

**THE ELEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLORIDA**

**CASE NO. 23- 1
(Court Administration)**

**ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER
NO. 23-02**

**IN RE: ESTABLISHMENT OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD *PLUS* COURT OF THE
UNIFIED CHILDREN'S COURT
DIVISION**

WHEREAS, Rule 2.215 of the Florida Rules of General Practice and Judicial Administration grants the Chief Judge the authority to adopt administrative orders necessary to “ensure the efficient and proper administration of all courts within [this] Circuit;” and

WHEREAS, the legislature formally enacted Florida Statute §39.01304, Early Childhood Court Programs, in 2020, authorizing Circuit Courts to create an Early Childhood Court Program to serve the needs of infants and toddlers in dependency court; and

WHEREAS, the continued focus of Early Childhood Court initiatives of Florida’s Dependency Court Improvement Panel (FDCIP), and the Florida Supreme Court’s establishment of Early Childhood Court Best Practice Standards in November 2019, set forth core components of this problem-solving court model, addressing the root causes of justice system involvement, to include: judicial leadership, specialized dockets, multidisciplinary teams, a non-adversarial approach, and offering evidence-based treatment, judicial supervision, accountability, and providing individualized therapeutic intervention for participants, thereby reducing recidivism and promoting confidence and satisfaction within the justice system process; and

WHEREAS, an Early Childhood Court supporting the therapeutic needs of the parent and child, aged 0-3, in a non-adversarial manner, which carries out the Florida Supreme Court’s Early Childhood Court Best Practice Standards, will greatly serve the well-being and safety of these families and children in dependency court, promote reunification and more timely permanency outcomes, and a reduction of abuse recurrence as compared to traditional dependency courts; and

WHEREAS, it has been determined the establishment of an Early Childhood *Plus* Court in this Circuit would provide a means to expeditiously and efficiently resolve cases involving children up to three (3) years of age in our dependency system, thereby

providing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to appropriately handle cases involving the unique needs of infants and toddlers, improve child safety and well-being, heal trauma and repair the parent/child relationship, promote reunification and timely permanency, prevent recurrence of maltreatment, and stop the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment including abuse, abandonment, and neglect;

NOW, THEREFORE, pursuant to the authority vested in me as Chief Judge of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, under Rule 2.215 of the Florida Rules of General Practice and Judicial Administration, it is hereby **ORDERED**:

1. **Establishment.** An Early Childhood Court shall hereby be established within the Unified Children's Court Division, effective upon the execution of this Administrative Order.

2. **Presiding Judge.** A designated judge who has received training on legal and constitutional issues in Early Childhood Courts, trauma-responsive courts, evidence-based treatment to include parenting practices, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the impact of trauma on the child and the parents, and other advances in the Early Childhood Court field.

3. **Caseload and Docket.** The problem-solving Early Childhood Court shall have a planned caseload of 40 cases, subject to expansion, comprised of children up to three (3) years of age with a pending dependency case in the Circuit. The cases shall be heard on a specialized court docket before the designated Early Childhood Court Judge, staffed by an Early Childhood Court Team which will link participating parents and young children with comprehensive and tailored evidence-based therapeutic interventions, promote engagement and coordination with service providers, and facilitate Family Team Meetings to achieve reunification and permanency.

4. **Core Components.** The Early Childhood Court core components include judicial leadership, transparency, viewing families through a trauma lens, recognizing the central role of infant mental health specialists and child parent psychotherapists, implementing a continuum of behavioral health services, ensuring the collaborative court team services include a community coordinator, cross-agency training, developmental support for the child/parents, parent education and support, and placement stability and concurrent planning. Monthly Family Team Meetings, consistent parent-child contact, focused co-parenting, regular evaluation, funding and stability are vital to the structure and success of the Early Childhood Court.

5. **Collaborative Partnership.** The Early Childhood Court is built upon a collaborative partnership between the Administrative Office of the Courts, Citrus Family Care Network, the Department of Children and Families, the Guardian Ad Litem Office,

Children's Legal Services, the Office of Regional Counsel, Private Court Appointed Counsel, Attorneys Ad Litem, and other child welfare community partners.

6. **Early Childhood *Plus* Court Model.** Additionally, all infants and toddlers ages 0-5 years of age with an open dependency case in the Circuit shall be eligible for case coordination and implementation of early childhood therapeutic services and case staffing with a designated Early Childhood Court Specialist, as part of the "*Plus*" component of the Early Childhood Court. This structure shall be known as the "Early Childhood *Plus* Court" Model. These cases shall remain in their assigned judicial sections before the presiding Unified Children's Court Division Judge, without the need for specific transfer to the problem-solving Early Childhood Court. Early Childhood Specialists will link these children and families with evidence-based therapeutic interventions, staff cases for engagement and coordination with service providers, and bring the paradigm of Early Childhood Court to their assigned division courtrooms to promote and meet reunification and permanency.

7. **Amendments.** The procedures as outlined herein are meant to be elastic so as to provide the greatest degree of flexibility and allow for fine-tuning to the extent necessary to effectuate the efficient and effective resolution of early childhood cases, and thus are subject to change as deemed necessary.

This Administrative Order shall be effective immediately upon signing, and shall remain in effect until further order of the Court.

DONE and ORDERED in Chambers at Miami-Dade County, Florida, on this 23rd day of January 2023.

**NUSHIN G. SAYFIE, CHIEF JUDGE
ELEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA**