

VOCA Grant Narrative- Infant/Toddler Court: Healing the Youngest Victims

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The main focus of this project and the Fort Bend County Infant Toddler Court (ITC), 328th District Court under the Judicial leadership of Judge Ronald Pope, is the protection of infants and toddlers from victimization and the healing of trauma by providing early and appropriate interventions. The brain of an infant is known to have the ability to compensate and recover from trauma of abuse and neglect. Early intervention is essential to improve the odds for the infants to recover. The human relationships the infant builds are the blocks to assist in healthy brain development. Early and appropriate interventions have proven to be effective at healing young children who have been victims of abuse. We know that children who are victims of abuse and neglect have higher rates of developmental disorders, emotional and behavioral regulation difficulties, disorganized attachments, all of which increases their risk for school problems, mental health disorders and sadly involvement with juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. We also know many of these families have social and environmental risk factors and that there is intergenerational transfer of these risks.

Fort Bend ITC considers child abuse as victimization and sees the multiple risk factors in these cases. An infant that has been removed from parental custody due to abuse and/or neglect experiences trauma on several levels: due to the abuse, the additional stress due to the separation, and often multiple placements. The child's parents are often experiencing several stressors as well resulting from their own victimization (including domestic violence), mental illness, social and economic risks, and separation from their children. The Fort Bend ITC works collaboratively to provide the necessary healing to reunite families where it is warranted (Recommendations come from CPS, Court Attorney, the Judge, and others) or help children connect with alternate caregiver, such as grandparents. There are key gaps in the existing service array, such as the use of trauma-informed assessments and interventions; the delivery of early, age and developmentally appropriate services that are evidence-based or best practices; and the availability of these services through a coordinated care management approach. This project expands the work of the Fort Bend County ITC by addressing these gaps and enhancing the delivery of trauma and relationship focused services to the children and families in the ITC.