

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE FIFTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
IN AND FOR PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER NO.: 5.705-9/19

IN RE: EARLY CHILDHOOD COURT

According to national research, a child's first 1,000 days of life are a critical period during which he or she faces either the greatest risk of having to endure lifelong adversity or the greatest opportunity for long term well-being with a stable, nurturing caregiver. To that end, Chapter 39, Florida Statutes, authorizes the establishment of an early childhood court to promote reunification and stable home environments for children ages 0-5. The goal of Florida's Early Childhood Court is to improve child safety and well-being, heal trauma and repair the parent/child relationship, expedite permanency, prevent recurrence of maltreatment, and stop the intergenerational cycle of abuse/neglect/violence. Positive results have been associated with the Safe Babies Court Team approach, which has demonstrated timely permanency, increased child wellbeing, and reduced recurrence of child abuse through the use of specialized dockets, multidisciplinary teams, community coordinators, and early childhood mental health specialists who provide child-parent therapy to address the multigenerational trauma.

NOW THEREFORE, pursuant to the authority conferred by the Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.215, it is **ORDERED** as follows:

1. An Early Childhood Court is hereby established in the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit of Florida.
 - a. The Early Childhood Court is built upon a partnership among the Administrative Office of the Court, the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, the Department of Children and Families, Child Net, Children's Home Society of Florida, the Guardian Ad Litem Program, Palm Beach County Legal Aid Society, the Office of Regional Conflict Counsel, Conflict Attorneys, the Center for Child Counseling, Clerk and Comptroller, and other community partners.
 - b. The Early Childhood Court Team consists of the Judge, Community Coordinator, Parents, Caregivers, Dependency Case Managers, Child First Team or other Infant Mental Health Specialists, other clinicians or community partners serving the family, Children's Legal Services, Attorneys for the Parents, Attorneys for the Children, and the Guardian Ad Litem's Office
 - c. The Early Childhood Court core components include: judicial leadership; viewing families through a trauma lens; recognizing the central role of infant mental health specialists and

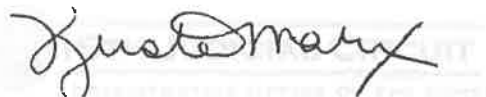
child-parent psychotherapists; implementing a continuum of behavioral health services; and ensuring the collaborative court team services include a community coordinator, cross agency training; developmental support for the child/parents, parent education and support, placement stability and concurrent planning. Monthly family team meetings, consistent parent-child contact, and a focus on co-parenting, regular evaluation, funding and sustainability are vital to the structure of Early Childhood Court.

2. Early Childhood Court dockets will be held every other month (or as necessary) on Monday afternoons in the Main Courthouse, from 3-5pm (time and location subject to change). Early Childhood Court Team members will participate, as much as possible, in staffings, monthly family team meetings, monthly provider meetings, and quarterly stakeholder meetings.
3. The Early Childhood Court Team will have discretion regarding the acceptance of new cases. At a minimum, cases with the following qualities shall be identified as potential Early Childhood Court cases:
 - a. The case involves a family with a child or children ages 0-5 years old who are adjudicated dependent with the primary goal of reunification;
 - b. The parent(s) consent to the petition for adjudication of dependency;
 - c. The parent(s) agree to participate in Early Childhood Court;
 - d. The parent(s) have the capacity and liberty to participate in the intensive interventions, which include monthly hearings, frequent visitation, and weekly treatment; and
 - e. The case jurisdiction is Palm Beach County.
4. Families may be excluded from participation in Early Childhood Court for reasons including, but not limited to:
 - a. The parent has severe uncontrolled mental illness or a severe intellectual disability that would prevent him or her from participating in therapy;
 - b. The parent has perpetrated an egregious act of violence or sexual crime against the child;
 - c. The parent is incarcerated for an extended period of time; or
 - d. The parent is otherwise unable to commit to intensive intervention.
5. Cases are identified in several ways including, but not limited to, review of shelter and dependency petitions by the Community Coordinator and referrals from Judges, attorneys, Department of Children and Families staff, case management, and Guardians Ad Litem. Upon identifying an eligible case, the Community Coordinator will meet with the parent(s)

and their attorney to explain the program and determine if the parent(s) are interested in voluntarily participating in Early Childhood Court.

6. If the parent(s) agree to voluntarily participate in Early Childhood Court, the following procedures shall occur after the child or child(ren) are adjudicated dependent:
 - a. The identified parent(s) will review and sign applicable consents accepting transfer of the case to Early Childhood Court; the case will be transferred by court order to Early Childhood Court; and all further hearings will be transferred to the Early Childhood Court docket.
 - b. The Clerk and Comptroller shall set the case on the Early Childhood Court Docket and set all future hearings before the Early Childhood Court Judge.
 - c. The identified parent(s) will be scheduled for an initial Family Group Conference with members of the Early Childhood Court Team.
 - d. The identified parent(s) will meet with the Child First Team or an infant mental health specialist and participate in assessments and therapeutic interventions as required.
 - e. In addition to attending court hearings, participants will attend a family team meeting every other month to discuss progress and potential barriers to reunification.
7. In the event that the parents' rights are terminated, the case will remain in Early Childhood Court with the goal of achieving permanency for the child through adoption or permanent guardianship. If the identified parent(s) elect not to participate or are removed from the Early Childhood Court for any reason, the Clerk and Comptroller or court staff shall transfer the case back to the previously assigned division for further proceedings.
8. All Early Childhood Court participants shall be responsible for compliance with the terms and conditions as set forth in the Early Childhood Court forms, as otherwise ordered by the Court, and as set forth in Chapter 39, Florida Statutes.
9. The Administrative Office of the Court, in collaboration with Early Childhood Court partners, will collect and maintain statistical data for the program.

DONE and ORDERED in Chambers at West Palm Beach, Palm Beach County this 10th day of September 2019.



KRISTA MARX, Chief Judge