

GIVING FAMILIES A CHANCE

THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN FAMILY COURT SERVICES AND FIRST 5

Superior Court of Santa Clara County

Partnership Helps Caring Specialists Connect At-Risk Families with Services

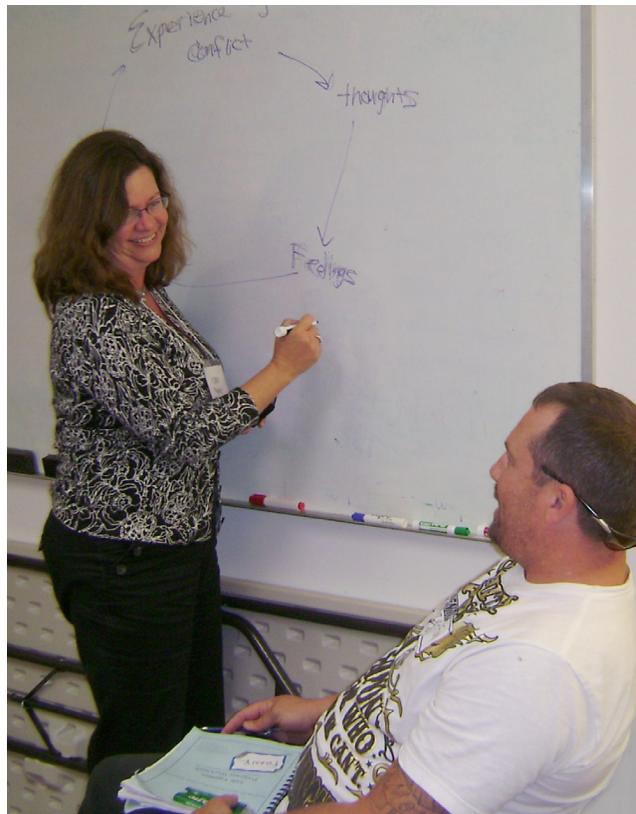
Santa Clara families entering the courts with disputes over child custody and visitation rights often have deeper problems affecting the health, safety, and welfare of their children or other members of the household, including domestic violence, substance abuse, child abduction, and mental illness. Many children involved in family court matters are involved in other courts as well—criminal domestic violence or probate, for example—or they have a high potential to become involved.

A survey of 1,300 families with matters filed in family court showed that most had experienced abuse or violence, and more than two-thirds were involved in the criminal justice system. Children often were caught between battling parents or trapped in other situations placing them at high risk.

Recognizing that the courts alone cannot address many of these deep-seated problems, the Superior Court of Santa Clara County reached out to FIRST 5 Santa Clara County, a county agency created under Proposition 10 to serve children in their first five years of life. FIRST 5, in turn, provided connections to its network of 68 service providers.

Under the name Giving Families a Chance, this collaboration has resulted in direct FIRST 5 funding of \$5.8 million in cash or in-kind services to families involved with the court. In addition, the court itself funds services such as supervised visitation, Parenting Without Violence classes, and therapeutic supervision, all conducted by private providers and nonprofit agencies.

FIRST 5 has staff who are based at the court, where they work to put families with at least one child under



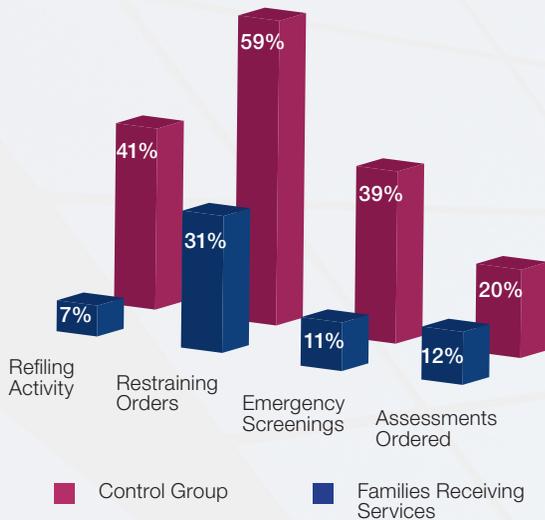
Parenting workshop at the Center for Healthy Development.

six on a fast track to help. FIRST 5 assigns family specialists to serve as advocates for these families in family court, dependency, probate criminal domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, and some drug court proceedings. The specialist's first job is to help family members understand what the court requires of them. Then the specialist explores the needs of the children and helps connect the family to a host of services, court ordered or voluntary.

Through this effort, family specialists have connected more than 6,000 parents with services such as health insurance, dental care, and preschool.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit Center for Healthy Development provides 8- and 12-week classes that teach parents the skills they need to build safe families and to parent without conflict. Enrollment for parents with children under six who are referred by the family court is subsidized, except for a small copayment.

Reduction in Interventions for Families Served by the Program



(Source: Harder + Company Community Research Evaluation report, November 2006.)

Harder & Company Community Research, which examined the court's data in 2005, reported a dramatic reduction in the number of families requiring judicial intervention or intervention by family court services to solve their problems. Harder compared families served by the Giving Families a Chance program with ones that had not been served over an 18-month period. It called the program "an effective means of improving litigants' trust and confidence in the courts."

The Giving Families a Chance program also has strong support from pro bono attorneys. They're available to represent parents for specific motions or

Contact:
Jean Pennypacker, Family Resources Division Director
(408) 882-2718 | jpennypacker@scscourt.org

limited actions in domestic violence matters, including restraining orders, to assure that both sides are represented.

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts gave the program its Irwin Cantor Innovative Program Award in 2008.

The most important testimonials have come from the Santa Clara County families that have been served by the program:

"Honestly, I did not have any expectations for myself in family law treatment court," said one parent. "I was amazed after attending TC how people like the coordinator and the judge genuinely were there to help me better myself. It has been beneficial to me in every way."

"We haven't had a new court filing in four weeks," remarked one participant in a Center for Healthy Development course. "This is the first time in four years we've gone this long."

"She called me this week and asked me if I wanted to go to the baby's doctor's appointment with her," a father reported. "That's the first time she's done that. In fact, that's the first time we've talked at all in over two months."

TO REPLICATE THIS PROGRAM:

- Recruit a judge to champion the program and to convene concerned community representatives to discuss the problem.
- Educate and collaborate with community organizations.
- Pool court and community resources.
- Develop priority referral systems for families in urgent need.
- Designate someone in the court system, perhaps a volunteer, to help families understand court orders and to connect them to services.