

Strengthening Early Relationships

The Safe Babies Court Team™ Approach

Responding to the Needs of Babies, Toddlers, and Families in the Child Welfare System

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The Safe Babies Court Team Approach™: Responding to the Needs of Babies, Toddlers and Families in the Child Welfare System

In 2018, children under the age of three made up 42% (1,829) of child abuse and neglect cases in Washington State.¹ Of all children who go into care, 25.6% are infants under 1 year, the second highest rate in the country.² It is already well known that early childhood experiences shape children's brain development and have life-long impacts on their social, emotional and physical well-being; the significant impact of COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened the need for comprehensive, effective services to support babies and their families.

COVID-19 Impact on Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Increased Safety Risks

- The number of weekly suspected neglect or abuse calls in Washington State has dropped by about 50% due to COVID-19; with schools and child care centers closed or working within limited capacity, children do not have access to the mandated reporters often responsible for reporting suspected maltreatment.³
- At one point, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) limited (or ended) in-person visits as a result of COVID-19. The best practice is for babies to have regular and on-going visits with their parents, as research shows that babies and toddlers that experience disruptions and instability in family relationships are vulnerable to negative developmental outcomes.⁴

While specific data regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families is limited, it is clear that this pandemic poses an overall threat to the safety, health, and wellbeing of young children and their families. These hazards include:

- Families are at heightened risk of abuse during times of crises, including child abuse⁵ and intimate partner violence.⁶ Quarantining measures implemented to address COVID-19 consequently risks higher levels of

¹ Orme, M., McCurley, C., Bricker, C., Sanford, R., Wang, W. (2019) Dependent Children in Washington State: Case Timeliness and Outcomes, 2018 Annual Report. Olympia, WA: Center for Court Research, Administrative Office of the Courts. <https://www.courts.wa.gov/subsite/wscrr/docs/2018DTR.pdf>

² Children's Bureau. 2018 Child Welfare Outcomes Report Data. <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/enteredCare/index>

³ Anne Hillman. 2020. How Washington state is watching out for child welfare during coronavirus pandemic. <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/qa-how-washington-is-watching-out-for-child-welfare-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20weekly%20calls,mandated%20to%20report%20suspected%20maltreatment>.

⁴ Sandstrom, Heather and Huerta, Sandra. 2013. The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis.

<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/32706/412899-The-Negative-Effects-of-Instability-on-Child-Development-A-Research-Synthesis.PDF>

⁵ Seddighi, H., Salmani, I., Javadi, M. H., & Seddighi, S. (2021). Child Abuse in Natural Disasters and Conflicts: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 22(1), 176–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838019835973>

⁶ Valera, Eve. 2020. When lockdown is not actually safer: Intimate partner violence during COVID-19. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/when-lockdown-is-not-actually-safer-intimate-partner-violence-during-covid-19-2020070720529>

violence and abuse among families due to social isolation; increased stress or depression; staying in the same space as an abuser; substance misuse; and inability to access appropriate services and supports.⁷

- The CDC recently reported that that U.S. adults experienced elevated adverse mental or behavioral health conditions due to COVID-19, including an increase in substance use to cope with pandemic-related stress; and suicidal ideation.⁸ Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 threatens the stability and connections that babies and families need. These include the threat of food and resource insecurity; inability to access childcare and appropriate services; and experiences in systems disruptions.⁹
- When parents experience high levels of stress, their children may be more susceptible to abuse or neglect.¹⁰ Young children may also demonstrate distress related to the disruptions of COVID-19, including difficulty sleeping and eating; fear of separation; regressing in skills; and heightened irritability¹¹.

Now more than ever, babies and toddlers need access to safe, nurturing, and consistent relationships to reduce the effects of trauma and disruptions implicated by COVID-19. A plan needs to be in place to provide families with the support they need to address the significant and disproportionate impacts of the pandemic.

Inequitable Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families of Color

It is well-known that the COVID-19 crisis has disproportionately impacted families of color in significant ways. In Washington, adults of color (including Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; or those of Mixed or Other races) living in households with children have experienced hardships at higher rates compared to their White counterparts. These experiences include:

- Loss of employment income¹²
- Difficulty in paying for usual household expenses¹³
- Sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat¹⁴
- Having little to no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time.¹⁵

⁷ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. Support for People Experiencing Abuse. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/stress-coping/abuse.html>

⁸ Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1049–1057. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

⁹ ZERO TO THREE, 2020. How COVID-19 Is Impacting Babies and Families. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3356-how-covid-19-is-impacting-babies-and-families>

¹⁰ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse Considerations During COVID-19. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/social-distancing-domestic-violence.pdf>

¹¹ Washington State Department of Health, 2020. Behavioral Health Toolbox for Families: Supporting Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19-FamilyToolbox.pdf>

¹² Kids Count Data Center, September 30 – October 26, 2020. Adults living in households with children who lost employment income since March 13, 2020 by race/ethnicity in Washington. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bar/10939-adults-living-in-households-with-children-who-lost-employment-income-since-march-13-2020-by-race-ethnicity?loc=1&loct=2#2/49/false/2032/4411,4039,2638,2597,7817,1353/21248>

¹³ Kids Count Data Center, September 30 – October 26, 2020. Adults living in households with children who had difficulty paying for usual household expenses in the past week by race/ethnicity in Washington. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bar/10946-adults-living-in-households-with-children-who-had-difficulty-paying-for-usual-household-expenses-in-the-past-week-by-race-ethnicity?loc=1&loct=2#2/49/false/2032/4411,4039,2638,2597,7817,1353/21256>

¹⁴ Kids Count Data Center, September 30 – October 20, 2020. Adults living in households with children who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat in the past week by race/ethnicity in Washington. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bar/10945-adults-living-in-households-with-children-who-sometimes-or-often-did-not-have-enough-food-to-eat-in-the-past-week-by-race-ethnicity?loc=1&loct=2#2/49/false/2032/4411,4039,2638,2597,7817,1353/21255>

¹⁵ Kids Count Data Center, September 30 – October 26, 2020. Adults living in households with children who have little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time by race/ethnicity in Washington. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bar/10942-adults-living-in->

Results from the Urban Institute’s Coronavirus Tracking Survey also indicated that Black and Hispanic adults are struggling to recover from the pandemic’s economic impact. As of September 2020, 36.9 percent of Hispanic/Latinx adults and 29.1 percent of Black adults were worse off financially than at the beginning of March, compared to 19.8 percent of White adults.¹⁶

Additionally, minority groups in Washington have been infected with and are dying from COVID-19 at alarmingly higher rates than White communities. Compared to White populations, hospitalization rates among confirmed COVID-19 cases are thirteen times higher among Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (NHOPI) populations; seven times higher among Hispanic populations; and three times higher among Black and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) populations.¹⁷ Compared to White populations, death rates are seven times higher among NHOPI populations; four times higher among AIAN and Hispanic populations; and twice as high among Black populations.¹⁸

Impact of Substance Use

Substance abuse is a key area of concern that threatens the stability, safety, and health of babies and families across Washington. COVID-19 puts vulnerable families at even higher risk of substance use or relapse due to the added stress, isolation, and barriers to accessing needed treatment and services. In 2018:

- 62% of children under the age of one were removed for reasons that included parental drug abuse. Data indicates an upward trend since 2011 in the percent of children removed for this reason.¹⁹
- An average of 74.6% of removals within 30 days of birth were due to Parent Drug Abuse.²⁰
- 45% of newborns were indicated as “substance exposed.” Data also indicates an upwards trend in the number of intakes of newborns indicated as “substance exposed.”²¹

households-with-children-who-have-little-or-no-confidence-in-their-ability-to-pay-their-next-rent-or-mortgage-payment-on-time-by-race-ethnicity?loc=1&loct=2#2/49/false/2032/4411,4039,2638,2597,7817,1353/21252

¹⁶ Karpman, Michael; Zuckerman, Stephen; and Kenny, Genevieve M, October 2020. Uneven Recovery Leaves Many Hispanic, Black, and Low-Income Adults Struggling. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103105/uneven-recovery-leaves-many-hispanic-black-and-low-income-adults-struggling.pdf>

¹⁷ Washington State Department of Health, November 2020. COVID-19 morbidity and mortality by race, ethnicity, and spoken language in Washington State. <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/data-tables/COVID-19MorbidityMortalityRaceEthnicityLanguageWASState.pdf>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Orme, M., McCurley, C., Bricker, C., Sanford, R., Wang, W. (2019) Dependent Children in Washington State: Case Timeliness and Outcomes, 2018 Annual Report. Olympia, WA: Center for Court Research, Administrative Office of the Courts.

²⁰ Department of Children, Youth, & Families, 2020. Creating a Response in WA: Reports of infants born with and affected by substance abuse or withdrawal symptoms resulting from prenatal drug exposure or FASD.

²¹ Ibid.

Disproportionality of Children Entering the Child Welfare System

Racial disproportionality needs to be specifically and comprehensively addressed, as young children of color are overrepresented in dependency court. Additionally, there is a lack of specific services to engage and support families of color.

2018 Washington Disproportionality of Babies and Toddlers 0-2 Coming into Care, Disaggregated by Race

Sources: Washington State Interactive Dependency Timeliness Report (2018), Washington State Office of Financial Management

Demographic	0-2 Dependency Cases Filed (%)	Total 0-2 Population in WA (%)
Black	7%	5%
AI/AN	4%	2.4%
2 or More Races*	22%*	13%*
Hispanic	15%	25%
White	50%	71%

*Understanding data pull for "2 or More Races:" Dependency case filing rate of this demographic ("2 or More Races"), pulled from the 2018 Washington State Interactive Dependency Timeliness Report, as the sum of the rates for AI/AN – Multi; Black – Multi; and Other – Multi, totaling 22%. The total 0-2 population in WA rate, collected from the Office of Financial Management, identifies "2 or More Races" as the value of "Two or More Races Total," totaling 13%.

The Intervention: The Safe Babies Court Team™ Approach

The Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) approach provides a direct response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. SBCT services specifically focus on supporting the connections between babies and their families; ensures that babies and families access needed services; and incorporates a trauma-informed approach with a focus on race and equity. As a community engagement and systems-change initiative, the SBCT approach works to reduce trauma and improve how courts, child welfare and child-serving organizations work together to support young children in, or at-risk of entering, the child welfare system. Pierce County led the way in Washington with the "Best for Babies" Program, and through a partnership with National ZERO TO THREE, the Center for Children and Youth Justice (CCYJ) is working with local communities to expand the SBCT approach across Washington State. In 2020, through an intensive, state-wide planning project, the approach is now being expanded to three additional counties in Washington State – Kitsap, Spokane, and Thurston.

Ongoing evaluations show the success of the SBCT approach:

- ZERO TO THREE has reported that maltreatment recurrence over 12 months was at 0.7%, compared to 9.1% nationally.²²
- The SBCT approach prioritizes family reunification as the primary permanency outcome. ZERO TO THREE reports that children are reaching permanency three times faster than infants and toddlers in the general

²² ZERO TO THREE, 2018. Safe Babies Court Team™: Trauma-Informed Care That's Changing Lives. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2181-safe-babies-court-team-trauma-informed-care-that-s-changing-lives>

foster care population; almost two-thirds of them find permanent homes with members of their families while only one-third of infants and toddlers in the general population exit foster care to family members.²³

- SBCT children experienced equitable access to services and reduction in the number of placements regardless of race or ethnicity. Overall, more than 80% of children received services within the first 60 days from court order or referral to service.²⁴
- American Institute for Research found that children in cases assigned to SBCT judges exited foster care 4 months sooner than children in cases assigned to control judges. Cases that received the full SBCT approach were 5 times less likely to experience recurrence of abuse or neglect.²⁵

Transforming the landscape starts with reducing the number of babies entering dependency court, improving the well-being and development of babies and toddlers, preventing trauma and family separation, and supporting parents and working toward reunification by acting safely, equitably, and effectively.

Key Components

Key Components of The SBCT approach include:

- Judicial and Child Welfare Leadership, active stakeholder engagement
- Data-informed benchmarking to continually inform and improve programming
- Oversight to ensure that families receive equitable and timely access to resources and services
- County, State, and National oversight and support to ensure alignment to the approach
- Dedicated staff driving the team approach at the family and community level
- Frequent Family Team Meetings to address needs and provide support
- Frequent family time, parent empowerment, and access to treatment that supports parent-child relationships
- Technical assistance, training and evaluation enable teams to assess effectiveness and improve outcomes

For information on the SBCT Core Components and key activities, visit:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/services/the-safe-babies-court-team-approach>

Current Project Status

CCYJ has partnered with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) to lead the expansion process, and our agencies are currently working with key stakeholders from across the state to comprehensively support this approach across Washington. This includes partners from the judiciary, legislative leadership, child welfare, and community service providers. Three sites have already been established – Kitsap, Thurston, and Spokane counties.

²³ ZERO TO THREE, 2017. How the Safe Babies Court Team™ approach is Reuniting Families Caught in the Heroin Crisis.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1498-how-the-safe-babies-court-team-approach-is-reuniting-families-caught-in-the-heroin-crisis>

²⁴ ZERO TO THREE, 2018. Safe Babies Court Team™: Trauma-Informed Care That's Changing Lives.

²⁵ American Institute for Research, 2020. New Study by American Institutes for Research Finds Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) Approach Reduced Average Time Spent in Foster Care, Recurrence of Abuse and Neglect. https://www.air.org/news/press-release/new-study-american-institutes-research-finds-safe-babies-court-team-sbct-approach?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

These sites are currently being funded by the US Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), through funding obtained by CCYJ in a competitive grant process. Race, equity and equitable access to services is at the center of CCYJ's commitment and focus on how this work will be implemented throughout the state, in a transparent and collaborative way.

While CCYJ has begun the essential advocacy and planning process, additional support is needed. CCYJ continues to champion private and public investments to dedicate staff time in the coming years to focus acutely on the following activities:

- Build a legislative strategy for 2021 for the SBCT approach to be the evidenced-based framework for Washington to ensure equity, consistency, and accountability across sites. CCYJ does not intend to propose a Fiscal Note, given the statewide budget crisis.
- Coordinate regional and statewide stakeholders to provide local support and statewide oversight.
- Develop a communications plan to share about the statewide opportunity, continue to build momentum and stakeholder engagement.
- Continue with education, outreach, and data collection efforts.
- Meet with potential new partners – specifically with tribal communities and potential new sites expressing interest in adopting the SBCT approach.
- Work with our national ZERO TO THREE partners in promulgating a national legislative strategy with Washington representatives, that aligns with the Washington and national implementation plans of the SBCT approach.
- Continue building a statewide public-private partnership funding network, given the fiscal impact of COVID-19 and uncertainty of resources in the future.



Our Mission: To create better lives for generations of children and youth by reforming the child welfare and juvenile justice systems

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