

Addressing the Developmental Needs of Infants in CT’s Child Welfare System: The Role of Child FIRST CT

Citing the growing body of research concerning children’s relationships with their family and community, Brenda Jones Harden, Ph.D. discussed the critical importance of these relationships during infancy and the child’s first few years in her remarks as the keynote speaker at a June 1 statewide conference hosted by Child FIRST CT. These early interactions can have a profound and lasting impact later in life. When young children are exposed to the stresses of poverty, child maltreatment, parental depression, parental substance abuse and/or family violence, the resulting “toxic stress” directly damages their developing brains, leading to a host of negative outcomes including:

- Mental health problems
- Language delays
- Lower academic achievement
- Poor social skills
- Poor health throughout their lifespan

Dr. Jones Harden focused her remarks on the needs of babies that become involved in the child welfare system and emphasized the benefits of trying to either maintain young children with their families or to insure a permanent adoptive home within a very short period of time. She stressed the “importance of permanent, consistent, nurturing relationships and stimulating, intimate home environments.” In fact, 50% of children under three years of age in the child welfare system have significant delays in their development.

Dr. Jones Harden is a national expert on young children in the child welfare system and an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland. The conference brought together 50 participants from the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the six Child FIRST sites in Connecticut, and the Child Health & Development Institute (CHDI) - the fiduciary for Child FIRST and a partner in its replication throughout Connecticut.

Originally developed in Bridgeport in 2001, Child FIRST is an evidence-based, early childhood home visiting model that works with the most vulnerable young children and their families to decrease abuse and neglect, emotional and behavioral problems, and developmental and learning problems. Child FIRST teams include a master’s level mental health and developmental clinician and a care coordinator who work with families in their homes to stabilize the home environment, to strengthen the relationship between the parents/primary caregivers and the young child, and to decreasing stress through community supports and services. Families typically receive weekly visits for an average of 6 - 9 months. This combination has a proven positive effect on children’s emotional and cognitive development and has decreased the incidence of child abuse and neglect. The results of a randomized controlled evaluation are published in a recent issue of *Child Development*.¹

With DCF undergoing a transformation with a new vision, this statewide conference represented an ideal opportunity for collaborative training. DCF has joined with Child FIRST to promote replication of this model throughout Connecticut. DCF Commissioner Joette Katz, J.D., a conference participant, remarked, “We must focus on strengthening families by developing relationships of respect, trust, and support. Many of our families have young infants. This is an ideal opportunity to prevent disability and optimize children’s health and development.”

The conference also provided an important venue for DCF and Child FIRST to explore how they could work together more closely to identify very young children at risk for negative outcomes and provide them with enhanced services, such as Child FIRST’s home visiting program. Child FIRST Executive Director, Darcy Lowell, M.D., stated, “We have a tremendous opportunity to use the newest scientific knowledge to ensure the healthy emotional, cognitive, and physical development of our most vulnerable, young children. A close partnership with DCF is critical if we are to reach this goal.”

The Child FIRST model is being replicated in Connecticut with the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a number of public and private funders including DCF, the Children’s Fund of CT, the CT Health Foundation, the Graustein Memorial Fund and the Grossman Family Foundation. Child FIRST currently serves families in Greater Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, New London County, Norwalk, and Waterbury.

For further information about this initiative, please contact Mary Peniston at marypeniston@gmail.com

¹ Lowell, D. I., Carter, A. S., Godoy, L., Paulicin, B. and Briggs-Gowan, M. J. (2011), A Randomized Controlled Trial of Child FIRST: A Comprehensive Home-Based Intervention Translating Research Into Early Childhood Practice. *Child Development*, 82: 193–208