

# Working with Families in the Child Welfare System Affected by Incarceration



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Quality Improvement Center  
for Research-Based  
Infant-Toddler Court Teams

## What Can You Do?

- Identify the barriers that parents with a history of incarceration face in your community, especially in the context of completing their case plan. These parents likely have difficulties obtaining a job, accessing public housing, and receiving federal benefits like public assistance.
- Set the tone for a dependency process that is empathetic and supportive of parents, welcoming their voices and addressing their needs.
- Offer strengths-based pre/post removal conferences and family team meetings. Promote compassionate efforts to empower and engage parents. Embrace parents as true members of the court team; allow them to participate via phone or video if incarcerated.
- Promote parent-child contact by working with the prison social worker and provide a child-friendly space with toys and books while children and parents wait for hearings.

### **The Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) Approach and the QIC-ITCT**

In response to the needs of maltreated babies and toddlers entering the child welfare system (CWS), ZERO TO THREE developed the SBCT approach: a collaborative, problem-solving systems-change innovation focused on supporting the health, mental health, and developmental needs of adjudicated babies and toddlers and expediting safe, nurturing permanency outcomes. SBCT offers a structure for systems to work together—the court, child welfare agency, and related child-service organizations—to ensure better outcomes for the youngest children in care and for their families. The structure comprises (1) a Family Team (attorneys, case planner, service providers, and family) that comes together at least monthly to identify and address barriers to reunification, and (2) a community stakeholder team, or Active Court Team, that engages in broader systems reform efforts. In 2014, the Children’s Bureau provided a grant to ZERO TO THREE and its partners to develop the Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (QIC-ITCT), which provides technical assistance and training to participating sites. The QIC-ITCT provides access to evidence-based interventions and best practices for individuals and agencies working with the birth-to-3 population. The mission of the QIC-ITCT is to support implementation and build knowledge of effective, collaborative court team interventions that transform child welfare systems for infants, toddlers, and families (see <http://www.qicct.org/>).

## Background

More than 2.7 million children in the United States have at least one parent who is incarcerated [2]. In 2009, close to 15,000 children entered out-of-home care as a result of parental incarceration [3]. Children in the child welfare system (CWS) with an incarcerated parent stay 24% longer in out-of-home care than children whose parents are not incarcerated [4]. After release, parents face multiple challenges that prevent them from completing their case plans and being able to reunify with their children, including difficulties obtaining a job, accessing public housing, and receiving federal benefits like food stamps and public assistance [5].

### SBCT Guiding Values

*“Being a parent is a job all parents want to do well. No matter how difficult or dangerous their lives, parents with addictions love their children and want the best for them. It is incumbent upon us to honor that love.” [1]*

## Parental Incarceration among Families Participating in a SBCT Site

Among children involved with SBCT sites, the challenges and risk factors faced by their parents are overwhelming. Fewer than half are employed. Most parents have not completed high school or any form of higher education. Close to half share housing with family or friends or are homeless [6].

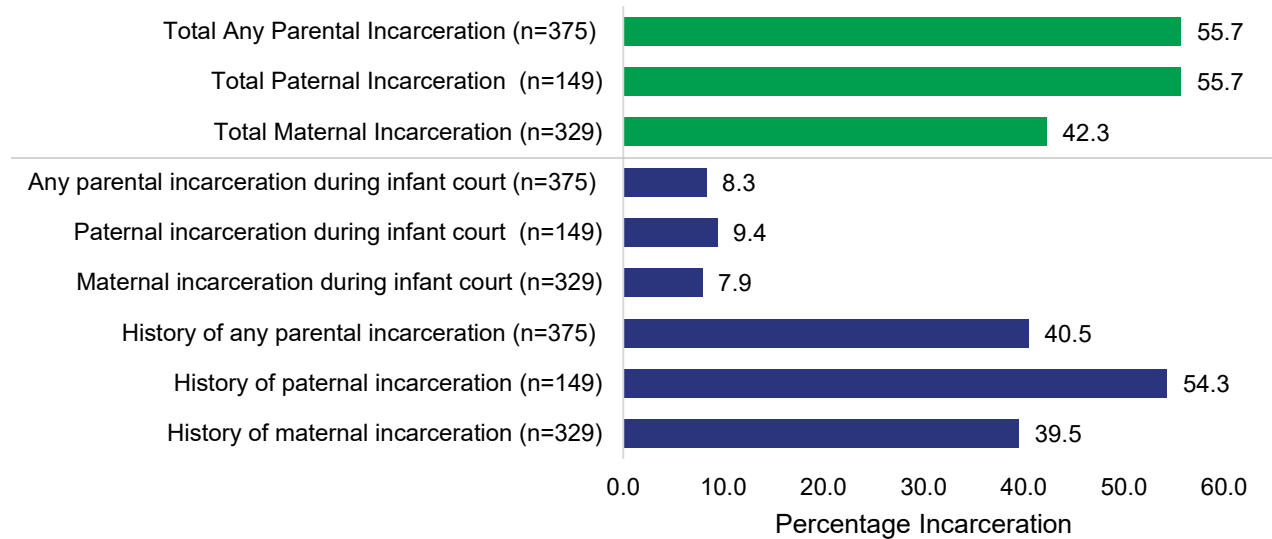
Parents involved in child welfare proceedings are much more likely than parents in the general population to have a prison record or to be facing incarceration at the time of the SBCT case [5]. As most of the parents have substance use disorders, their incarceration is often related to drug possession convictions.

Among families that have been part of an SBCT site between April 2015 and May 2018, more than half of children had a parent who has been incarcerated and almost one in ten children had a major interruption in contact with a parent due to the parents serving prison or jail time during their participation with the SBCT.

The percentage of parents who have been incarcerated among SBCT sites is higher than estimates from a nationally representative sample of children investigated for maltreatment in which caseworkers identified that fewer than 14% of primary caregivers had a recent history of arrests [7].



### Parental Incarceration among Families Involved with the SBCT



Note: The top 3 total bars represent either any history of incarceration or incarceration during participation at a SBCT site.

### SBCT Solution

As a community engagement and systems-change approach, SBCT focuses on improving how the courts, child welfare agencies, and related child-serving organizations work together, share information, and expedite services for young children in the CWS. The SBCT approach employs best practices in child welfare combined with innovative collaborative, problem-solving strategies to expedite time to permanency among young children with a parent that has experience with incarceration or is incarcerated during their SBCT case [5]. These include: *Judicial Leadership, Valuing Birth Parents, and Frequent Family Time (Visitation).*

#### SBCT Core Components

- Judicial Leadership
  - Local Community Coordinator
  - Active Court Team Focused on the Big Picture
  - Targeting Infants and Toddlers Under the Court’s Jurisdiction
  - Valuing Birth Parents
  - Concurrent Planning and Limiting Placements
  - The Foster Parent Intervention: Mentors and Extended Family
  - Pre-Removal Conferences and Monthly Family Team Meetings
  - Frequent Family Time (Visitation)
  - Continuum of Mental Health Services
  - Training and Technical Assistance
  - Understanding the Impact of Our Work
- <http://www.qicct.org/safe-babies-court-teams>

From the beginning of a SBCT case, *Judicial Leadership* is fundamental in engaging parents with a history of incarceration. The judge sets the tone for a dependency process that is empathetic and supportive of parents, welcoming their voices and addressing their needs. Hearings include a central focus on the quality of placements and concurrent planning and progress in strengthening the parent-child relationship. The SBCT approach also involves regular and frequent strengths-based pre/post removal conferences and family team meetings, compassionate efforts to empower and engage parents as full members of the team; placement of children with caregivers willing to be permanent parents if reunification does not work; and frontloading of services that are critical for reunification efforts and advance child and family well-being.

The SBCT approach provides technical assistance and training to sites on core components *Valuing Birth Parents* and *Frequent Family Time (Visitation)*, including providing resources to support incarcerated parents. For example, the SBCT implementation guide [5] includes information about the Baby Elmo Program created in 2008 by two Academy of ZERO TO THREE Fellows, Carole Shauffeur and Rachel Barr.

In 2007, the Sesame Workshop published a series of videos for parents and their young children called *Sesame Beginnings*. The videos are used in the Just Beginning curriculum to illustrate the skills being taught. The early participants of what was then called “A Parenting Intervention for Incarcerated Teen Parents” [8] renamed it the “Baby Elmo Program” in honor of its Sesame Workshop connection.

Now in 11 juvenile justice facilities (4 pre-commitment juvenile halls and 7 commitment facilities), the Just Beginning Baby Elmo Program has served more than 300 fathers and their children 3 to 36 months old. Because the coaches are the correctional staff working in each

*“Often parents experience a stay of incarceration when we meet them in SBCT. One father in particular was the primary caregiver for the 3 and 4 year old children in this family. It was clear that he had a close relationship with them and the mother struggled with a severe mental health disorder which hindered her ability to naturally care for them without supports. Incarcerated parents enter court knowing that is the only time they have with their children until the next hearing. Because this was an SBCT family, the father was able to tell his story of how he engaged with his children prior to coming into care. He advocated for the mother and talked about the fact that while he knew they needed him... he needed them, especially his new baby whom he had yet to bond with. He was not going to be incarcerated forever and if there was a chance for him to be a strong and productive parent beyond this moment, the intervention had to start that day. In a collaborative effort from the team, the father was able to come two hours early and spend time with his children in the playroom. Working side-by-side with the educational program within the prison system he participated in classes to support positive parenting, individual counseling and the development of life skills beyond incarceration. Space was also provided for him to spend time with his children away from the general population and have access to hands-on-parenting during their family time.”*

-SBCT community coordinator



facility, the cost of implementation is very low. The coaches receive one full day of training on the Just Beginning curriculum, which includes five sessions to facilitate the father's ability to play with his young child:

- Basic attachment theory and stranger anxiety
- Following the baby's lead
- Incorporating language into play (e.g., labeling the child's actions and the toys she chooses)
- Showing praise
- Implementing all the skills.

Each 60-minute parent-child visit is preceded by the associated training. The coach remains with the father and his child during the visit. Each facility has a designated room for these visits that is designed by facility staff and the young fathers to be child friendly. Sesame Street characters are painted on the walls and the floor has brightly colored matting. Toys represent the range of interests and abilities of infants and toddlers. At the conclusion of the 5-session intervention, fathers continue to have regular visits with their young children until their release [5].

The work of one SBCT community coordinator from a long-standing SBCT site exemplifies the types of efforts that community coordinators regularly undertake to support parents who are incarcerated: "For incarcerated fathers, the SBCT

family team can help the parent and child maintain a connection. Each state has different rules about prison visiting. In Mississippi, the Forrest County Community Coordinator, Josie Brown, went to a prison to pave the way for parent-child contact. She met with the prison social worker who offered her office as a location for visits. If you welcome representatives from probation, parole, and prisons to your SBCT, you may find ways around prohibitions about visiting. Keeping young children connected to their fathers is important for both the children and the fathers. There is no substitute for holding a baby." [5]

#### **Judicial Leadership in Practice: Finding and Engaging Fathers**

*"The primary identified issue that comes up over and over again is that we, as a system, fail and have failed in the most basic of tasks—giving notice to known fathers, named fathers. We haven't done enough at every level to try and discern who the father is or who he may be.*

*It is important to start from the assumption that it is a good thing to identify the father and that he needs to be given a chance to make a positive contribution to the process. He may not take us up on it and he may never appear in the case but it is not the choice of a social worker or attorney or judge to make based on what the mother says about him or based on what a criminal history may say about him without any other considerations."*

-Polk County Juvenile Court Judge Colin Witt [5]

## How Do We Know the Approach Is Working?

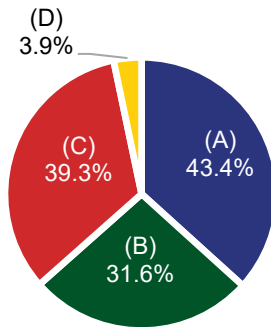
At each SBCT site, family teams work diligently to support children and their parents. Among families with a closed CWS case that have been part of an SBCT between April 2015 and May 2018, nine of every ten parents have a history of substance use disorders, six of every ten have a history of mental health issues and, for over half the CWS had concerns about domestic violence. Although over half of children with a closed CWS case had a parent with a history of incarceration, there were no significant differences in the percentage of children who reached permanency in 12 months. Among 231 children with a closed case, 82% of children that had a parent ever incarcerated and 85% of children with parents with no history of incarceration reached permanency in 12 months. Parental incarceration also had no significant effect on the type of permanency among children with closed CWS cases when looking at the family as a whole or at mothers. Only among fathers, children of those with no history of incarceration were more likely to be reunified (66.7%) than children with a father with a history of incarceration (34.1%).

These are encouraging results at the family level. Regardless of history of parental incarceration, over 80% of children reached permanency in 12 months, and about half of the children are reunified with one or both parents. The active support that family teams provide to parents with a history of incarceration is a key feature of the SBCT approach.

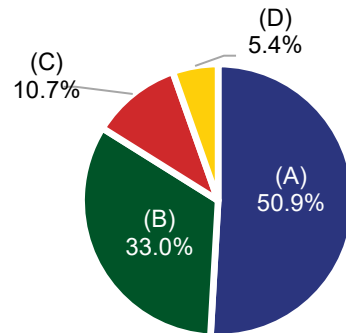


**Parental Incarceration and Child Type of Permanency among Families Involved with the SBCT (n=231)**

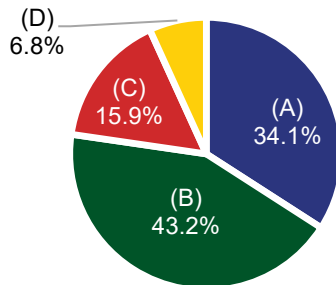
History of Maternal Incarceration (N=76)



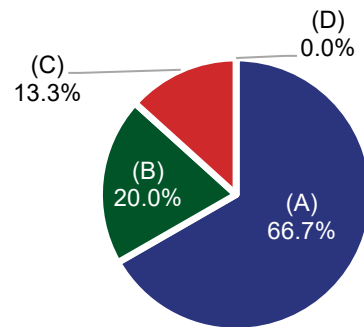
No Maternal Incarceration (N=112)



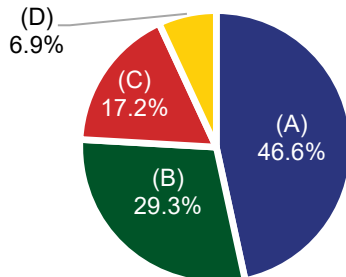
History of Paternal Incarceration (N=44)



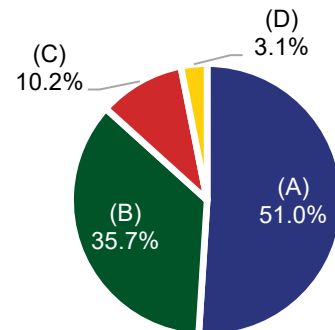
No Paternal Incarceration (N=45)



History of Any Parental Incarceration (N=116)



No Parental Incarceration (N=98)



**Working with Families in the Child Welfare System Affected by Incarceration** is part of a series of briefs based on the evaluation of the Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams.

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