

Home Visiting and Child Welfare

Extending the Reach of Home Visiting

Series on Home Visiting's Connections to Larger Systems of Support

SEPTEMBER 2026

The earliest years of life are foundational for children's development. Secure, nurturing, and consistent relationships with caregivers help young children develop trust, safety, and a sense of self. When family stress is high – whether the result of economic insecurity or other challenges – young children experience the effects of that stress in profound ways.

Young children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system:

- Historically, over one quarter of all child maltreatment victims in the U.S. are younger than three years old, with children under one most affected.¹
- Young children (birth to age five) are the most likely to be involved in the child welfare system; the majority of cases involve neglect, often tied to poverty or parental stress.²

Countless studies find that early involvement with the child welfare system can have a long-term impact on children's emotional well-being.³ Because of this, efforts over the years have focused on providing earlier, family-strengthening support to families in the hope that fewer children will require placement in out-of-home care.

Signed into law in 2018, the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) gives states, territories, and tribes the option to use child welfare program funds for evidence-based preventive services like home visiting, mental health counseling, and substance abuse treatment that can help to support and stabilize families. This represents a notable change from child welfare agencies' focus on safety through placement, to a focus on prevention and early intervention.

Home visiting and child welfare have different purposes, responsibilities, and approaches—but when they understand and leverage each other's strengths, they can create a more connected continuum of support for young children and families. Voluntary home visiting programs can develop trusting relationships with families, offer early and consistent support to families, and provide deep expertise on infancy and early childhood development. When families are experiencing significant stress or facing concerns related to child safety, child welfare can play an important role in ensuring safety.

¹ <https://mchb.hrsa.gov/programs-impact/early-childhood-systems/infant-toddler-court#:~:text=Abuse%20and%20neglect%20during%20infancy,that%20children%20need%20to%20thrive>

² https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/text_968.pdf

³ <https://hvworkforce.org/resource/improving-partnerships-and-coordination-between-home-visiting-and-child-welfare/>

Together, they can foster healthy child-caregiver attachment, provide trauma-informed support, connect families to needed resources and services, and reduce placement in out-of-home care.

Promising Examples

The National Home Visiting Network set out to uncover examples of collaboration between child welfare and home visiting. Several evidenced based home visiting models, including Healthy Families America, SafeCare, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Child First among others, purposefully work at the intersection of these fields to reduce abuse and neglect. Among the many examples we discovered, the following two illustrate what can be possible when the two systems work together.

Healthy Families America

Healthy Families America (HFA) aligns with the FFPSA, offering preventative, evidence-based approaches to reduce the need for foster care. HFA provides flexible, tailored support to build protective factors and strengthen families. Its support is relationship-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. HFA has developed specific protocols for sites that work with families referred from child welfare. The protocols allow programs to accept referrals and adjust standard programmatic frameworks to support families facing acute stress and/or child welfare system involvement. For example, adjustments include extending enrollment so that children up to 24 months can enroll; extending the service duration; considering caseload adjustments to reduce burnout of home visitors and spread out the highest need cases; and establishing memorandum of understanding between local HFA programs and child welfare agencies to streamline referral pathways and data-sharing agreements.

Essential Lesson:

Together, these adaptations demonstrate how a home visiting model can maintain its core approach while creating greater flexibility for families experiencing heightened stress or child welfare involvement.

Safe Babies / Infant-Toddler Court Teams

The Safe Babies Infant-Toddler Court Team approach was developed by ZERO TO THREE in 2005 as a pilot to reduce child maltreatment and speed up permanent placement by closing gaps at the systems level. Operating in more than 30 states, the model is designed to bring together judges, mental health providers, social workers, and community coordinators to consider the root issues that might be interfering with child safety. Home visitors partner with the community coordinators to build unified family support plans and they also provide hands-on parenting guidance, developmental screenings, and wrap-around services. This allows these teams to focus on what matters: understanding child development, the importance of early attachment, and creating safe, stable, and nurturing environments; integrating research-informed best practice into court proceedings and child welfare case planning; and aligning solutions across systems creating a continuum of services for families.

Essential Lesson:

This approach illustrates the unique contribution home visiting can make within a multidisciplinary child welfare team: bringing a developmental, relationship-based perspective into decisions about child safety, attachment, and permanency.

Collaboration Tips: Home Visiting and Child Welfare

Home visiting programs can support family strengthening and reunification by:

- Working in partnership with child welfare to establish pathways and remove barriers for child welfare to timely refer families to home visiting.
- Partnering with the judicial and child welfare systems to offer support to families at risk of child separation and to help increase the likelihood of family preservation and reunification.
- Developing consistency across the fields including shared language, collaborative protocols and service plans (e.g., establishing or supporting an Infant-Toddler Court Team), and cross-training of staff.
- Considering how each family's goals for home visiting may support the goals for their child welfare case plan.
- Sharing the home visitor perspective and experience working with families as decisions are made about services, programs, supports, and case plans.

Helpful Resources

National Home Visiting Resource Center - State Partnerships to Coordinate Home Visiting and Child Welfare - <https://nhvrc.org/wp-content/uploads/NHVRC-Brief-032923.pdf>

Jackie Walorksi Center for Evidence-Based Case Management
<https://hvworkforce.org/resource/improving-partnerships-and-coordination-between-home-visiting-and-child-welfare/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway -
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/find-resources/>

Annie E. Casey Foundation - 10 Key Resources for Child Welfare Professionals -
<https://www.aecf.org/blog/10-key-resources-for-child-welfare-professionals>

Chapin Hall & Start Early - Home Visiting in the Family First Context - <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/FFPSA-HV-Brief.pdf>

Casey Family Programs Issue Brief on Safe Children: Are home visiting programs effective in reducing child maltreatment? https://www.casey.org/media/22.07-QFF-SC-Home-visiting-programs_fnl.pdf

Prenatal to Three Policy Center - Home Visiting and Child Welfare Involvement
<https://pn3policy.org/home-visiting-and-child-welfare-involvement-a-matched-comparison-group-study/>

Zero to Three - Collaborating with Infant-Toddler Court Teams: A Tip Sheet for Home Visiting Professionals - https://www.zerotothree.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ZTT-Home-Visiting-Tips-Visitors-Final_508.pdf