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Contact:

Katie Schoenhoff, Director of Programs
United Methodist Health Ministry Fund
katie@healthfund.org | 620-662-8586

Statewide Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) Project Shows Promise Across Kansas and Cultures

The 10-week early childhood home visiting program results are promising in Kansas: healthier children, more confident caregivers, and stronger families

Secure attachment and nurture in the first years of life are crucial. The infant and toddler years are a key time for healthy social and emotional development in children, which is a critical factor related to later life outcomes such as school success and mental health. Toxic stress can derail healthy development.

A ten-week home-visiting intervention piloted by five Kansas foundations shows promising impacts for young Kansans and their caregivers. From May 2017 through April 2020, the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative brought the evidence-based Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC) intervention to five sites in Kansas to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating the program into the existing array of early childhood programs across the state.

ABC is a proven parenting intervention for caregivers of infants and toddlers who have experienced early adversity. ABC is designed to help regulate elevated infant/toddler cortisol levels—a key indicator of stress—in just ten weekly home visits with parent coaches.

“We understand how critical early childhood development is to lifelong health and learning success,” said Teresa Miller, Kansas Health Foundation president and CEO. “Partnering on the ABC intervention program helps families with home visitation support for children that have experienced toxic stress or adverse childhood experiences. We know that early intervention is key to a child’s overall development.”

Over the course of three years, 536 families were screened for toxic stress across 36 counties. In that time, 402 families were enrolled in the ABC intervention, and 682 caregivers and 907 children were impacted.

The evaluation found that the ABC intervention can be successfully implemented in various agencies and areas across Kansas, with outcomes similar to those in the national literature and research.

“Our evaluation team was excited to find that the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative had positive outcomes in Kansas including healthier children, more confident parents and caregivers, stronger families, and more comprehensive services and systems,” said Amy Mendenhall, director of the Center for Community Engagement & Collaboration at the University of Kansas.

After completing ABC:

- Caregiver concerns regarding child social-emotional functioning decreased.
- Children’s cortisol levels, an indicator of stress, became more normalized. However, the change was not statistically significant for the entire sample.
- Parent coaches rated children’s overall wellbeing as more positive.
- Caregivers’ knowledge, and beliefs in their caregiving abilities, increased.
- In interactions with their children, caregiver intrusiveness went down, while sensitivity and delight went up.
- Caregiver capabilities significantly improved.

“The findings from the ABC Early Childhood Initiative show us that appropriate coaching, encouragement and resources for families experiencing stress make a real difference in how children grow and thrive. This multi-site project demonstrates the life-altering benefits of investing in child health and family well-being from the start,” said Brenda Sharpe, REACH Healthcare Foundation president and CEO.

“Nobody is just born knowing how to be a parent. And parenting is hard,” said Katrina Lowry, early childhood programs director at Russell Child Development Center. “ABC enhances parent confidence and competence.”

The ABC intervention was incorporated into existing home visit programs at five Kansas sites across Kansas:

- **Horizons Mental Health Center:** Reno County
- **Rainbows United:** Sedgwick and Butler Counties
- **Russell Child Development Center:** Southwest Kansas
- **Project Eagle – University of Kansas Medical Center:** Wyandotte County
- **Northwest Kansas Council on Substance Abuse:** Northwest Kansas

“In Reno County, the ABC program offered an opportunity to further connect our early childhood support system partners and test out an intervention to potentially prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),” said Kari Mailloux, director of strategic initiatives at Hutchinson Community Foundation. “We valued that the program built on the strengths of both parents and existing home visiting programs.”

The initiative included four parent coaches who delivered the program in Spanish. Approximately 41% of families served were Hispanic or Latinx, and 22% primarily spoke Spanish in the home. Overall, the findings were similar for families who received ABC in Spanish as those who received it in English.

Coaches experienced some challenges in translating the program and its core concepts. Overall, they shared positive experiences regarding the cultural relevance of the program and having a coach who spoke Spanish and was Latinx.

“It was important to have the initiative reflect the changing demographics in our state,” said David Jordan, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund president and CEO. “We were excited to see positive results for our Spanish-speaking families. We shared those findings—and the challenges in translating materials and some concepts—with the program developers at the University of Delaware.”

The initiative resulted in expanded capacity for early childhood services across the state. Four sites have set up sustainable funding to continue offering the ABC program as part of their early childhood services. Two sites are participating in the Family First Prevention and Services Program, receiving funds to deliver services to prevent kids from entering the child welfare system. Two other sites set up processes to bill through Medicaid and insurance for ABC services.

Given the success of ABC in normalizing cortisol levels and lessons learned from other states – like New York, which utilized ABC to sustainably reduce child welfare caseloads and aid reunification efforts – there is great potential for policymakers to further support evidence-based programs like ABC to advance child health and child welfare goals as well as improve educational attainment.

Continued investment from foundations and early childhood stakeholders in ABC and other evidence-based programs will offer important opportunities to test, pilot, and evaluate programs to inform and maximize the return on future investments affecting generations to come.

“A young child’s future health, prosperity and well-being is dependent, in large part, on their environment during the very early years of their lives,” said Cathy Harding, president and CEO of Wyandotte Health Foundation. “Supporting this initiative and the children and families who participated was not only an investment in their future, but in our community’s future.”

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For further information, please contact:

David Jordan, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, david@healthfund.org, (620) 662-8585
Aubrey Abbott Patterson, Hutchinson Community Foundation, aubrey@hutchcf.org, (620) 663-5293
Teresa Miller, Kansas Health Foundation, tmiller@khf.org, (316) 262-7676
Brenda Sharpe, REACH Healthcare Foundation, brenda@reachhealth.org, (913) 568-8113
Cathy Harding, Wyandotte Health Foundation, charding@wyhealthfdn.org, (913) 371-4033