Florida's Early Childhood Courts

A proven, evidence-based investment in Florida's youngest children in state care

Yet less than 5% of Florida's children, 0-5 years old, in out-of-home care can access Early Childhood Court today. This brief shows what the model does, what the data say, how the state could benefit, and what it would take to reach every child.

What is Early Childhood Court?

Florida's ECC, fondly called *"baby court,"* is a proven evidence-based model —Safe Baby Court Teams—spanning over 100 sites nationwide. It provides a pathway of hope, stability and permanency for maltreated young children by intervening in the pivotal early years of brain development, laying the foundation for lifelong health and well-being.





> *Early Childhood Court is a proven, evidence-based trauma intervention that enhances child well-being, empowers families to break the cycle of maltreatment across generations, and reduces long-term taxpayer costs.*

How **many** young children **are in state care?**

13,638
Florida children in out-of-home care as of 8/31/2026

4,930
of them are **under age 5** —babies are the largest single age group in care

~277
children ages 0–5 are **currently in Early Childhood Court** (September 2026)

35
ECC sites statewide today (August 2026)

How does ECC achieve better outcomes?

ECC teams are trained in the trauma informed ECC approach working together to fast track supports for babies and their families to promote a stable permanent home.

The multidisciplinary team

1. Trauma trained Judge
2. Early Childhood Court Coordinator (Court Admin.)
3. Therapist trained in Child Parent Psychotherapy
4. Access to certified and trained Peer Specialist (parent)
5. Dedicated and ECC trained Case Manager
6. Dedicated and ECC trained DCF Attorney



Babies can't wait: what the team does

- Holds monthly hearings with a specialized docket
- Provides Child Parent Psychotherapy to heal trauma & improve parenting
- Facilitates monthly parent/ team meetings
- Works with family to integrate fast-tracked services

What it delivers

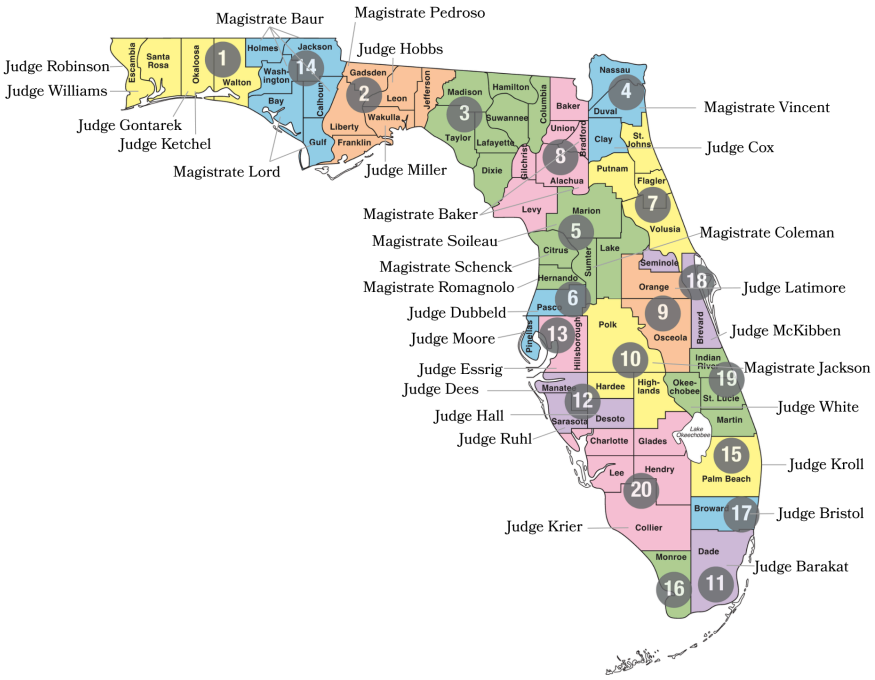
- Accelerates permanency
- Reduces reoccurrence of maltreatment
- Enhances well-being

Where ECC reaches today—and where it doesn't

Thirty-five court teams serve roughly 277 children. Statewide, 4,730 children under age 5 are in out-of-home care.

Florida's 35 Early Childhood Court sites

Circuit map with presiding judges and magistrates, updated August 2026



August 2026

Why aren't all kids in Early Childhood Court?

- No dedicated funding source.
- Wide-spread vacancies due to noncompetitive salaries.
- Florida's billion dollar opioid settlement has not been earmarked for ECC, although 82% of ECC removals involved substance use—25% specifically opioids (2018–2023).

The model works. Capacity—35 teams—is what limits it to a fraction of the babies and toddlers in care.

The cradle to prison pipeline

- Child maltreatment is the most significant predictor of delinquency, recidivism, violence, and incarceration.
- Research indicates that 70% of prisoners come from child welfare backgrounds.

  Without proper intervention, childhood trauma can lead to early behavioral problems and contribute to debilitating physical and mental health over a lifetime.

  Therapeutic courts are transforming the justice system into a healing-centered approach that addresses trauma and promotes recovery.

Rationale for expansion

- Grounded in science & evidence-based practices
- Statewide standardized practice
- Data-supported outcomes
- Taxpayer cost savings



Judge Terrance Ketchell, Florida First Judicial Circuit

"Every time we can solve a problem within a family,it keeps kids out of the juvenile justice system,keeps kids ultimately out of the adult prison system."



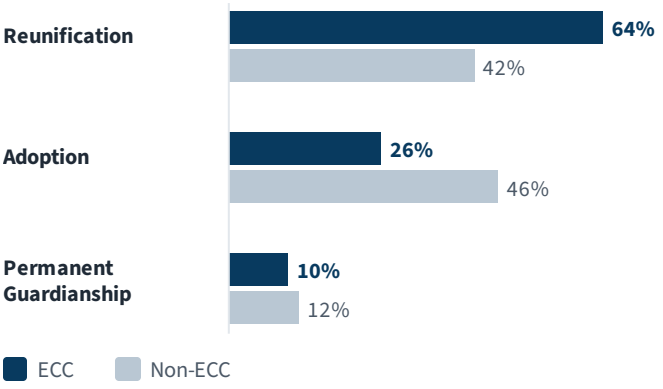
Early Childhood Court improves outcomes

Statewide comparison of children removed at ages 0–4.99 in ECC sites versus non-ECC sites, Fiscal Year 2024–2025.

ECC increases reunification rates

By combining monthly ECC court hearings, parent-team meetings to expedite essential services, and child/parent therapy to address trauma, children are significantly more likely to be safely reunited with their families compared to non-ECC courts.

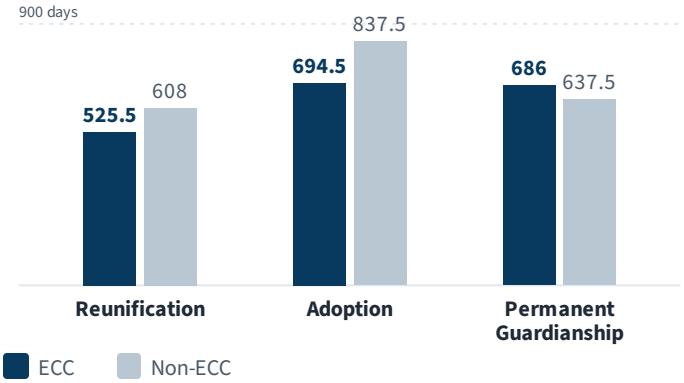
Permanency by case closure type



ECC achieves permanency faster than non-ECC courts

Median number of days to each permanency type. Reunification—the outcome ECC is built to make safe and possible—arrives nearly three months sooner, and adoption more than four and a half months sooner.

Median days to permanency



64% vs. 42%
of ECC cases close with reunification, compared with non-ECC courts

82.5 fewer days
median time to reunification in ECC (525.5 vs. 608)

143 fewer days
median time to adoption in ECC (694.5 vs. 837.5)

Source: Florida Office of State Courts Administrator (August 19, 2026). Data includes children ages 0 – 4.99 at the time of removal during 2024 – 2025 Fiscal Year (7/1/2024-6/30/2025) from the 33 ECC sites and same data from non-ECC sites.

ECC achieves better outcomes for babies

Multiple evaluations show that families served by ECC experience improved results compared to non-ECC cases:

- Higher and faster reunification rates
- Enhanced child safety and well-being
- Reduced time spent in the system
- Fewer placement disruptions
- Less re-abuse

Additionally, ECC helps heal trauma for both parents and children, breaking the multigenerational cycle of maltreatment.

flcourts.gov/Resources-Services/Office-of-Problem-Solving-Courts/Early-Childhood-Courts

What the numbers mean for a child

For an infant, 82.5 days is a season of development. For a toddler waiting on adoption, 143 days is nearly five months of uncertainty. ECC's monthly hearings, parent-team meetings and Child Parent Psychotherapy compress that wait—and send more children home to their own families.

Across ECC closures, reunification and adoption together account for 90% of outcomes.

For more information about ECC, watch the FSU Documentary: **Florida's Early Childhood Courts: Hope and Healing**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkSw7DkzZIw

Taxpayer cost savings

Florida TaxWatch projects millions in savings from Early Childhood Court (2020).

$113.6 million

in projected total savings from serving young children in ECC rather than traditional dependency courts

	Total Labor Costs	Total Out-of-Home Costs	Total Recidivism Costs	Total Cost
Traditional Courts	$297.2 million	$140.1 million	$55.9 million	**$493.4 million**
Early Childhood Courts (ECC)	$242.7 million	$111.9 million	$25.1 million	**$379.8 million**
Total Savings	**$54.5 million**	**$28.3 million**	**$30.8 million**	**$113.6 million**

What would it take for every child in care to access Florida's Early Childhood Court?

- Based on ECC's 10 years of improved outcomes and potential savings, Florida TaxWatch recommends a dedicated, sustainable revenue source for ECC for all young children in dependency.
- Ensure Medicaid's enhanced rates for therapeutic services cover all 0–5 dependency cases to ensure early intervention and support.
- Leverage Florida's Opioid Settlement funds, which align closely with ECC, as 82% of ECC cases involved substance use as the reason for removal, with 25% specifically related to opioids (2018–2023).
- Offset the costs of ECC coordinators and dedicated staff through savings realized from reducing the number of children in out-of-home care and preventing re-entry into care to maximize resource efficiency.
- Implement monitoring to assess the impact of reductions in OHC expenditure, ensuring that savings are reinvested effectively to fully cover the program's essential costs and maintain its quality and outcomes.

The investment logic

Fund the teams. Let the savings from fewer children in care—and fewer returning to care—carry the program forward.

Every year's investment in ECC coordinators, case managers, therapists and attorneys is offset by cost avoidance: children spend less time in out-of-home care and fewer re-enter it. Monitoring the reduction in OHC expenditure ensures those savings are reinvested to fully cover the program's costs and protect its quality.

Bi-partisan support

Florida's Early Childhood Courts have earned bi-partisan support including Florida's Governor's Office, Office of Planning & Budget, DCF, Community Based Care, Florida TaxWatch, Health Plans, Children's Home Society, Judicial partners, court teams, GALs, community partners, and more.

Early Childhood Court is a proven, evidence-based trauma intervention that enhances child well-being, empowers families to break the cycle of maltreatment across generations, and reduces long-term taxpayer costs.