical Impartiality	4.77	0.60
Censored-Voice	4.61	0.66
Power Differential- Power Balance ^b	4.20	0.87
Controlled-Choice ^b	3.74	0.87
Prohibition-Empowerment ^b	4.00	0.81
Gender Stereotypes-Gender Impartiality	4.35	0.42
Cultural Stereotypes-Cultural Impartiality	4.61	0.66
Noncooperation-Collaboration	4.27	0.48
Unsupportive-Peer Support	4.23	0.67
Unsafe-Safe	4.45	0.32

Qualitative: The Pasco County ECC is functioning without dedicated funding, making the program susceptible to problems should a collaborative partner pull back funding, potentially resulting in a decreased ability to adhere to the standards and components of the model. Other community weaknesses mentioned included: not enough transportation options for the families; an inadequate number of foster homes; a lack of trauma-informed resources; and no dedicated funding for a community coordinator (see Table 2). The opportunities noted included educating case managers on trauma-informed approaches, garnering buy-in from other community stakeholders, and adding stakeholders to the program. Turnover of the current judge and/or case managers was a serious concern expressed, as it could result in the end of the program, which might result in children languishing in the system. Lack of interest or participation among stakeholders and case managers was also a threat to the ECC.

Table 2. Pasco ECC SWOT Analysis Results

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on what's best for the child/ needs of the child Strong partnership between stakeholders Evidence based/ trauma- informed approach Reducing time in care/ eliminate recidivism Infant mental health therapist Dedicated judicial leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate caseworkers/ staff of various agencies Buy-in by stakeholders, upper management, agencies Dedicated caseworker/ case manager for the ECC More family specialists, infant MH smental health specialist More social service organizations to get involved Very committed judge must remain
WEAKNESSES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of dedicated funding stream More trauma-informed resources needed/ lack of continued education for case managers Not enough availability of foster homes Lack of dedicated transportation High case manager turnover Lack of collaboration with CMO Lack of dedicated funding for community coordinator Amount of trauma experienced by parents with children that enter the system Lack of dedicated case managers for the ECC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of funding Lack of interest/participation of stakeholders Loss of judge or replaced with non-interested judge No dedicated case manager with appropriate caseloads and pay Turnover of agency personnel Lack of teamwork/partnerships

CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders being invested and working collaboratively is what makes the Pasco County ECC successful. Additionally, this ECC is meeting its top three goals of judicial leadership, a consistently focused trauma lens, and the integration of the infant mental health specialist. However, there are some concerns and recommendations to take away from this study.

1. Respondents reported a need for more family specialists, more infant mental health teams, and a dedicated judge to take over when the current judge retires.
2. Sustainability or growth require funding, something the ECC requires. A cost-benefit analysis between types of dependency courts and a summative evaluation to examine specific outcomes achieved by the ECC may assist in securing necessary funding.
3. Future research could explore the relative power balance between the ECC and other styles of dependency courts.

^a Several key findings emerged as strengths of the ECC: To embrace participants individually (Historical Stereotypes-Historical Impartiality), to openly share information (Covert-Transparency), and to foster an environment of safety (Distrust-Trust).

^b Key findings for growth: equity of power (Power Differential-Power Balance), participants able to impact the outcome (Prohibition-Empowerment), and promoting an environment of freedom (Controlled-Choice).