

Short-term early childhood intervention shows promise in Kansas

Phase 1 evaluation results highlight importance of investing and intervening early

A 10-week home visiting program known as ABC targets infants and toddlers who experience early adversity. In Kansas, the results are promising – healthier children, more confident caregivers, and an increased interest in early childhood development.

A CASE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The importance of social-emotional

development: Social-emotional development in infants and toddlers is a critical factor related to later life outcomes such as school success, social interactions, and mental health. Healthy early childhood development provides a strong foundation for all future learning and helps children reach their full potential, but risk factors, including toxic stress, adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and other challenges, can derail this crucial process, with far-reaching consequences.

A positive ROI: Research demonstrates that investing in science-based, short-term early interventions supporting healthy development pays off over both short and long terms, delivering lasting results that change lives for the better while also producing substantial returns on that investment. The **Heckman Equation** cites high quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children deliver a 13% return on investment per year and a 7:1 cost-benefit ratio.

AN EFFECTIVE EVIDENCE-BASED EARLY INTERVENTION: ABC

A program developed by Dr. Mary Dozier at the University of Delaware, called Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC), is a practical application of findings from years of research on the interactions between early childhood experiences, brain development, and behavior. ABC is a brief, evidence-based parenting intervention for caregivers of infants and toddlers who have experienced early adversity. The home visiting program is designed to buffer the harmful effects of toxic stress and help restore normal early childhood development.

Broadly, ABC focuses on building healthy families through the development of secure attachment, nurturance, and positive regard – supporting parenting competencies promoting positive child outcomes including strong social emotional skills, coping and resilience from stressors, and school readiness. While ABC is typically completed over just ten weeks, research to date has shown measurable, long-term positive impacts lasting at least into middle childhood.

KANSAS ABC EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE

Five philanthropic organizations brought the ABC program to Kansas to determine if it would deliver the same results in a variety of service settings and geographic locations. The collaboration of Kansas foundations was led by the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund and included Hutchinson Community Foundation, Kansas Health Foundation, REACH Healthcare Foundation and Wyandotte Health Foundation.

From May 2017 through April 2020, they funded the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative to expand early childhood service capacity in Kansas by promoting widespread screening for toxic stress, training more providers in the ABC intervention, and evaluating the effectiveness of integrating an evidence-based intervention into the array of early childhood programs through five sites across the state.

The evaluation component of the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative, conducted by the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, included an **implementation evaluation** as well as an impact study focused specifically on how the ABC intervention impacted children, caregivers, and their families.

KANSAS ABC EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation found that the initiative resulted in more comprehensive early childhood services across Kansas and that families who participated in ABC demonstrated more positive outcomes, including healthier children, more confident parents, and stronger families.

Over the three years of the initiative, the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare (KU) evaluation team monitored and analyzed implementation of the ABC intervention across the five Kansas sites. The results demonstrated ABC to be a valuable, though challenging, intervention to implement. The initiative generated valuable learnings as facilitators were able to provide guidance for supporting future sustainability and for addressing difficulties around implementation as identified by parent coaches (e.g., recruitment, client engagement).

Over three years, the initiative impacted the lives of hundreds of Kansas families, reaching 682 caregivers and 907 children. After completing ABC:

- Caregiver concerns regarding child social-emotional functioning decreased.
- Children's cortisol levels, an indicator of stress, became more normalized.¹
- 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 initiative also resulted in expanded capacity for early childhood services across the state:

- Awareness increased around the importance, and return on investment, of investing early in the healthy social-emotional development of Kansas children. This connects with growing recognition among policymakers in Kansas and nationally of the potential for the ABC intervention

BY THE NUMBERS

Over the course of three years, the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative impacted the lives of Kansas families. This data includes:

36
Counties 

536 
Families Screened for Toxic Stress

402 
Families Enrolled to Receive the ABC Intervention

682 
Caregivers Impacted

907 
Children Impacted

“

The child's language and words have just exploded with mom following the lead more. The child has language delays, but each week he has tons of new words! ”

- Parent Coach

“

I think the one thing that I remember the most is just the constant reminder that I am a good mom and, it is okay to sometimes get a little frustrated as long as you're understanding how the child feels and not just kind of pushing their feelings aside. ”

- Caregiver

¹Though cortisol level patterns became more normalized, the change was not statistically significant for the entire sample.

to improve student outcomes for at-risk children, prevent at-risk families from entering the child welfare system, and help children transition out of the child welfare system.

- During the three years, ABC was part of 7 legislative hearings, 2 legislative bills, and more than 14 presentations. Additionally, 18 Kansas stakeholders traveled to New York City to visit a model early childhood program delivering ABC.
- Sites developed sustainable funding to continue delivering ABC after Phase 1 ended. 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.
- 39 infant parent coaches and 10 toddler parent coaches were trained. 12 learning community meetings facilitated extended learning and sharing about early childhood services including ABC.
- Three sites will participate in Phase 2 of the initiative, which will broaden the implementation to include ABC Toddler, and evaluate measures of general child development, parental stress, and family empowerment.

By intervening to build and strengthen parenting competencies demonstrated through decades of research to promote more positive child outcomes such as strong social-emotional skills, coping and resilience from stressors, and school readiness, we have provided the building blocks necessary to support a positive future trajectory for these Kansas children and families.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS

With the growing awareness of the importance and substantial ROI for investing in high-quality science-based early childhood programs, the report highlights the potential that can be achieved through ongoing support for interventions such as ABC. The evaluation confirms this early childhood intervention can buffer the biological and behavioral effects of early adversity and strengthen interpersonal relationships with caregivers, both of which influence long-term health, learning and behavior.

As policymakers explore evidence-based strategies to

- prevent utilization of the child welfare system,
- keep children with their parents in their homes,
- improve health,
- build parenting skills, and
- address equitable attainment of education,

the report detailing the Kansas experience with ABC highlights its potential as a worthy, evidence-based investment.

Kansas has already moved in this direction by providing Family First dollars to support ABC projects as part of child welfare prevention strategies deployed under Family First. Likewise, the Kansas Department of Education has recognized ABC as an approved program for equity funds at the state level, and Medicaid is reimbursing mental health providers using ABC for eligible children.

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.

Families reported statistically significant improvements in the children's social-emotional functioning and their overall well-being after participating in ABC.

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