

Parenting Awareness Month

Spotlight on Reunifying Families through Baby Court

The Issue: Babies and toddlers need safe and secure bonds with their parents in order to thrive, and there is ample evidence that the vast majority of parents want what's best for their children. Even when young children have been maltreated and placed in foster care, family reunification is often possible when parents receive the appropriate supports they need to do better and children receive early interventions necessary to protect healthy development and attachment. The reality is that more than half of children who enter foster care do return home to their parents. To address the unique challenges of infants and toddlers and change what can become a life-long cycle of repeated court actions and foster care placements for a child, specialized court dockets known as "baby courts" have emerged in a handful of Michigan cities to offer individualized supports and mental health services to help stabilize and strengthen even the most vulnerable families with young children.

Rising trends in child abuse and neglect in Michigan support the need for new strategies to help children and families. Michigan's rate of child abuse and neglect has grown by 29 percent since 2006, according to the latest Kids Count Data Book. And babies and toddlers make up the largest number of children in documented cases. Today, baby courts are in operation in Midland, Genesee and Wayne counties and others are being planned for Kent County and the Grand Traverse area, but this approach is still unavailable for the majority of families who could benefit.

Under these specialized court-mandated family reunification plans, parents receive training and supports that are intensive and individualized, and children receive mental health services to overcome the negative consequences of maltreatment. Baby courts typically offer assessment and intervention, parent coaching and education, supported visitation, guided play groups, mental health counseling, and drug and alcohol treatment. Because neuroscience demonstrates that early intervention and child welfare policies can make life-long differences in the lives of young children, the emotional and social health of babies and toddlers are of utmost concern in baby court programs.



A Family's Story: On a Sunday earlier this month, Jacob and Celine of Flint spent the day taking their young son, Koda, to church and then playing and going for a walk before settling down to make a family dinner. "It was a great day," recalled Jacob, 26, a hands-on father who's now as comfortable getting down on the floor to play with his son as diapering him. Addressing his fiancé, Jacob said, "She's amazing. I honestly couldn't ask for a better mother for my child." But what made this seemingly ordinary

day different for all three of them was that it was 15-month-old Koda's first day back in the full-time care of his parents. Koda had spent over a year in foster care in a nearby suburb while he and his parents were enrolled in Genesee County's baby court after he was identified as a victim of abuse/or neglect and placed in foster care after falling ill in his parents' care.

Erin Werth, coordinator of the Flint-based Maltreated Infant/Toddler Treatment Court, said the family was referred to baby court after Koda was placed in foster care because professionals were able to identify strengths within the family that lead them to believe they could work towards reunification. Toward that goal, an individualized treatment plan was created with a team-based approach including area infant mental health therapists and child welfare specialists from the state Department of Health and Human Services, Werth said. Jacob and Celine began attending parenting classes to learn new skills for working with Koda, and the couple took part in a structured playgroup to demonstrate their newly learned abilities. Every three months they came before a judge to discuss their progress. Werth said the couple became so engaged and successful in the program that they were invited to become mentor parents for others entering baby court.

"They just did a beautiful job," Werth said. "They've worked closely with our infant mental health therapist, have done all of our programs and have worked very hard."

Werth said parents are selected for the baby-court program based on criteria, including "who needs our help the most," and a motivation to change. "What it boils down to is – Is the family ready for intervention and are they amendable for the therapeutic process? And is this a family who without intervention is going to frequent the (foster care) system?"

Jacob, who will be serving as the stay-at-home parent while his fiancé works a fast-food job, said he appreciated developing new skills that helped him learn how to pay close attention to his son's personal cues and needs. Because of seizures Koda experienced early in life, he is not yet able to speak and has developmental delays for which he is receiving home visitation *Early On* services, Jacob said. "That's just another great program," Jacob said of *Early On*.

"We gained experience," he said of the court program. "We learned about dealing with tantrums and how to use toys to help with his fine motor skills. We also learned about being comfortable in our environment and to finally open up and talk about issues, everything (from) child care to when you were a child."

Jacob talked about his rough home life as a teen complicated by an abusive stepfather who drove him away. Jacob was eventually placed in a juvenile treatment facility following charges of home invasions and aggravated assault. He later went to prison. Jacob admits the baby court program and counseling gave him new strategies for dealing with his impatience and anger. Through counseling and parenting classes, he said he learned how to use a calm voice, instead of yelling, and positive ways to redirect children's behavior rather than applying punishment.

Jacob's progress was also helped by medication for bipolar disorder and other mental health issues, he said. Fully supportive of the program's counseling opportunities, Jacob now heartily urges other parents to become open to change through counseling. "Talk about everything you

have issues with. The counseling will help you in the long run. Don't try to fight what's going on ... embrace it," he said. "If you have feelings about something, talk about it, and in return you'll get what you need."

Werth says Jacob has become a model dad. "I am 100 percent confident this child will never come into (outside) care again," Werth said. "(Jacob) absolutely struggled when he was growing up but he is beautiful to see with this son today."

The Genesee County baby court was launched eight years ago and sees about eight to 10 families each year. Werth said they would see more cases but there aren't enough mental health therapists to serve all families. Infant mental health therapists are limited to two or three baby court cases at a time because the cases are time-consuming requiring frequent court visits, and therapists must juggle them with their non-baby court cases. Medicaid covers the therapists' salaries and the Genesee Court engages them through the public Genesee Health System, the non-profit Easter Seals and Genesee County Community Mental Health. Besides requiring dedicated mental health therapists, baby courts also require a full-time coordinator to operate which is an added expense, Werth said. Other additional costs include offering specialized parenting classes, she added.

Werth said the goal of the program is to alter the way the foster care and court systems relate with families to reduce the negative outcomes experienced by infant and toddlers who have experienced abuse and neglect. Critical to its success is helping infants and children develop healthy development and attachment to their parents and avoid problems caused by frequent placement changes in foster care.

Since its inception, the program has had great success – only three children have returned to foster care out of 40 families served. "It's interrupted the general pattern of cycling in and out of foster care," she said. Many of the parents in the program were once in the foster system, themselves, and it's been rewarding to see that change for their own children, Werth added.

In addition, the program has helped judges look at families differently, and recognize that babies who have experienced abuse or neglect have emotional needs that need attention. Even some lawyers have enrolled in infant mental health courses to gain new understanding. "As a result, we've been able to change policies and bring services faster to families and get systems working together," Werth said.

Despite Koda's delays, Jacob said he has great hopes for his easy-going, generally happy son. His goals for Koda are not unlike any parent's wishes for their child.

"I want him to go to school, get a trade, and find a decent job," he said. "And have a good life."