

# Incorporating Early Childhood Courts into Washington's Dependency System

In 2021, **children under the age of three made up 48% (1,410)** of dependency filings in Washington State. Early childhood experiences shape children's brain development and have life-long impacts on their social, emotional, and physical well-being. Timely and appropriate interventions help maltreated babies and families heal.

Early Childhood Courts are therapeutic court programs utilizing the Safe Babies Court Team™ approach. This **community engagement and systems-change initiative** focuses on reducing trauma and improving how courts, child welfare, and child-serving organizations work together to support young children in, or at-risk of entering, the child welfare system. Five communities in Washington currently operate Early Childhood Courts – **Clark, Kitsap, Pierce, Thurston, and Spokane** Counties.

Early Childhood Courts provide a **HIGH IMPACT OPPORTUNITY** to change the landscape of our child welfare system and to:

- **REDUCE** the number of babies, toddlers, and families entering dependency courts
- **IMPROVE** the well-being and cognitive development of babies and toddlers
- **PREVENT** trauma and family separation in a safe, equitable, and effective manner

**Core Components** of the Early Childhood Court-Safe Babies Court Team approach include:

- Judicial and child welfare leadership
- A trauma-informed approach that includes more frequent hearings and supportive family team meetings
- Dedicated staff driving the team approach; community engagement at the family and community levels
- Focus on equitable access to services, and family reunification, that includes parent empowerment, support, and access to treatment that supports parent-child relationships
- Technical assistance, training, and evaluation to assess effectiveness and improve outcomes

For more information on the Core Components, visit: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/services/the-safe-babies-court-team-approach>

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# National Evidence of Safe Babies Court Team Effectiveness

	SBCT	National
Recurrence of maltreatment	0.7%	9.1%
Babies reunified with parents or placed with relatives	87.8%	66%

Children of **all races and ethnicities were served equally well** with regard to both placement **stability and length of stay** in foster care.

In 2021, the Washington State Legislature passed SB 5331, which established standards for Early Childhood Court programs, centering racial equity and parent reunification as core standards, and ensuring that courts adopting this approach do so with consistency and fidelity. This is now codified into law as RCW 2.30.100 et seq.



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*The Center for Children & Youth Justice is partnering with the Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts to support the implementation and expansion of Early Childhood Courts in Washington and is collaborating with stakeholders from across the state. The Early Childhood Court sites are currently funded by a grant from the US Health Resources and Services Administration, awarded to CCYJ through a competitive process.*



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