



Supporting Early Connections

King County (WA) Infant Mental Health Dependency Court Project

Infants and toddlers are the largest group of children to enter, remain in and re-enter foster care, and the least likely to reunify with their biological families. Many of these young children face multiple placements with biological parents, foster parents, and/or relative caregivers. The changes and transitions these children encounter put them at great risk both for immediate and long-term mental health challenges. Unfortunately, courts, child welfare systems, and foster and birth families are often unaware of the need to address the unique mental health and relationship needs of young children who experience significant trauma, loss and separations.

The Supporting Early Connections project was developed to address the needs of vulnerable infants and toddlers and their families. The project is currently funded by a grant from the Stuart Foundation and the contributions of collaborators, including King County Superior Court, the Department of Social and Health Services and Navos (a community mental health provider). The Center for Children & Youth Justice provides coordination and evaluation of the project.

The four overarching goals of this project are:

- 1) Provide early intervention mental health services for infants, toddlers and their biological parents aimed specifically at addressing the breakdown in their relationship that has brought them to the attention of the court.
- 2) Support family/parent engagement, increasing the likelihood that families will complete treatment and thereby increase the chances for successful reunification with no further reports of abuse or neglect.
- 3) Improve knowledge and understanding of how to better meet the needs of very young children and their families in the Justice, Child Welfare and Mental Health systems.
- 4) Develop and model an effective, multi-system partnership that is sustainable and can be replicated in other locales.

Supporting Early Connections serves families with dependency cases heard at the Norm Maleng Regional Justice Center in Kent, WA. Cross-disciplinary training is also provided on an on-going basis to project partners and others working with families involved in the child welfare system. The project has the full participation of the Court Commissioner, defense counsel, the Attorney General's Office, Children's Administration Region IV, King County Dependency CASA and Navos. Infant mental health expertise is also provided by project consultants, Dr. Sheri L. Hill and Dr. JoAnne Solchany.

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