

# Evaluation of Early Childhood Court Teams in Escambia and Okaloosa Counties

Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida

## BACKGROUND

This research project addressed two needs in the First Judicial Circuit which encompasses Escambia and Okaloosa Counties: 1) training on trauma-informed care in order to enhance the collaborative functioning of the Early Childhood Court Teams (ECC), and 2) an evaluation of ECCs in Escambia and Okaloosa Counties. A face-to-face training on trauma-informed care was delivered by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCTSN) and based on the NCTSN Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. The comprehensive evaluation of the Early Childhood Court programs had multiple components:

- 1) A pre-post comparison using a self-report inventory to determine whether ECC professionals and community stakeholders' knowledge of the impact of traumatic stress increased after participating in live training on trauma-informed care.
- 2) A pre-post comparison of a self-report inventory to determine whether parental stress (as measured by the Parenting Stress Index – Short Form) changed over the first four months of ECC participation.
- 3) A collaboration survey of ECC staff and community stakeholders and an analysis of the survey data.
- 4) Twelve ECC parent interviews and a qualitative thematic analysis of the data obtained in these interviews.
- 5) A matched comparison design with families served by the Escambia and Okaloosa ECCs as the intervention groups to measure the impact of ECCs on reunification.

Each component addressed an important facet of Early Childhood Courts and provided an opportunity to expand our understanding of their impacts. Challenges ranged from the administration and analysis of responses on a single measurement tool or questionnaire to conducting interviews with parents served in the ECCs and the processing and analysis of large FSFN databases.

Most of the findings generated in this evaluation were favorable to the ECCs in these two counties. There were very few measurable differences between the two ECCs in outcome performance. The matched comparison design produced a set of findings that indicated a statistically significant impact of both ECCs on reunification.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *Training on Trauma-Informed Care*

Based on the self-report inventory administered at the training, the results indicated an improvement in the knowledge of trauma-informed care. The judiciary participated in this training, as well as other key professional groups. The measured impact of these trainings has been positive immediately after, as well as in actual practice several months after the training.<sup>1</sup> Modifications of the NCTSN training have been applied with an inclusion of a train-the-trainer component and refresher or follow-up sessions to reinforce knowledge gains in the initial trainings.

### *Parental Stress*

Based on the retrospective administration of the PSI-SF among 21 ECC participants that had been in an ECC for at least four months, it was found that there was a reduction in the level of the Child-Parent Dysfunctional Interaction subscale. Despite the positive finding of lowered parental stress for one of the subscales, it would have been more impressive if significant results had been evident for all three subscales and at a higher level of statistical significance. A larger sample might have produced additional positive significant results in this evaluation but the importance of measuring and monitoring stress was recognized.

### *Professional Collaboration in Early Childhood Courts*

Improving collaboration among the child welfare professionals in the Early Childhood Courts was one of the research objectives in this project. The ECC teams are multidisciplinary in nature and collectively provide a variety of services for families, including parent education, mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, early childhood education, screening and intervention for developmental delays, and referrals to health care services. Many are the same services that would be provided in the absence of the ECC; however, the function of the ECC is to coordinate these services more effectively. Dependency court judges as well as Families First, the CBC provider serving Escambia and Okaloosa Counties, have identified Early Childhood Court Teams as an effective practice framework for overcoming silos and enhancing coordination among courts, the CBC, service providers, and advocates.

A focus on professional collaboration in the child welfare arena is not new.<sup>2</sup> Multidisciplinary teams and staffings that involve child protection services, the judiciary, community-based care agencies, children's legal services, community providers, and Guardians ad Litem have emerged with the implementation of a practice model in Florida called the Safety Methodology.

Based on the collaboration survey in this evaluation, findings were generally favorable. The comments regarding ECC achievements were very positive and are represented in the following:

- Shorter time frame to permanency (reunification as well as other discharges, such as adoption)
- More reunifications
- Strong team approaches and more resources
- Successes with families in reunification with younger child even when a parent has had his/her rights terminated for older children

<sup>1</sup> Connors-Burrow, N., Kramer, T., Sigel, B., Helpenstill, K., Sievers, C. & McKelvey, L. (2013). Trauma-informed care training in a child welfare system: Moving it to the front line. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 1830-1835.

<sup>2</sup> James Bell Associates. (2011). *Early Childhood/Child Welfare Service Partnerships: The Challenges and the Potential*. Arlington, VA: Author.

## KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

Comments regarding challenges and suggestions to address them were also instructive for the ECCs in both counties. Selected comments are summarized in the following with the county for the ECC that shared the challenge and/or suggestion in parentheses:

- Clients difficult to locate, move often and have phones disconnected (Both counties)
- Need more feedback from providers (Both counties)
- The needs of older siblings are not being met (Okaloosa)
- CPP slows down the reunification (Okaloosa)
- Difficult to address a parent's multiple challenges (DV, substance abuse, low functioning) in 9-12 months (Escambia)
- Lack of clear ECC policy/procedures (acceptance/eligibility of families into ECC, scheduling of staffings and court hearings) (Escambia)
- Need strong leadership to guide the focus of the ECC (Escambia)
- Need the ECC process to be streamlined (Both counties)
- Need more service/therapy options that are trauma-informed (Okaloosa)
- Need rules for reunifications, overnight and unsupervised visitations (Okaloosa)
- Staffings should be held on the same day as court hearing (Okaloosa)

It is important to note that there were no survey participants from the judiciary. Even though the judiciary has demonstrated support for the ECC model in these two counties and believes in the model, their participation in this evaluation component might have offered some insights into collaboration and how it can be strengthened.

### **ECC Parent Interviews**

The twelve ECC parents interviewed provided a comprehensive look at what happens, what services are provided, what was beneficial, what should be improved and how their interaction with their children has been impacted. Positive opinions of ECC were abundant and convincing. Parents in Escambia and Okaloosa Counties shared the extent to which ECC changed their lives for the better. The support and encouragement gained from their ECC was acknowledged by multiple parents. Suggestions for improvements included a need for better communication between professional staff working on a case, particularly when there is staff turnover. The importance and need for drug treatment immediately after children have been removed was also acknowledged by more than one parent.

### **Impact of ECCs in Reunifying Families**

The evaluation component that focused on the ECC comparisons provided a rare chance to examine the impact of participation in an ECC on a single outcome, reunification. In addition to comparing the two ECCs to each other, the design allowed a comparison of each ECC with matched records in their respective counties. There was a significant difference in the number of reunifications between the ECCs and the matched comparison groups with ECC participants having a significantly higher number of reunifications.

The positive ECC findings were an important contribution to the evidence-base on Early childhood Courts, but there is more to learn and confirm. The strengths of the early child court models often refer to the actual services that parents and their children receive. This set of services includes child-parent psychotherapy (CPP), parenting training (might include Circle of Security), drug treatment, counseling and support groups for domestic violence victims, and a variety of other services that are considered appropriate for all members of the family. Evidence supporting CPP as effective with several outcomes and Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) as effective with another set of outcomes (including parent stress) has been documented in SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. A meta-analytic review of parent training program effectiveness identified varying components of training and supported the use of the programs in changing parenting behavior and preventing early child behavior problems.<sup>3</sup> The effectiveness of the ECCs on a variety of outcomes might be due, in part, to the specific services received. Without detailed information on the services received by each family, including the number of sessions and the assessments by the providers of progress in behavior change, it was not possible to identify the impact of a specific service or therapy in this evaluation.

### **Limitations and Qualifiers in the Methodologies and Analyses**

One limitation was small sample participant samples — 21 participants completed the PSI-SF and 12 participated in the parent interviews.

In the matched comparison design, all of the analyses conducted for comparing ECC and non-ECC records were based on the data available on cases at the time of the data extraction from the FSFN. While discharge data were available for a large number of cases up until the date of the data extraction, very few cases were actually closed. Most of the families were still receiving services. In this analysis, it was important to maintain as many families as possible in the evaluation for adequate sample sizes. However, it might have been more appropriate to examine closed cases separate from those currently open. Missing key dates and other information on ECC participants also added limitations to the analysis.

There was limited information available in FSFN on all victims in this evaluation. There were only five covariates with the necessary data in order to calculate the propensity scores for the matching procedure. As a final limitation in this evaluation, the matched comparison design with the impact analysis was not a randomized controlled trial.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations offered in the report build on the evaluation findings and draw from research literature in child welfare. They are two-prong in that they support ECC improvements and continued evaluation of ECC.

- 1) Provide more trauma-informed care training.
- 2) Include the administration and review of the Parental Stress Index-SF for parents enrolled in the ECCs.
- 3) Monitor and strengthen ECC collaboration by administering the *Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory* and discussing the responses.
- 4) Conduct ECC policy and procedural review sessions.
- 5) Conduct more evaluations of ECCs in Florida.
- 6) Strengthen the comprehensive collection and organization of data on ECC participants.
- 7) Continue to document relevant information on provider services.

<sup>3</sup> Kaminski, J.W., Valle, L., Filene, J., & Boyle, C. (2008). A meta-analytic review of components associated with parent training program effectiveness. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 36, 567-589.