



*For far too long the courts in Mississippi just applied a Band-Aid to the problems presented by abused and neglected babies. We didn't have the knowledge or tools to put together an effective approach. Now our small community has really come together to ensure babies are getting what they need to develop medically, socially, and cognitively.*

~Judge Michael McPhail, Forrest County Youth Court, Hattiesburg, MS

### ***Safe Babies, Strong Families, and Healthy Communities***

Every seven minutes a baby or toddler in America is removed from his parents' care because of alleged abuse or neglect. At a time when these children are first exploring the world, when their lives as learners are just beginning, they are learning that the world is a dangerous and frightening place. Their brains are assaulted by stress hormones that can diminish their IQs and social interactions. Their need to find safe, trusting relationships overrides their curiosity. Their future and the future of their communities are compromised. These young children, a disproportionate percentage of whom are children of color, are often overlooked in the range of approaches designed to improve the early learning environments for poor children. Despite this grim forecast, research confirms that the early years present an unparalleled window of opportunity to effectively intervene with very young victims of maltreatment. Research-informed decision-making combined with developmentally appropriate services can change the odds for these babies and toddlers. Yet, the child welfare system is not guided by what science says babies need. As a result, what unfolds is a developmental disaster for babies.

ZERO TO THREE has instituted a groundbreaking program in ten diverse sites. *Safe Babies, Strong Families, and Healthy Communities* is operating in Hattiesburg, MS; New Orleans, LA; Des Moines, IA; Honolulu, HI; Cherokee, NC; San Francisco, CA; Omaha, NE; Douglasville, GA; New Haven, CT; and Little Rock, AR. The principle strategy of the Safe Babies program is the Safe Babies Court Team, which combines judicial muscle with child development expertise and community partnerships so that babies and toddlers are given the life-changing help they need. By working together, multidisciplinary teams are developing and implementing comprehensive research-based approaches to meet the needs of these young children. In each site the Safe Babies project will:

- Establish and support a team representative of all the decision-makers, services and resources which can support abused and neglected babies in the community
- Help individual team members apply evidence-based whole-child decision-making to improve healthy developmental outcomes one baby at a time
- Utilize the whole team to create systemic changes that build community capacity to improve outcomes for all babies and toddlers in the child welfare system

*The court team model has revolutionized the way we do business in this courthouse. And I can't imagine ever doing it any other way. It is so valuable in helping me make the best decisions I possibly can and to know that the work that we're doing is backed up by the science of what's best for children. It's very comforting for someone who puts her name on the line and decides where a child will spend the night because that can be a life and death decision.*

~Judge Constance Cohen,  
Associate Juvenile Judge Iowa Courts, District 5

*Safe Babies* is an opportunity to invest in an initiative that is transforming the way communities approach the needs of marginalized babies and toddlers to lay a healthy foundation for their educational and social success. The strength of *Safe Babies, Strong Families, and Healthy Communities* lies in the expertise and networks present at the local level supported by the knowledge and guidance of ZERO TO THREE.