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# Issue Brief

## Offsetting Toxic Stress by Training Parents of Infants and Young Children in Foster Care The ABC Program Operating in 11 States

### Helping Foster Kids Succeed

Dr. Mary Dozier was one of four speakers at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar on *Helping Foster Kids Succeed: State Strategies for Saving Lives, Saving Money*. She is the Amy E. DuPont Chair of Child Development and Director of Research at the Early Learning Center at the University of Delaware. Her ABC program is listed as an outstanding program in SAMSHA's National Child Traumatic Stress Network and in California's Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. This issue brief summarizes her seminar presentation and chapter in the seminar briefing report.

Dr. Dozier's presentation video and briefing report chapter can be downloaded at [wisfamilyimpact.org/fis33](http://wisfamilyimpact.org/fis33).

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**The annual price tag of child maltreatment is \$80 billion including the estimated costs of crime, lost productivity, and medical and mental health services.** Many children suffer from abuse and neglect, but infants and children under age 3 are at greatest risk. Maltreatment exposes the child to toxic stress—stress that is strong, frequent, and prolonged. Toxic stress can damage the architecture of the brain in ways that alter the body's response to stress, and impair learning and problem solving. These early years of life are a critical window for identifying families at risk of maltreatment and providing a rapid, research-based response.

**ABC is a scalable and powerful parenting program that can offset the damaging effects of toxic stress.** ABC, like most effective programs for young children, targets families or caregivers rather than the children themselves. When parents and caregivers are trained to be nurturing and responsive, children demonstrate an impressive ability to catch up physically, intellectually, and socially.

**ABC changes children's biology and behavior.** Improving birth and foster parents' ability to be nurturing changes how children's bodies deal with stress. Children who are abused or neglected tend to have higher levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Remarkably, cortisol levels improved during the ABC program and persisted three years after the program ended. Children also were able to better self-regulate their behavior and emotions in ways that position them for later success in work and life.

**ABC works by improving the ability of parents and caregivers to be nurturing.** For children who have experienced toxic stress,

it is especially important that parents and caregivers are nurturing. Without nurturing care, children have trouble building secure attachment relationships with their parents and caregivers. In humans, the prospects that the young will survive and develop depends on close and caring relationships with parents and other adults. Children who experience early toxic stress are more likely to exhibit "disorganized" attachment relationships. These disorganized attachments place kids at high risk because it contributes to later problems such as acting out, anxiety, depression, fighting, and substance use.

**ABC works with substance-abusing mothers and those at high-risk of maltreating their young children.** ABC also has proven effective with foster mothers, even though the relationship with the infant is often temporary. Ten one-hour sessions are conducted in the homes of children 6 to 24 months of age. ABC teaches parents how to respond to children exposed to toxic stress, who often behave in ways that push parents away. This can make parents assume their children don't need them when they really do. Maltreated children especially need parents who respond sensitively to their needs and do not come across as frightening or threatening. In ABC, parents practice these new skills with gentle guidance from a coach. Videotapes also provide feedback to parents to highlight their strengths and weaknesses.

**The quality of the evidence on ABC is strong.** ABC is recognized nationally as an evidence-based program for improving child welfare and reducing child trauma. ABC is operating in Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. ●