

Child FIRST



Child FIRST (Child and Family Interagency Resource, Support, and Training) is a model program to decrease the incidence of serious emotional disturbance, developmental and learning problems, and abuse and neglect among high-risk young children in Greater Bridgeport, Connecticut. When mental health and child development problems first arise, Child FIRST works with pediatricians, teachers, and other community providers to identify, assess, and intervene with vulnerable children and their families.

The Challenge

Enormous brain development occurs during the first three-to-five years of life, with 80-90% of brain growth completed by three years of age. The environment in which a child develops is critical to the development of brain architecture. Research shows that children who are not touched, stimulated, or played with during this time period have brains which are 20-30% smaller than normal. **Today, a baby born to an inner city Bridgeport mother faces multiple barriers to success:** 63% receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and over 25% of Bridgeport's 13,635 young children fall below the poverty line. In the Bridgeport Hospital Pediatric Primary Care Center, over 50% of children screened had behavioral problems and over 45% face high environmental risks: domestic violence, maternal depression, substance abuse, inadequate health care, poor education, illiteracy, unemployment, and teen and single parenting.

The Child FIRST Response

Each year, Child FIRST serves 1,000 vulnerable, underserved children ages 0-5 years and their families.

- Child FIRST behavioral health clinicians work within early care and education, pediatric, family resource centers, and other early childhood settings to train and mentor providers to **screen and identify** early signs of emotional and behavioral problems, and learn strategies to facilitate healthy development.
- Child FIRST partners to provide **consultation** services to any community provider and parent concerned about the development of a young child, at the agency site or in the home.
- For families with multiple challenges such as depression or domestic violence, Child FIRST provides: comprehensive **home-based assessments**, the development of an

integrated family plan, and care coordination to ensure ongoing access to needed **community-based services**.

- Child FIRST provides direct **mental health treatment** for the child and parents in the home and in community sites.

Child FIRST Works!

Research and evaluation of the Child FIRST model shows:

- a statistically significant decrease in children's emotional and behavioral problems, decrease in parental stress and depression, decrease in protective service involvement, and improvement in language development and parent-child interactions in very high risk families;
- a marked increase (77% vs. 30%) in access to services for all family members;
- significant increases in teachers' understanding of emotional and behavioral issues, ability to identify children with problems, and ability to develop and implement strategies to help children in their care; and
- marked improvement among 40-60% of children in early education identified with behavioral problems.

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