

Bethany Christian Services of Chattanooga - Safe Families for Children Program

A Huge Problem

By law and policy, most state child welfare agencies can only intervene on behalf of children who have suffered substantiated abuse or neglect, leaving many more children and their families in crisis in difficult situations. With the changing economy, thousands of families are experiencing job loss or other financial crisis that can lead to housing loss. Others are dealing with unpreparedness for parenting, lack of social supports, illness, substance use or incarceration. During such crises, many parents are in jeopardy of not being able to provide a safe and stable environment for their children. Historically, the extended family and neighbors stepped in by taking care of children for short periods of time and coming alongside families in crisis. However, many families today are socially isolated and their extended family is non-existent or not available. The children in a family traumatized by crisis then become especially at risk as their parents struggle to cope with crushing circumstances and emotions. Without assistance, many of these situations will lead to abuse/neglect episodes with long-lasting consequences for the children.

The Safe Families Solution

Safe Families for Children (SFFC) is a network of volunteer host families that extends the community safety net by providing parents in need – on their own initiative or on the referral of a social services or community agency worker – a loving sanctuary where they can safely place their children in times of crisis. Parents do not relinquish their parental rights or place their children in state foster care; they can take their children back into their home at any time they feel they have been able to reestablish safety and stability. Volunteer Safe Families, prompted solely by compassion, are thoroughly screened and trained by Bethany Christian Services of Chattanooga, a Christian, non-profit, licensed child-placing agency, and serve without financial motivation or compensation. By temporarily alleviating parents from struggling to care for their child on top of dealing with the immediate crisis they are facing, SFFC provides them with time to address the issues that led to crisis without fear of losing custody of their children.

Objectives

The Safe Families for Children Program strives to meet three objectives:

1. **An Alternative Response for Child Protective Services:** Safe Families provides child protective services workers with a safe alternative response when abuse or neglect is not substantiated but the family shows evidence of being in crisis, thus significantly reducing the number of children entering the child welfare system.
2. **Child Abuse Prevention:** Providing an overwhelmed and resource-limited parent with a safe, temporary place for their child without threat of losing custody can avert potential abuse/neglect.
3. **Family Support and Stabilization:** Many parents struggle because of limited informal social supports and unavailable extended family. Many Safe Families become the extended family that a parent never had.

(Over)

Facts

- **Safe Family Approval and Supervision:** Safe Families are recruited from throughout greater Chattanooga, primarily from churches and other community organizations, and Bethany Christian Services thoroughly screens and approves them, through a process that includes obtaining several references and conducting background checks. They also receive training prior to service.
- **Supervision and Length of Stay:** Children are closely monitored while staying with the Safe Family and regular contacts and visits with their parents are encouraged. The average length of stay is 45 days.
- **Ages:** Newborn infants through parenting teens. 85-90% of children are returned to their parents.
- **Referrals:** Families are referred because of short-term crises for which the risk can be resolved or significantly reduced in a brief period of time, such as job loss, housing loss, post-natal stress, unpreparedness for parenting, post-partum depression, illness, substance use, or incarceration due to probation violation or other offenses that carry a relatively short sentence. Safe Families is not an appropriate referral for chronic problems such as ongoing substance abuse, domestic violence, substantiated abuse / neglect, or ongoing mental illness. In Chicago, where Safe Families began, 50% of families are referred by the child welfare system. Referrals also come from hospitals, churches, drug treatment and homeless centers, prisons, schools, police stations, adoption agencies, etc.
- **Growth:** SFFC is growing fast. In Chicago, where Safe Families began, over 300 volunteer Safe Families are already hosting children and supporting families in crisis. In addition to Chattanooga, states including South Carolina, Indiana, Florida, Georgia, and New Jersey are beginning Safe Families programs at the invitation of child welfare agencies and other community groups.

Modified from Program Summary written by Safe Families of Lydia Home Association, Chicago, IL.