

Early Childhood Court Evaluation: Preliminary Findings and Next Steps

OVERVIEW

Children ages 0-3 years are the largest age group of children removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.¹ The first 3 years of life are critical for supporting young children's optimal brain development, and a vulnerable time for risk.² Child maltreatment early in life is linked to increased health and developmental risks across the life course.³

Early Childhood Court (ECC) is designed to improve outcomes and promote timely permanency process for children ages 0-3 who have been removed from their parents due to maltreatment. Relying on judicial leadership, a local community coordinator, an infant mental health specialist, and a team of other stakeholders, families receive comprehensive services that address their myriad needs.⁴ This integrated, team-based approach to dependency court is enhanced by frequent case consultation, including monthly team meetings and judicial hearings.

EVALUATION

Between July and December 2018, researchers conducted a mixed method evaluation of Florida's ECCs. The state-wide evaluation solicited feedback from ECC team members through both qualitative interviews and focus groups as well as an online survey, with questions focusing on their perceptions of both team processes and outcomes. In total, 53 ECC team members from 21 sites participated in one of 15 focus groups or individual interviews. Additionally, 144 ECC team members completed the online survey. Participants identified as judges, community coordinators, attorneys, infant mental health specialists, child welfare workers, clinicians, administrators, foster parents, and parent partners.

KEY RESULTS

What is Early Childhood Court?

ECC professionals across groups agreed that the model is being followed statewide. They have a clear understanding of the focus and goals of the model and implement the team approach within the context of their individual communities and available resources.

ECC is **multi-disciplinary**. Team members feel empowered and self-efficacious in their individual roles, support the team's decisions, and are satisfied with their participation on the team:

"It's a little bit flexible site to site, but your community coordinator is your central hub person at every ECC site along with the judge. Then every site also has primary clinicians usually from one, maybe two agencies and then every site has primary social service agencies, parents' attorneys, and child welfare attorneys. In a sense, the core team is that group of people." (Administrator/Policy Expert)

ECC has strong **judicial leadership**, with well-trained, trauma-informed judges and magistrates who demonstrate appropriate judicial demeanor, support parents and caregivers, and exercise appropriate decision-making practices:

"I see myself as the glue to the team, just making sure that we are always working together as a team... [and] work together for the benefit of the family. I also... make sure that we distinguish ourselves, and that we are a problem-solving court. We're an ECC court and we don't do it the way that traditional dependency court does it." (Judge)

How is Early Childhood Court different from regular dependency court?

ECC is **more compassionate**, with an emphasis on respect and relationship-building:

"...It's very different. Just the way you're spoken to, the way that you're treated, and kind of what your position is within the system is very different." (Clinician)

Judges aim to create a **more personal courtroom**. They try to engage team members and facilitate a positive court environment:

"We talk about coming to the table...I don't sit on a bench and I don't wear a robe." (Judge)

Monthly team meetings and court hearings provide increased opportunities to assess cases, including progress on case plans and considering additional needs of the families. Team members consistently attend hearings and provide relevant information for the court's consideration. Often, issues are resolved and recommendations crafted prior to court hearings. Team members perceive the frequency of activity to be related to **greater accountability** and **faster time to permanency**:

"It's night and day compared to regular dependency versus the ECC. I think a lot of it has to do with us being in court so often." (Clinician)

ECC is based on **current evidence**. ECC is modeled on the Safe Babies Court Team approach, which intends to 1) protect vulnerable infants and toddlers from further harm; 2) address "the damage already done;" and 3) identify the structural barriers within the child welfare system that impede family success.ⁱ Team members receive training on topics such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), trauma-informed care, and infant and toddler development:

"Some of [my cases] were children that were in the system...I have apologized to them. I'll say, 'I'm sorry I didn't know then what I know now.'" (Judge)

Who does Early Childhood Court serve?

Most ECC teams limit the number of families they accept, though nearly one-third of **team members perceive their ECC caseload to be too low**. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria varies by site, but on average, teams serve approximately 20 families at any one time.

ECC-involved families receive **numerous assessments**, including child developmental, medical, and dental exams; parent and child trauma assessments; infant mental health assessments; and parent-child relationship assessments. ECC-involved families were consistently described as experiencing **multiple risk factors**:

"Gosh. Substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence. Trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma. The parents really, really, really need a lot of support." (Clinician)

Participants also described involvement with the court system **across generations** of families:

"Ours, it's very intergenerational trauma. Our judge has seen... like this is her fifth generation of this family..." (Community Coordinator)

What are the elements of success?

Participants reported that **effective and clear communication, trusting relationships** among all team members and families, **parent engagement**, and **judicial leadership** were important for successful case processes. Engaging with a parent, tapping in to their motivation, and partnering with them to come to a plan for safety and permanency for the child were often described as a success. There is a great degree of autonomy in an ECC-involved parent's role:

"[Parents] have a lot more control over what happens to their case versus a traditional case, where no one's watching and then everyone else is going to make the decision based upon what happens during a very large period [of time] versus—I feel like the [ECC] parents have a lot more say [as] to what happens... to their kids." (Attorney)

Importantly, **success was not always defined as reunification**, but rather safety and permanency for the child.

What are the challenges of Early Childhood Court?

The **funding of the community coordinator position** can create several challenges. Community coordinator positions **funded from multiple sources** can face competing responsibilities:

"You get further and further away from the purpose of what you're supposed to be doing because they just keep adding to it..." (Community Coordinator)

A **lack of consistent funding and support** can impede team growth:

"I also think that having confidence in the funding for the position of community coordinator because that allows your team to think about growth and long-term strategies versus just the immediate...we want to know that this is going to continue." (Community Coordinator)

Primarily, participants were concerned about a **lack of community coordinator neutrality** when they are funded by a local community-based care (CBC) agency, which the majority are:

"Philosophically, I don't believe it should be with the CBC...they should be court programs...I think it's hard to manage because I think the staff struggle. Is it a CBC program, or is it a court program?" (Administrator/Policy Expert)

Community coordinators corroborate this:

"...My agency...they have their own interests. The way they see my role is much different than the way I see my role. The neutrality piece, even though they may understand it, I've come into the work where there's some conflict..." (Community Coordinator)

Turnover can "cause inconsistencies and delays" because new hires have to be educated in a seamless manner that does not disrupt the family support or the ECC process. Case manager turnover was considered particularly problematic.

Many ECC teams experience a **lack of necessary resources** to best serve ECC-involved families. Housing and transportation options are particularly scarce, which can present logistical challenges for families given the intensity of ECC-related services and requirements. A lack of qualified service agencies and providers (e.g., domestic violence centers, child parent psychotherapists) was also noted.

Who can benefit from Early Childhood Court?

Overall, the **faster timeline and specialized model** of ECC were described as universally more effective than standard dependency court because of the young age of the child(ren) and ability of the team to problem-solve effectively to address complex family issues:

"If you look at the risk conditions of the families...they're no different, and these families have tremendously high levels of social risk trauma, substance abuse, and domestic violence...There's nothing characteristic about any of the cases. It's not the case. It's... the [ECC] model and the team together are what make the difference." (Administrator/Policy Expert)

Although one of the pivotal components of Early Childhood Court is an intensive clinical intervention utilizing Child Parent Psychotherapy, evaluation of its effect on families was beyond the scope of this initial evaluation. Future funding would allow review of the clinical interventions and family outcomes.

NEXT STEPS

Informed by the Fall 2018 evaluation activities, in Spring 2019, the evaluation team will:

- ▶ **Compare Early Childhood Court processes and outcomes by coordinator funding source.** Given the concerns about community coordinator funding, and how that might affect (perceptions of) neutrality, the evaluation team will analyze existing survey data to see if ECC team processes vary by funding source. The team will also work with the Office of Court Improvement to compare outcomes (e.g., re-removals) by coordinator funding source, if possible, using administrative data.
- ▶ **Explore fidelity to the model by individual Early Childhood Court teams.** While the present analysis focused on ECC implementation generally, the evaluation team will next explore fidelity to the model by individual teams. Though, overall, ECC team members perceive a high level of model implementation, there could be **significant** variation by team.
- ▶ **Conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis.** In Fall 2018, the evaluation team sent a brief survey to ECC team members regarding their workload and salary information. In total, 123 participants engaged at least partially with the survey. A member of the evaluation team is currently examining the cost-effectiveness of the ECC model.

Given their near complete absence from the Fall 2018 data collection, it is also important that evaluators make a targeted effort to recruit both parents and caregivers into Spring 2019 evaluation activities, as resources allow. Their voices are integral to evaluating this program.

Pending funding, subsequent evaluation activities might examine highly successful vs. less successful ECCs; the role of ECCs in promoting racial equity in the dependency court system; longitudinal outcomes; and client characteristics or circumstances most likely to benefit from the ECC model. Additionally, the perspectives of parents, caregivers, and foster parents should be actively sought.

- 1 Chinitz, S, Guzman, H, Amstutz, E, Kohchi, J, Alkon, M. (2017). Improving Outcomes for Babies and Toddlers in Child Welfare: A Model for Infant Mental Health Intervention and Collaboration. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 70, 190-198.
- 2 Cameron, JL, Eagleson, KL, Fox, NA, Hensch, TK, Levitt, P. (2017). Social Origins of Developmental Risk for Mental and Physical Illness. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 37(45); 10783-10791.
- 3 Schickedanz, A, Halfon, N, Sastry, N, Chung, P. (2018). Parents' Adverse Childhood Experiences and Their Children's Behavioral Health Problems. *Pediatrics*, 142(2). doi:10.1542/peds.2018-0023
- 4 California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare [CEBC]. (2018). The Safe Babies Court Team. Retrieved January 7, 2019 from <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/safe-babies-court-teams-project/detailed>



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