

Ensuring the Healthy Development of Infants in Foster Care: A Guide for Judges, Advocates and Child Welfare Professionals

Introduction

Infants — babies less than 12 months of age — are the largest group of children to enter, remain and re-enter the child welfare system. Of the almost 600,000 children in foster care nationwide, one in five admissions is an infant. Since an alarming number of these babies are born prenatally exposed to drugs, premature or low birthweight, they are far more likely than other children to have serious medical problems, disabilities and developmental delays. If left undetected and unaddressed, the needs of infants in foster care can jeopardize their healthy development and prospects for a permanent home. For their families, many of whom struggle with addiction, serious mental illness and extreme poverty, the strain of meeting these complex health needs can make it more difficult to manage the daily challenges of parenting. For advocates and permanency decision makers, an infant's complex health needs can undermine efforts to reunify families and recruit and retain foster and adoptive parents.

Fortunately, the new scientific research on the first months and years of life tells us that infancy presents an unparalleled window of opportunity to promote a child's healthy development and family stability. Our nation's courts and child welfare systems are at the front line for linking the new knowledge about infants with child welfare practice. We would move closer to achieving the goal of healthy development and permanency for every infant in foster care if at least one person involved in the court process — one judge, one lawyer, one Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), one caseworker — would ask basic questions to spotlight that infant's needs and integrate those needs with permanency planning efforts.

Written as an accompaniment to the booklet, *Ensuring the Healthy Development of Foster Children: A Guide for Judges, Advocates and Child Welfare Professionals*, this handbook is a working tool to help you understand the questions to ask and the resources that can address the special needs of infants in foster care and strengthen their families.

A Checklist for the Healthy Development of Infants in Foster Care

1. What are the medical needs of this infant?
2. What are the developmental needs of this infant?
3. What are the attachment and emotional health needs of this infant?
4. What challenges does this caregiver face that could impact his or her capacity to parent this infant?
5. What resources are available to enhance this infant's healthy development and prospects for permanency?

For the complete guide:

<https://www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildr%20Booklet.pdfen/PDF/Infant>