Social-emotional development in young children 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 growing body of research demonstrates that investing in science-based, short-term early interventions pays off over both the short and long term, delivering lasting results that not only change lives for the better but also produce substantial returns on that investment. The Heckman Equation cites high quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children delivering a 13% return on investment per year, and a 7:1 cost-benefit ratio.

Developed by Dr. Mary Dozier at the University of Delaware, 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. While the ABC intervention is typically completed over just ten weeks, research to date has shown measurable, long-term positive impacts lasting at least into middle childhood.

To explore whether ABC would deliver the same results for Kansas children, a collaboration of Kansas foundations led by United Methodist Health Ministry Fund and including Hutchinson Community Foundation, Kansas Health Foundation, REACH Healthcare Foundation and Wyandotte Health Foundation funded the Kansas ABC Early Childhood Initiative to expand early childhood service capacity in Kansas and evaluate the replicability and efficacy, at scale, of integrating an evidence-based intervention into the array of early childhood home-visiting programs through five sites in varying settings and geographic locations across Kansas.

Building on the success of an earlier Kansas ABC pilot, Phase 1 of the Initiative included five agencies - Horizons Mental Health Center, LiveWell Northwest Kansas, Project Eagle, Rainbows United, Inc.,
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and Russell Child Development Center – serving 36 counties across the state.

The Initiative was structured around two key activities: (1) integration of a screening tool (Household Strengths and Strain Inventory) to identify families for referral; and (2) implementation and evaluation of the ABC intervention. Evaluation, a focus within the second key activity, included several data instruments and measures collected via the parent coaches who delivered the intervention. The measures, collected pre- and post-intervention, assessed outcomes for the child, caregiver, and family. Additionally, cortisol (i.e. stress hormone) testing via collection of saliva samples was collected pre-intervention, immediately after completing the intervention, and approximately six months post-intervention.

Over the past three years of the Initiative, the KU evaluation team also monitored and analyzed implementation of the ABC intervention across these 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 addressing difficulties around implementation (e.g. recruitment, client engagement) which were identified by parent coaches, and for supporting future sustainability.

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 after participating, including healthier children, more confident parents, and stronger families.

Over three years, the initiative was able to impact the lives of hundreds of Kansas families across the state, 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. There is also growing recognition among policymakers in Kansas and nationally of the potential for the ABC intervention 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.

- Sites successfully 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 were able to set up processes to bill through Medicaid or insurance for ABC services.

- 39 infant parent coaches and 10 toddler parent coaches were trained, and 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.

Overall, the $2.4 million initiative successfully increased early childhood capacity and awareness across the state, made a difference in the lives of 682 caregivers and 907 children, provided valuable learnings for how challenges in implementation can be creatively overcome, and further demonstrated that early childhood interventions like ABC not only make good economic sense but more importantly empower individual families to raise happy, healthy kids – providing strong foundations helping them to reach their full potential.

As policymakers, foundations, and other stakeholders 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, this report detailing the Kansas experience with ABC and experience from other ABC projects nationally highlights the potential of ABC as a worthy, evidence-based investment.

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