

The Strengthening America's Families Act



Infants and toddlers are the age group most vulnerable to maltreatment, with babies experiencing abuse or neglect at 200-400% the rate for other age groups.

There is a common misconception that very young children are not affected by the events around them. But because of their rapid brain development, young children who experience maltreatment—and too often the instability of foster care—have a high likelihood of lasting detrimental impacts on their emotional and cognitive development.

Infants and toddlers are an outsized proportion of children in child welfare programs: a full one-third of children entering foster care—even before the pandemic—were under age three. The child welfare system, however, was not designed to support the unique needs of babies or their caretakers. The causes of child abuse and neglect are complex and require multi-faceted solutions. Many states and communities do not have the support structures in place to ensure strong early development and address family trauma through coordinating a broad array of family resources to ensure safe and loving environments for young children.

The Strengthening America's Families Act (SAFA) would support the efforts of states and localities to transform child welfare policy and practice through community-based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (ITCT). Led by judges, ITCTs work collaboratively to prevent child abuse and neglect, as well as address the needs of young children experiencing maltreatment and their families.

How SAFA works: SAFA harnesses the science of child development to drive change. The legislation provides key funding to build state and local systems that support a range of comprehensive, trauma-informed infant, toddler, and family services for families in the child welfare system, as well as prevention services where possible. Currently, ITCTs are in 98 sites in 29 states but only serve a fraction of children and families in need. SAFA would:

- Provide seed money to states to develop, stabilize, and enhance ITCTs;
- Ensure that communities and states have the training and technical assistance necessary to develop programs with integrity and deliver evidence-based services; and
- Expand the reach of a proven approach to transform how communities and the child welfare system support the well-being of infants, toddlers, and families.

Measurable Success:

- Maltreatment reoccurs in **fewer than 1% of the cases** served by ITCTs, far below the national standard of 9.1%;
- The ITCT approach **saves more than \$14,000 per child**, versus a traditional child welfare case;
- **84%** of infants and toddlers in the program achieved permanency within a year, **compared with the national standard of 40.5% and a national average of 18.7% leaving foster care in less than 12 months**; and
- A **high rate of substance use disorders**, a reason for removal in almost 70% of cases, did not hamper outcomes. The vast majority (74%) of parents needing treatment entered services within a week.

Cosponsor the Strengthening America's Families Act and help transform outcomes for the youngest children in the child welfare system.

For more information, visit <https://www.zerotothree.org/FederalAgenda2021> or contact Jim Bialick, Director of Government Relations, at jbialick@zerotothree.org.