

Supporting Infant Mental Health: Applying the Safe Babies Approach to Strengthen Families and Early Childhood Systems

Welcome!



1 Social Work CEU



April 21, 2026
10:00 am



WHO WE ARE

Groundwork Ohio is a **nonpartisan public-policy research and advocacy organization** dedicated to ensuring Ohio's youngest children, from prenatal through age five, have the strong start they deserve. Since 2004, we've worked to champion high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families, and communities.

We advance quality early childhood systems in Ohio by engaging, educating, and mobilizing diverse stakeholders and strategic partners to promote data-driven and evidence-based early childhood policies.

www.GroundworkOhio.org

HOUSEKEEPING

- Today's webinar is being recorded.
- Closed captioning is available in your Zoom settings.
- All participants are muted.
- Please use the Q&A for questions.
- If we can't get to your request or question during the event, we will follow-up after the event if you provide your email address with the question.
- All participants will receive a recording of the webinar along with materials shared via email after the event has concluded.
- If you are here for a free social work CEU, you must stay for the entirety of today's presentation and complete the evaluation form at the end. A copy of your Certificate of Completion will be emailed to you after the webinar.



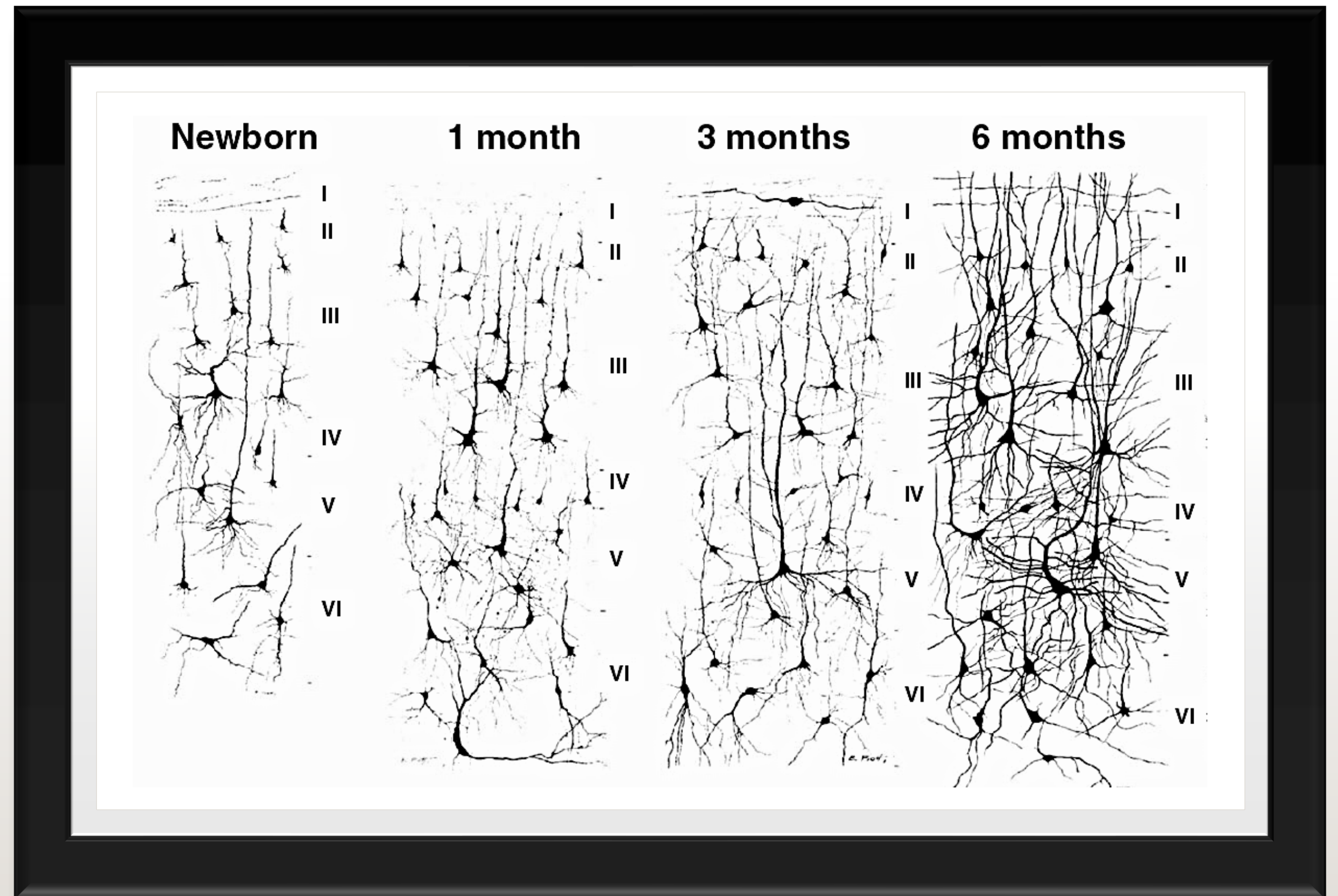


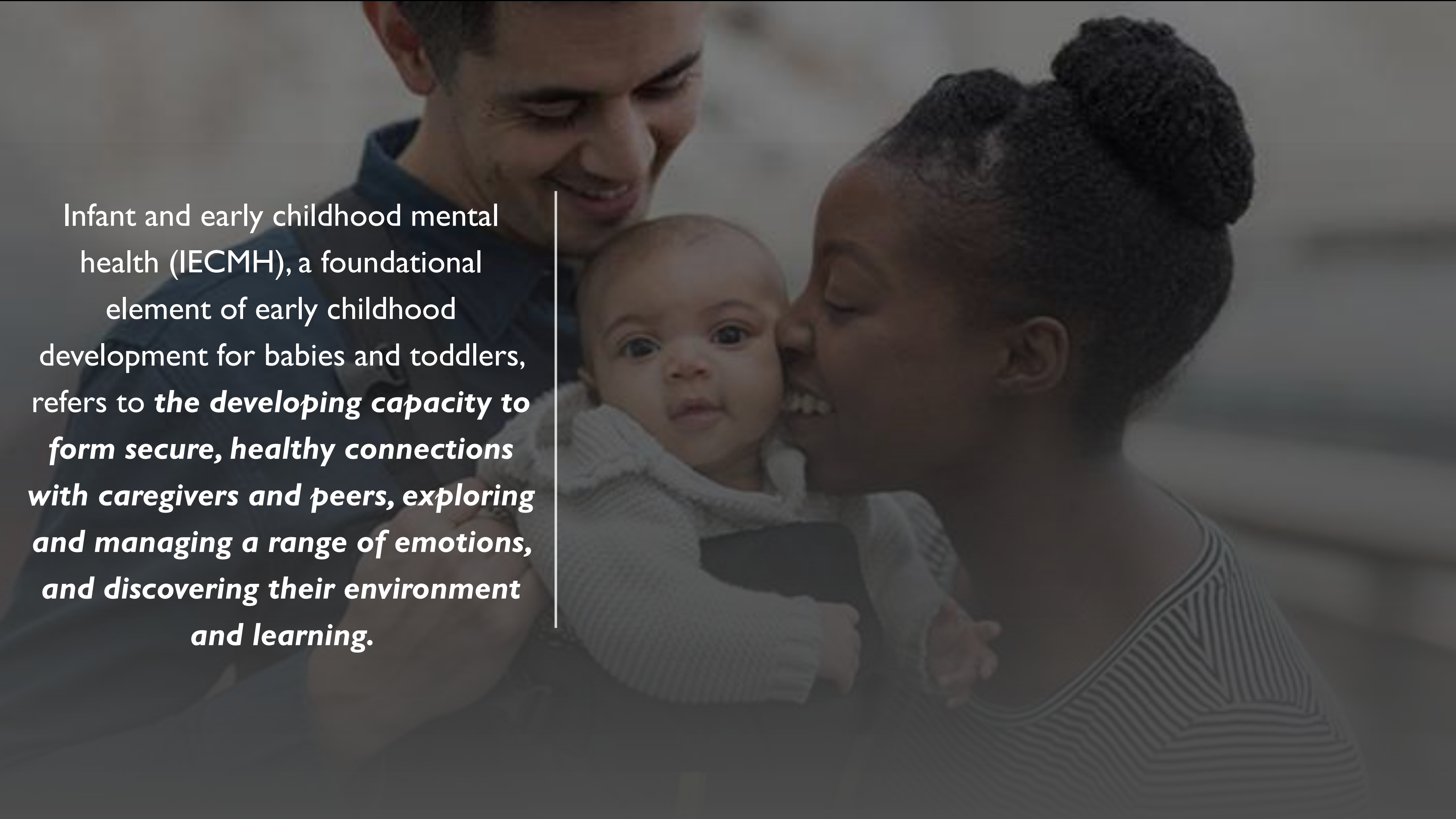
Judy Norris
Sr. Technical Assistance Specialist
ZERO TO THREE



Trina Lovett (MSW, LSW)
Community Coordinator
Safe Babies Lucas County

BABIES ARE
FORMING 1 MILLION
NEW NEURAL
CONNECTIONS
EVERY SECOND

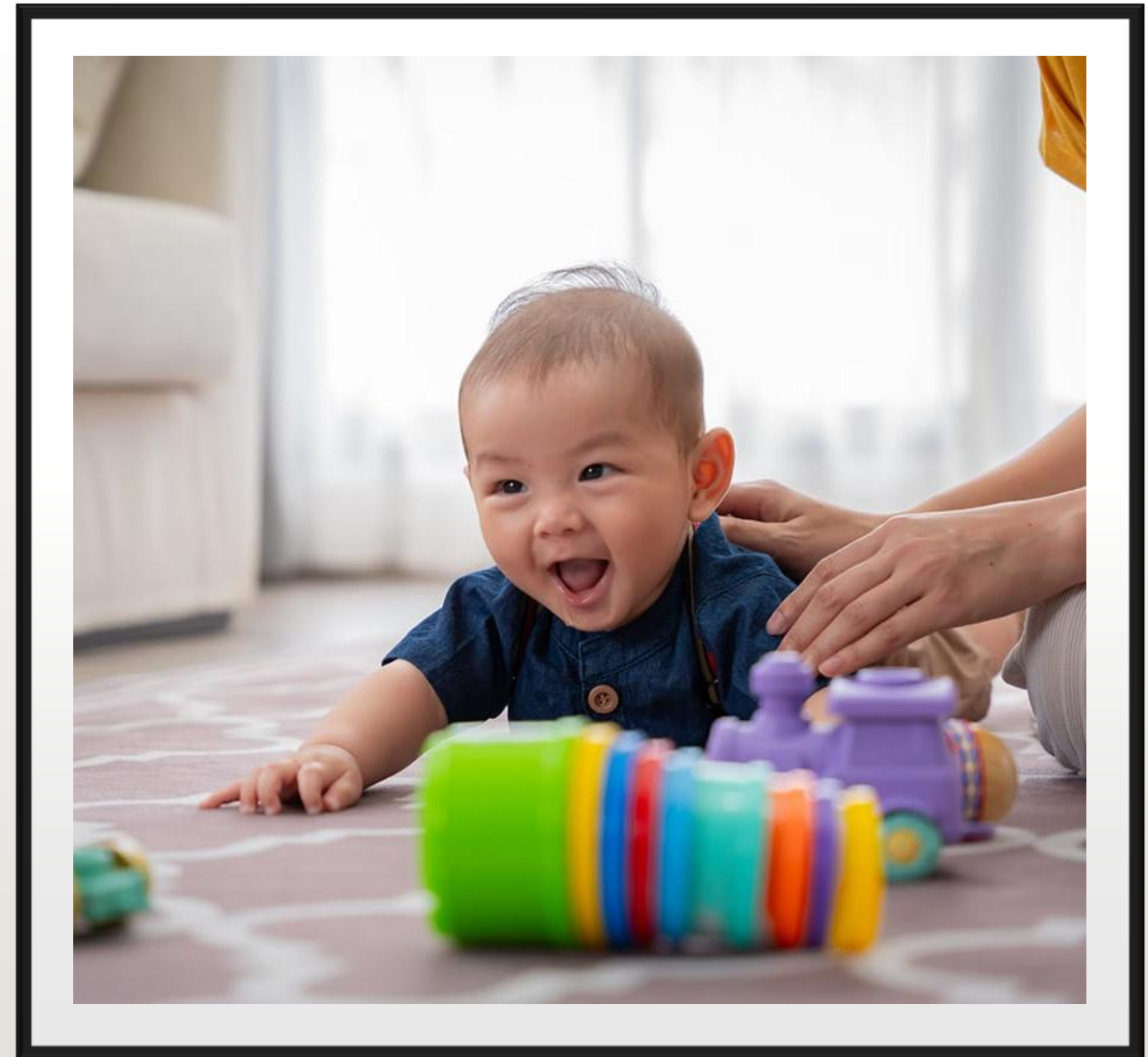




Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH), a foundational element of early childhood development for babies and toddlers, refers to ***the developing capacity to form secure, healthy connections with caregivers and peers, exploring and managing a range of emotions, and discovering their environment and learning.***

In the context of secure and nurturing relationships, the brain organizes around curiosity and exploration of the environment.

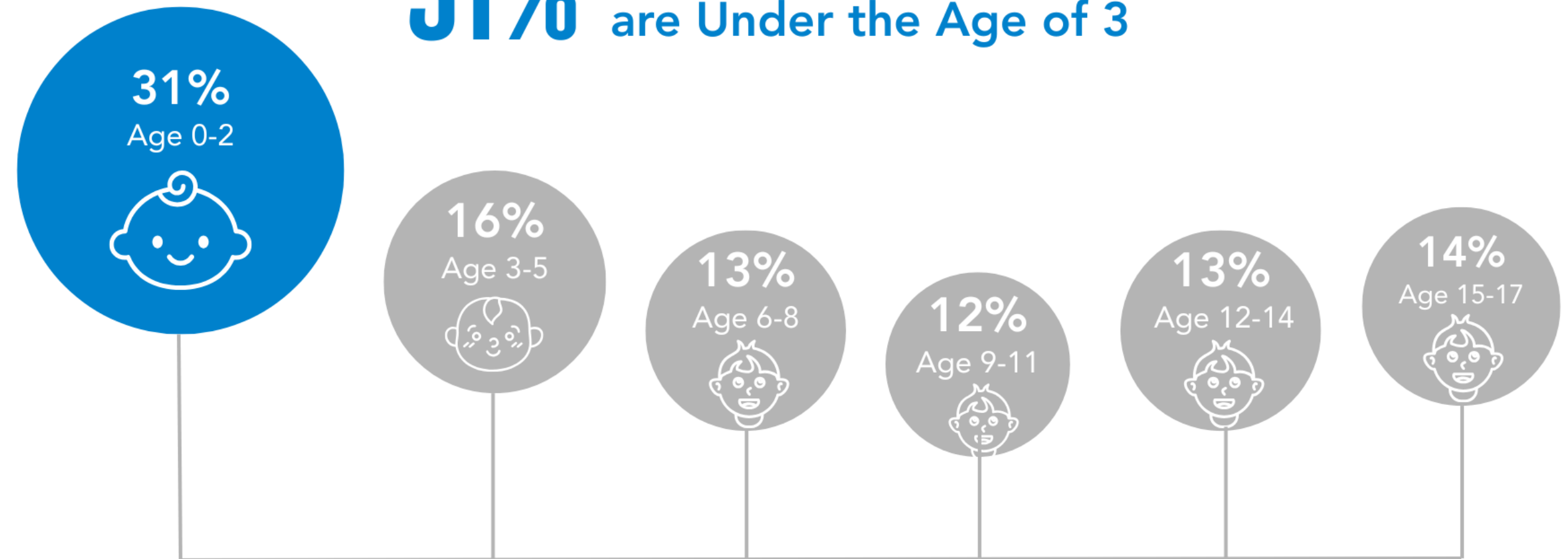
In the context of neglect, volatility, and disorganized relationships, the brain organizes around self-preservation.



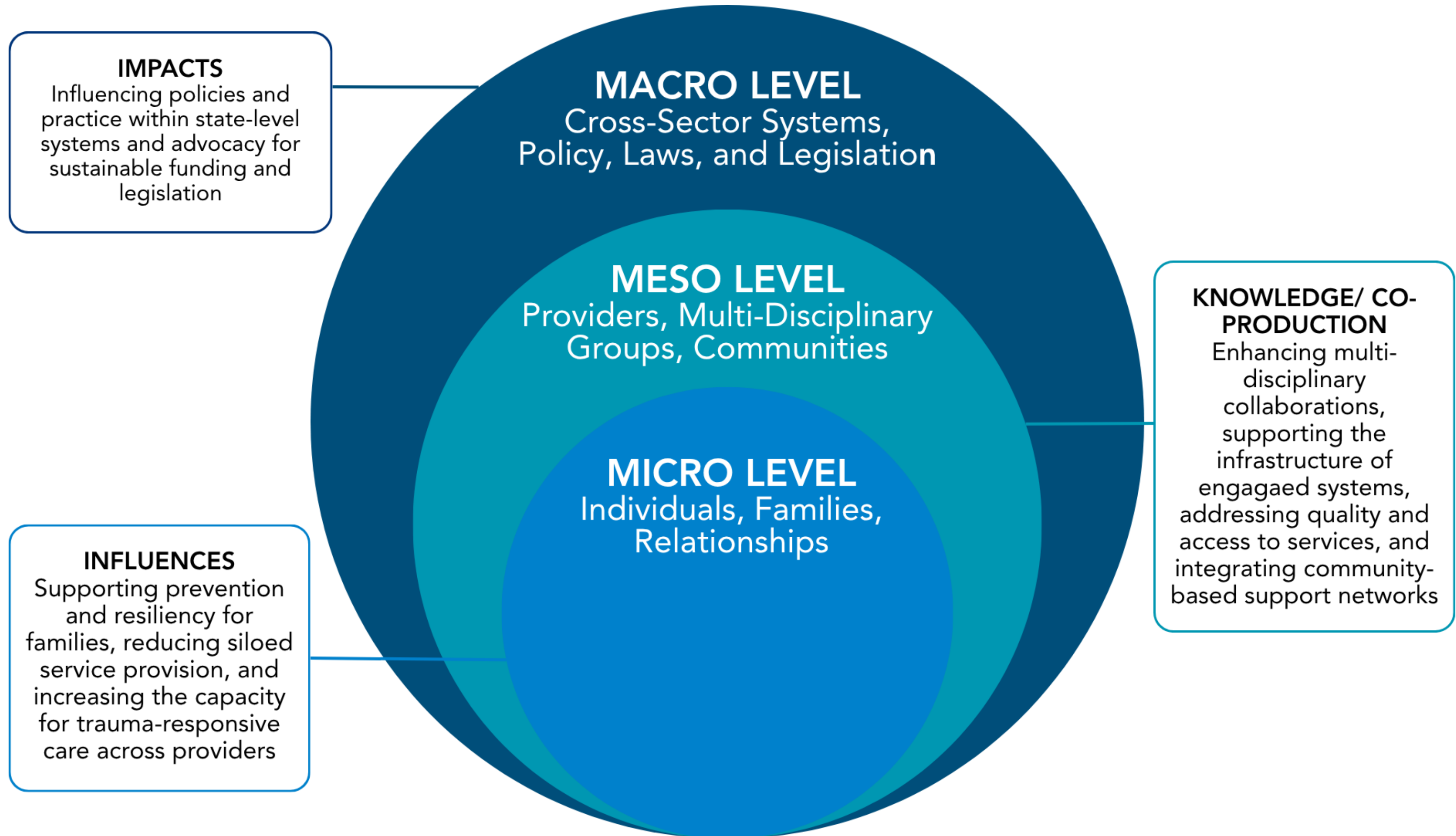
What is Safe Babies, and Why Does It Matter?

- In the United States, **every 10 minutes a baby or toddler is removed from their parents** due to maltreatment and neglect and placed in out-of-home care.
- Our brains grow faster between the ages of 0 and 3 than any later point in life, forming more than **1 million new neural connections every second**.
- Safe Babies meets the urgent needs of babies and toddlers by applying **the science of early childhood development** through its innovative team-based approach

31% of All Children Entering Foster Care are Under the Age of 3



Safe Babies and Systems Change





The Safe Babies Approach Site Implementation Team

WHY is this team important?

Research on implementation best practices has shown that for positive program outcomes to be achieved and sustained, programs must be supported at all levels. This means that the professionals on the front line—those directly supporting children and families at the Safe Babies approach site—cannot do it alone. They need a coordinated group of experts with diverse perspectives and levels of authority to ensure that the system is supporting, rather than creating challenges for, the frontline professionals implementing the Safe Babies approach and the families they serve.



Implementation is never a static activity, but is always working toward improvement, sustainability, and growth.

WHAT is the PURPOSE of this team?

- A Site Implementation Team provides leadership and oversight for effective Safe Babies approach implementation and ongoing sustainability in the community by:
 - Serving as the site's liaison to the Infant-Toddler Court Program National Resource Center and State Team (if applicable) for Safe Babies approach technical assistance and training
 - Providing operational support for the site (e.g., administrative, operational, and team member roles and responsibilities)
 - Employing strategies to support and sustain Safe Babies approach practices in the community system through training, policies, and procedures
 - Using a continuous quality improvement approach to examine data to understand if the Safe Babies approach is being implemented as intended and to identify trends and needs of families served in the site
 - Bringing data about child and family trends and needs, as well as implementation and sustainability needs, to the Active Community Team (This broad and diverse group of community partners works to improve equitable access to comprehensive services and supports for children with very young children)
 - Sharing information about systems inequities, barriers, gaps, and solutions with the State Team (if applicable) to inform their collective efforts with state partners to improve child and family systems and support all Safe Babies approach sites in the state



The Safe Babies Approach Judicial Role

The "why" behind judicial leadership and practice in the Safe Babies approach

- The science of early development shows that the first three years of life are a critical window of opportunity for promoting children's health and well-being
- Safe, stable, and nurturing care is the foundation of early childhood development, helping young children recover and heal from past negative experiences
- A court process that is healing and trauma-responsive, such as the Safe Babies approach, promotes child and family well-being and strengthens families
- The complexity and urgency of families' needs, call for cross-sector collaboration (e.g., court, child welfare agency, and community partners) to support children and families efficiently and effectively
- When the court, child welfare agency, and community partners/collaborators come together to understand services and analyze systems gaps and barriers, they can identify creative solutions
- Judges are uniquely positioned to create a collaborative, solution-finding atmosphere in court and to engage community partners to ensure that needed services for children and families are available and accessible
- All children and parents have a right to equal protection under the law
- There is evidence of disparities among diverse groups involved in the child welfare system



The Safe Babies Approach Family Team Meetings

What is the PURPOSE of Family Team Meetings?

Family Team Meetings (FTMs) engage families in collaborative proactive planning that puts young children's developmental needs for safe, stable, and nurturing early caregiving relationships, as well as the individualized needs of each family, at the center of



When FTMs are implemented successfully?

- When implemented in partnership as a 'family team' in all planning and decision-making
- When professionals actively support the parent's leadership in a shared planning process
- When professionals avoid stigmatizing language in developing a climate of collaborative, solution-finding spirit, built on mutual respect and trust ('we're all on the same team')
- When professionals develop trusting working relationships and plan for transitions, using a developmental, strengths-based approach
- When professionals address environmental conditions that affect health and well-being such as housing, food, transportation, and income
- When professionals work across the life of the case to ensure that needs are identified and met
- When professionals make recommendations for the child and family are agreed upon



The Safe Babies Approach Active Community Team

What is the PURPOSE of an Active Community Team?

The Active Community Team (ACT) brings together community partners together to improve equitable access to comprehensive services, early intervention, and therapeutic supports for families with very young children. This work can be thought of as building an early childhood system that aims to meet the needs of children and families with needed services and supports.

An early childhood system brings together family, child welfare including the department of social services, and family support program partners to achieve agreed-upon goals for thriving children and families.

What DOES IT LOOK LIKE when an ACT is implemented?

- All ACT participants feel a sense of ownership
- All participants feel a climate of trust and respect, leading to finding and alignment of shared resources
- Shared early childhood systems-building
- Policies, funding, and other infrastructure
- Strategies to counteract or change existing systems that are not implemented

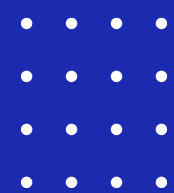
Who PARTICIPATES in ACT?

- Participants represent the broad array of stakeholders involved in the child welfare system and the community. The group will depend on the unique needs of the community over time as priorities shift. However, participants include:
 - Families with lived experience
 - Resource families (foster parents)
 - Community organizations
 - Direct service providers
 - Professionals with decision-making authority

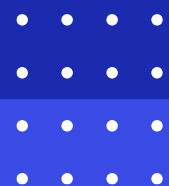
DEFINITIONAL TOOLS



Safe Babies
OHIO
Lucas County



Addressing Family Needs Through Cross-System Collaboration



A Community-Based Approach to Early Childhood Support

Trina L Lovett, MSW, LSW
Community Coordinator
Safe Babies Lucas County

A woman with braided hair is smiling and looking down at a young child. The child is wearing a purple shirt and is focused on playing with a small, dark, round object in their hands. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light. The image is overlaid with a blue geometric shape on the left and right sides, containing white text boxes.

How Early Childhood Systems Function in Practice

Development happens within relationships and systems

Families interact with multiple systems at once

Systems often operate independently

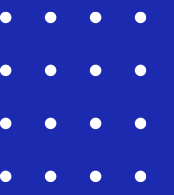
Gaps occur between systems

Coordination shapes access to support

ACT

Overview of the Active Community Team

- Cross-system collaboration focused on ages 0–3
- Focused on reducing gaps before court involvement (Prevention)
- Partners meet regularly to coordinate across systems
- Brings partners and community stakeholders together to strengthen local systems of care
- Supports a more connected system of care
- Strengthens communication and referral pathways



Who's at the Table

Child Welfare

Early Childhood Services

Behavioral Health (IECMH providers)

Healthcare Providers

Community-Based Organizations



UNITED WAY
Greater Toledo



LUCAS COUNTY
CHILDREN
SERVICES



MERCYHEALTH



TPS
PROUD
TOLEDO PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Zepf Center

unison
HEALTH

AmeriHealth Caritas
Ohio

buckeye
health plan.

Harbor

CareSource



Ohio Guidestone
WHERE NEW PATHS BEGIN

Safe Babies
Lucas County
Every Beginning Matters

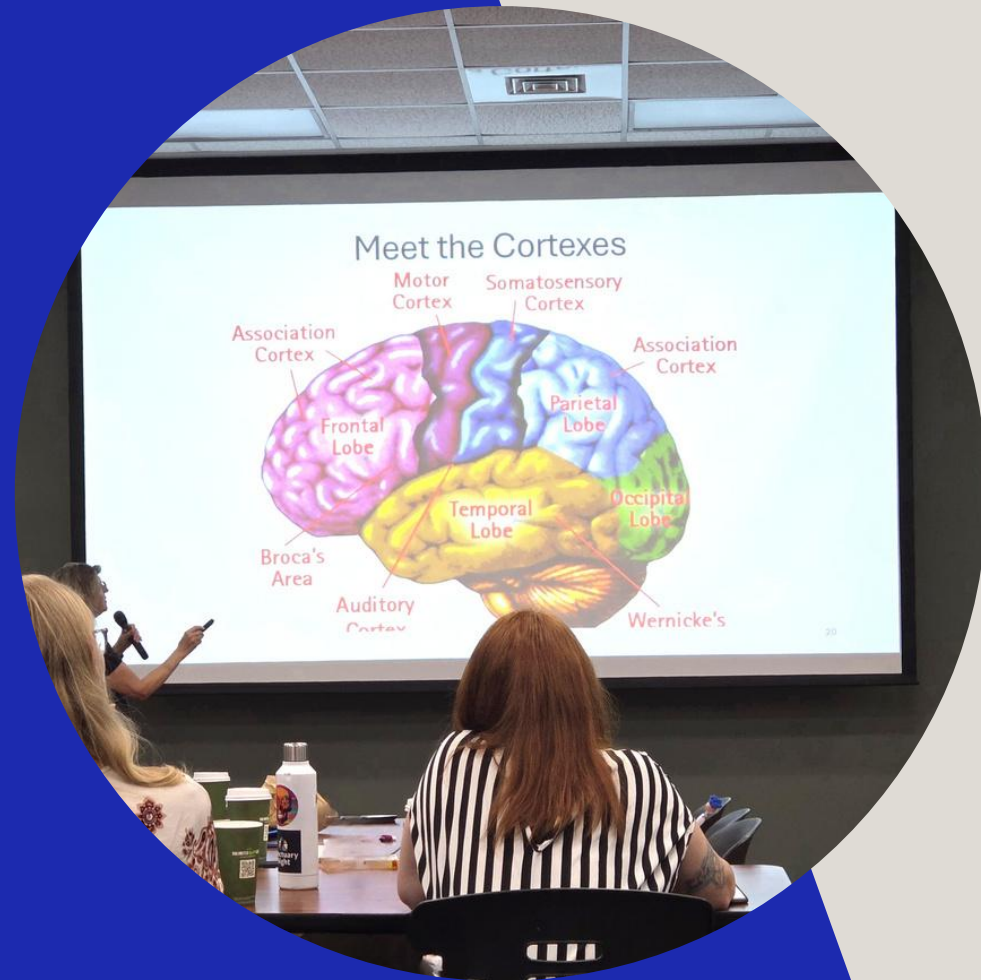
Ohio
Department of
Children & Youth
Ohio Children's Trust Fund

LUCAS COUNTY
Early
Head Start

TEAM
RECOVERY

TOLEDO-LUCAS COUNTY
HEALTH
DEPARTMENT
Stay informed. Stay healthy.

How Needs Are Being Addressed Locally

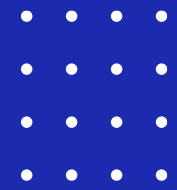







- Resource mapping → asset building
- Strengthening referral pathways
- Ongoing cross-system communication
- Universal training for shared understanding:
 - Early childhood trauma (0–3 conference)
 - FASD training (providers & community)
 - Education on community agency services
- Reducing barriers and system confusion

“It’s one thing to know a service exists—it’s another to know how to actually connect a family to it.”



Themes from IECMH Providers and System Partners

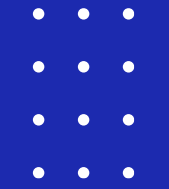


-  Capacity challenges across providers
-  Families navigating multiple systems
-  Barriers to access
(transportation, funding, eligibility)
-  Differences in understanding of early
childhood needs
-  Continued need for relationship-
based support (e.g., CPP)



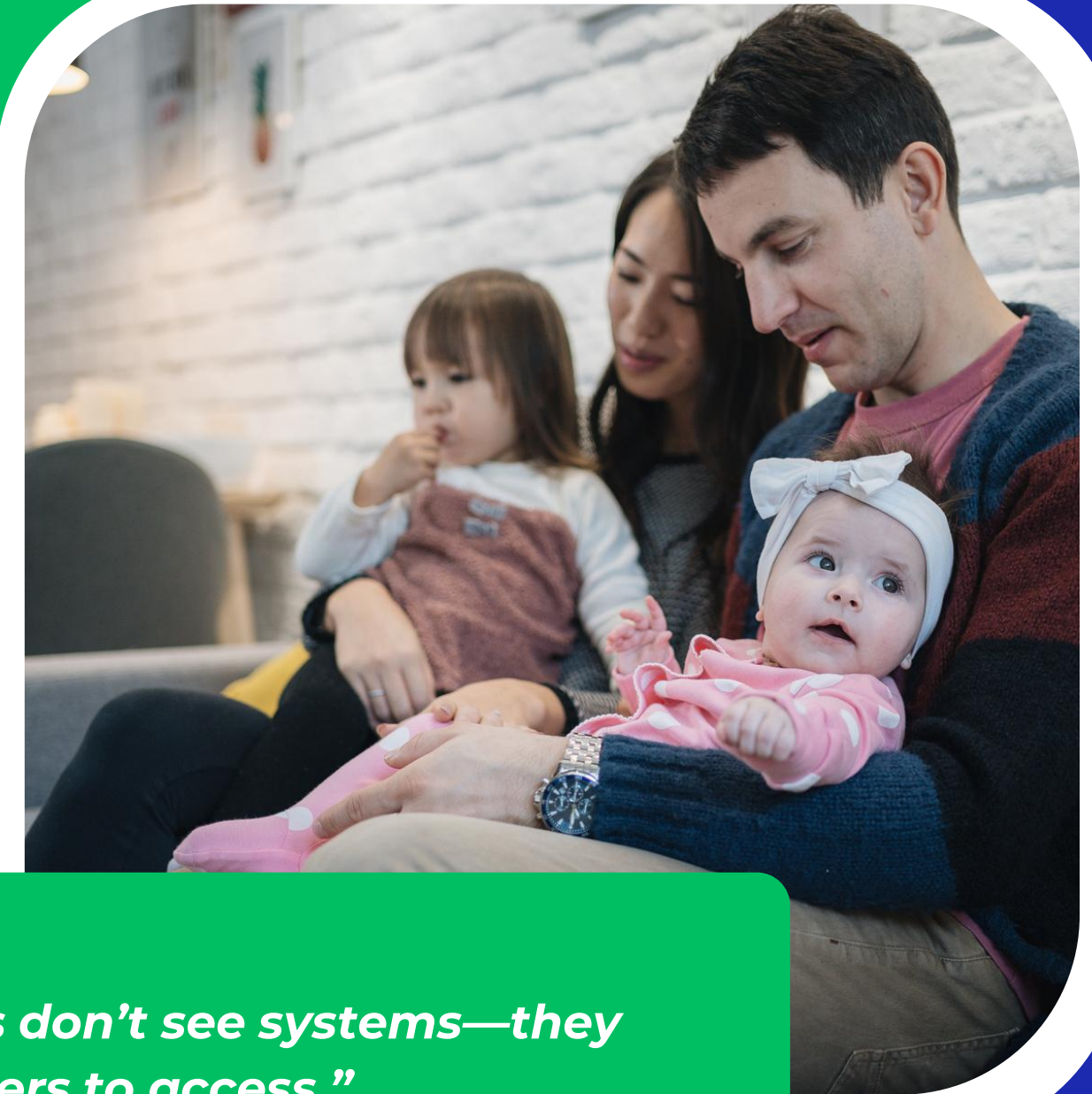
ACT in Practice

- Improved provider communication
- Better matching of referrals
- Reduced duplication
- More timely connections for families



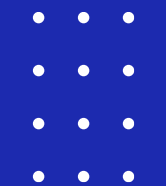
Importance of Systems-Level Work

- Families experience systems collectively, not in silos
- Gaps occur between systems—not within them
- Coordination improves access and timing of support
- Early connection matters for infants and toddlers
- **Safe Babies** supports cross-system coordination

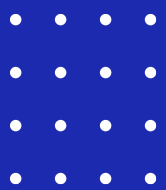


“Stronger systems reduce the burden on families to navigate services on their own”

“Families don’t see systems—they see barriers to access.”



THANK YOU



Safe Babies Ohio: Serving Four Communities Statewide





Safe Babies

OHIO

SafeBabiesOhio.org

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News



4,630 of Ohio's young children, ages 0-5, were in Public Children Service Agency (PCSA) custody [\(View 2024 study\)](#)

groundworkohio.org/safe-babies-ohio



CEU Information

**Complete the
Session Evaluation**



ADVOCACY ALERT



Dear Congress,

**PRIORITIZE
FUNDING FOR
CHILDREN AND
FAMILIES.**



Groundwork
OHIO



ADVOCACY ALERT

VOTE BABY VOTE

A photograph of a pregnant woman in a light purple shirt sitting on an examination table. A doctor in a white lab coat is leaning over her, using a stethoscope to listen to her abdomen. The background is a clinical setting with a window and some greenery.

- ✓ Support a healthy pregnancy
- ✓ Prepare for baby
- ✓ **Vote**

**VOTE
BABY
VOTE**

Roadshow *LISTENING TOUR*

Help bring Groundwork Ohio to your community!

From August through October 2026, Groundwork Ohio will travel across the state to hear from families, health and care providers, local policymakers, community funders, and other leaders who touch the lives of young children aged 0-5. Our team held a dozen events around the state in 2024 and our learnings were critical to shaping our current policy agenda.

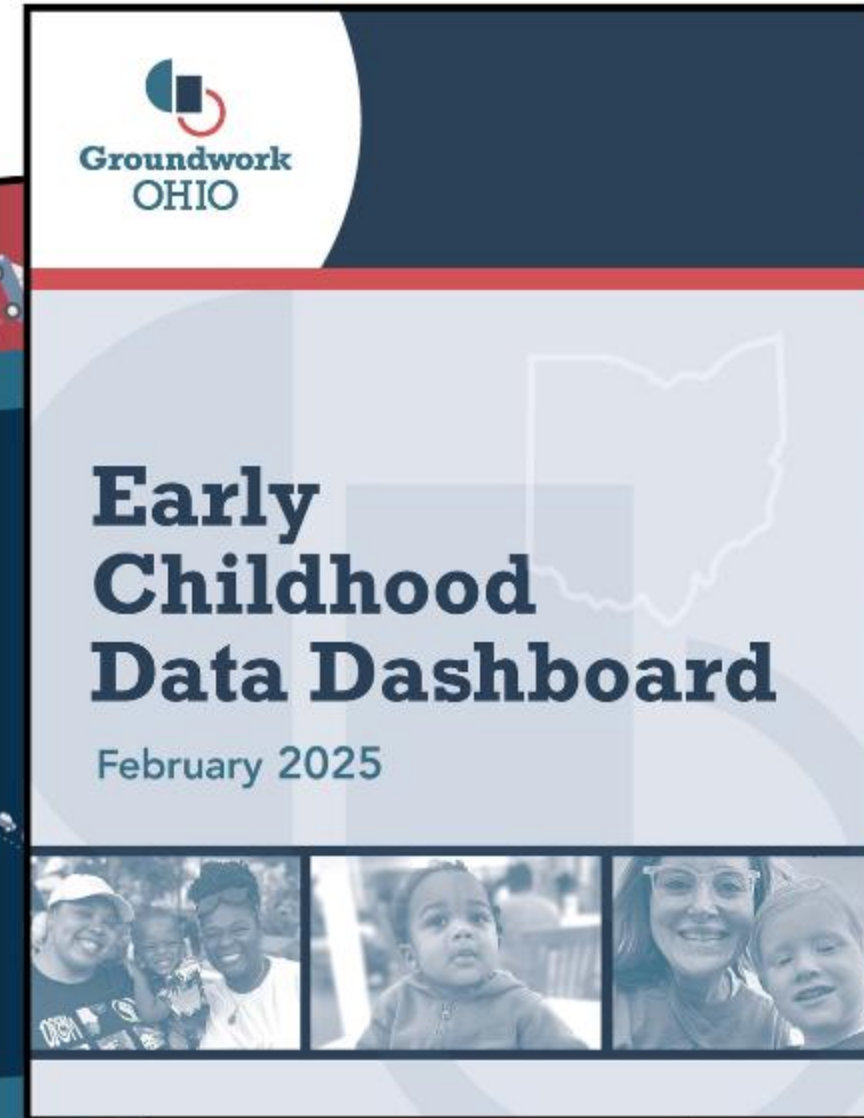
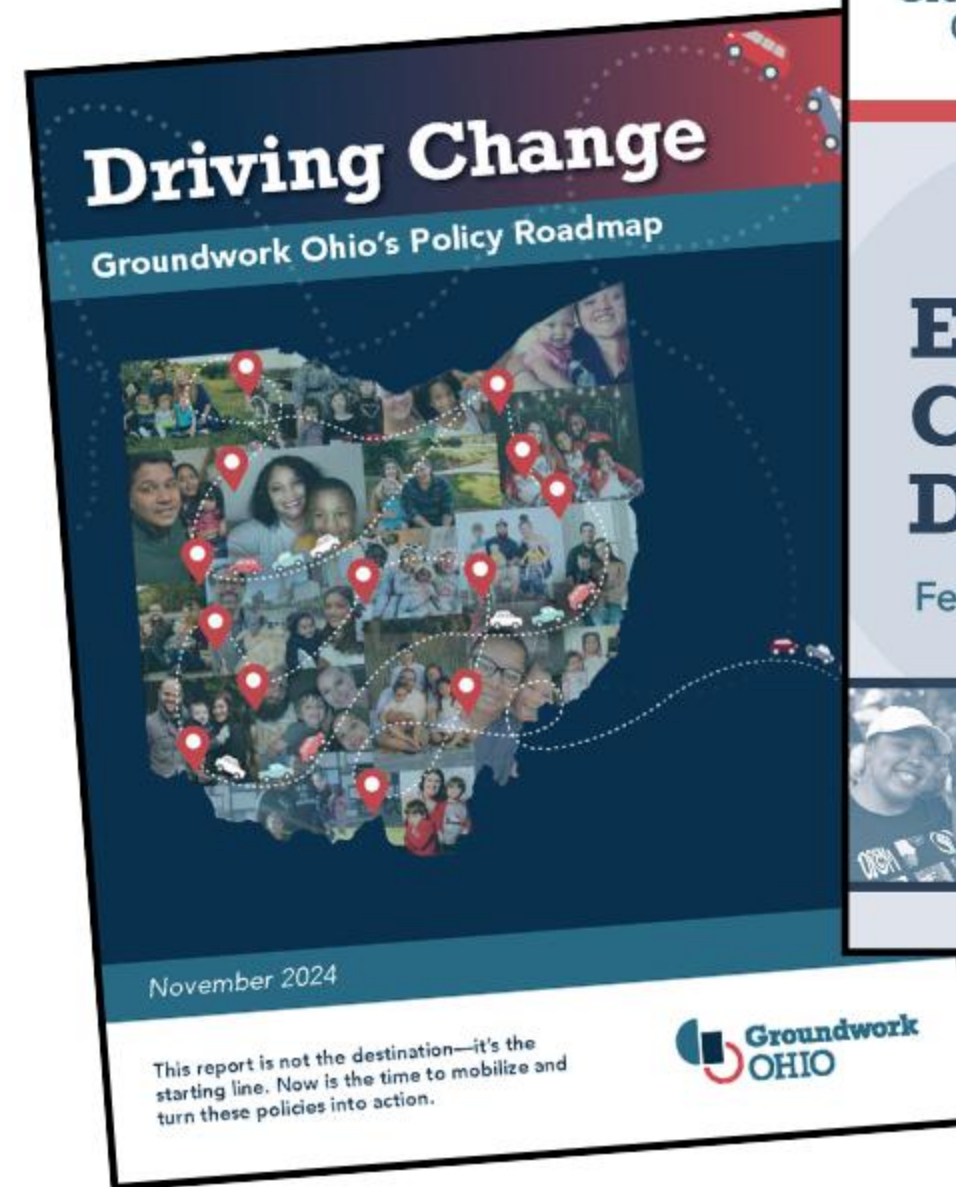
We want to connect with communities, elevate local voices, and spotlight what's working—and what's needed—to support young children and families. We're inviting partners to help shape these visits.



**Are you interested in a site visit,
roundtable discussion, or
community forum?**

**CONTACT BRITTANY BOULTON
bboulton@groundworkohio.org**

RESEARCH & REPORTS





Thank you!



www.GroundworkOhio.org