Helping the Youngest Start Life Strong

A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Strong Starts Court Initiative

By Jeffrey Sharlein

Center
for
Court
Innovation

Helping the Youngest Start Life Strong: A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Strong Starts Court Initiative

By Jeffrey Sharlein

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Children under the age of 4 are both highly represented in the child welfare system and particularly susceptible to the adverse consequences of abuse and neglect, including disorganized and insecure attachments and long-term challenges related to physical, emotional and behavioral health, socialization, and problematic substance use (Afifi et al. 2020; Anda et al. 2006; Coan 2016; Cyr et al. 2010; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Sroufe 2005; Thompson 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2021; Widom et al. 2012). Additionally, while the child welfare system is intended to positively intervene in cases of abuse and neglect, child welfare involvement itself has been associated with later adverse outcomes, and race and class disparities in system involvement are well-documented (Afifi et al. 2020; Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; Fong 2017; Merritt 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2021).

The Strong Starts Court Initiative is one attempt to address some of these concerns. Strong Starts works to support young children (aged 0-3) and their families in court due to allegations of abuse or neglect. In operation since 2015, the program now runs in four New York City boroughs: Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and Brooklyn.[1] Strong Starts coordinators provide direct support for families, educate judges and lawyers about early childhood mental health and available resources, and promote a more collaborative approach to the court process. Additionally, and in contrast to traditionally processed cases, Strong Starts coordinators convene clinical conferences and write court reports to enhance communication and cooperation. As part of the program's work with families and court professionals, Strong Starts also works to incorporate principles of procedural justice into child abuse and neglect proceedings.

This evaluation of Strong Starts asks the following questions:

1. Do Strong Starts cases have lower rates of future dependence petitions than other cases?
2. Do Strong Starts cases have a shorter time to case resolution than other cases?
3. To what extent and in what ways does Strong Starts participation improve overall family well-being?

---

[1] The Brooklyn site began operations after data collection was completed, and so is not included in the evaluation.

4. How does Strong Starts lead to changes in practice and increases in knowledge about infant mental health among attorneys and judges?
5. To what extent are Strong Starts cases handled in a procedurally just manner?
6. What are program strengths and challenges?

Methods

This evaluation utilizes a mixed methods approach, analyzing data from three sources.

1. Court Data Administrative family court data for the Bronx were obtained from the New York State Office of Court Administration. The two main outcomes of interest are subsequent petition—i.e., whether a subsequent abuse or neglect petition was filed in Bronx Family Court within the tracking period—and time to case resolution.

2. Parent/Family Caregiver Survey Researchers conducted a telephone survey with parents and other family caregivers who had been involved in Strong Starts across the three boroughs. The 31 survey participants were asked about family well-being, their sense of procedural justice during their case, and the helpfulness of the program.

3. Judge and Attorney Interviews Researchers conducted interviews with 16 judges and attorneys across program sites who were familiar with the program. Interviews focused on Strong Starts' influence on the judges' and attorneys' practices; knowledge gained from the program; perceptions of procedural justice in Strong Starts and family court generally; and aspects of the program that they find to be particularly helpful or in need of improvement.

Child Welfare Outcomes

Future Petitions Strong Starts participation is associated with reduced likelihood of future abuse or neglect petitions. After a follow-up period of between six and 54 months, no Strong Starts case had a new petition filed while 12% of comparison cases did. Also, families with more children and initial allegations pertaining to substance abuse and/or mental illness are more likely to have future petitions.

Time to Case Resolution Strong Starts cases last longer when the child's final home is with the respondent parent, but are shorter when the case results in the child living with another caregiver. One possible explanation for this finding is that the service referrals, case coordination, and other aspects of Strong Starts may improve the chances of families being

reunified or staying together, but may also increase case times. Other factors associated with longer case times include more children in a family; specific allegations (abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and derivative); and child removals.

Other Program Outcomes

Family Well-Being The parents and other caregivers noted improvements in family well-being across several areas following Strong Starts participation:

- Increased knowledge about early childhood, including early childhood development, early childhood trauma, and the importance of attachment to caregivers;
- Improved relationships between caregivers and the children in the case; and
- Supported navigation of the child welfare process.

Professional Practice Judges and attorneys reported changes in their knowledge and practice in three main areas:

- Understanding of early childhood mental health;
- Knowledge of available resources and interventions for children and families; and
- Efficient processing of Strong Starts cases.

Procedural Justice For the most part, parents and caregivers who completed the survey understood what was happening in their case and what was required of them, felt they were treated with respect and had a chance to tell their side of the story, and saw the process as unbiased. Interviewees also perceived high levels of procedural justice in the program. At the same time, there are some apparent gaps between caregiver experiences and court professionals' perceptions, with caregivers expressing nuance regarding respect and voice which professionals did not perceive.

Program Strengths and Challenges

Survey participants and interviewees alike found the Strong Starts coordinators and tailored service referrals to be particularly strong program components. Suggestions made by interviewees for program growth include increasing the number of families served, ensuring that all attorneys on Strong Starts cases are familiar with the program, and obtaining adequate space for all program activities.

Recommendations

Study findings suggest a number of recommendations, in three categories: recommendations for continuity, program improvement, and areas for further research.

Keep What's Working

Based on the positive feedback from participants and professionals, Strong Starts should continue to emphasize clinical coordinators and their work with families; connecting families with services targeted at their particular needs; and collaborating with and educating judges and attorneys in the family court.

Program Improvement

Interviewee recommendations for improvement highlighted the need for more resources:

- Increase the program's capacity to work with more families.
- Secure adequate space for all program activities, including conferences and professional education, in all sites.
- Provide attorneys who are new to Strong Starts with a brief orientation about the program and how it differs from traditional case processing. Additionally, the program could create explanatory materials for all family court attorneys.

Further Research

Further research is needed to make informed program recommendations in other areas. These include additional analyses to better understand the results of the current study, including the relationship between case length, final home, and Strong Starts; the additional needs of families with mental health substance abuse-related allegations; and where there are gaps between professionals' perceptions and families' experiences of procedural justice. Finally, while racial disparities in child welfare are well-documented and were raised by some interviewees, race data from the courts were not available for analysis. Regular collection of race data by the court would allow for research into racial disparities generally and into how programs such as Strong Starts address them.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Young Children in the Child Welfare System

In 2019, over one-third of children with substantiated or indicated maltreatment nationally were under the age of 4 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2021). These children and their families face a number of difficulties. Childhood abuse and neglect have been linked to long-term adverse outcomes in areas such as physical health, emotional and behavioral health, and problematic substance use (Afifi et al. 2020; Anda et al. 2006; Widom et al. 2012). Maltreatment has also been linked to disorganized and insecure attachments (Cyr et al. 2010). Abuse and neglect in early childhood pose particular challenges. This is a time of unparalleled neurological development—development that is highly responsive to external stimuli. That is, what a young child experiences shapes the way the child's brain develops. This is especially seen in attachments: disrupted attachment development at this stage has been linked to enduring impacts in numerous areas including emotional regulation, psychopathology, and social cognition (Coan 2016; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Sroufe 2005; Thompson 2016). While the child welfare system is intended to intervene in cases of abuse and neglect, child welfare involvement itself—including foster care placement—has also been associated with later adverse outcomes such as poor physical and mental health, among other challenges for the children and their families (Afifi et al. 2020; Merritt 2020).

Given this, it is crucial to effectively intervene in cases of abuse and neglect, both to avoid future trauma resulting from maltreatment and to reduce future child welfare system involvement. Family involvement with the child welfare system should ideally address the well-being of the entire family and treat parents respectfully and without bias, while promoting the child's safety. This mandate is all the more essential given the well-documented over-representation of families of color and poor families in the child welfare system (Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; Fong 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2021).

One approach that has been used to address some of these concerns is a form of therapeutic jurisprudence called infant-toddler court teams. The model was developed starting in the 1990s as Early Childhood Courts in Miami, Florida, and expanded starting with the 2005

Safe Babies Court Teams model, developed by Zero to Three. Versions of these models have now been implemented across the United States (Casanueva et al. 2017; Magruder et al. 2019). In general, these teams include a coordinator who works with families, along with attorneys, judges, and community partners; team members work together to improve outcomes in child welfare (dependency) cases involving children aged 3 or younger. Prior evaluations of this model have found reductions in time to permanency, improvements in family well-being, and increases in stakeholder knowledge about early childhood development. There is also some limited evidence of reductions in documented recurrences of child maltreatment relative to typical case handling (Casanueva et al. 2013; Casanueva et al. 2017; Faria et al. 2020; Florida Courts 2018; James Bell Associates 2009; McCombs-Thornton and Foster 2012; Stacks et al. 2020).

The Strong Starts Court Initiative

The Strong Starts Court Initiative, a project of the Center for Court Innovation, is one iteration of infant-toddler court teams. Strong Starts works to support young children and their families who are in family court due to allegations of abuse or neglect. The program operates in four New York City boroughs: the Bronx since 2015, Queens since 2016, Staten Island since 2018, and Brooklyn since 2021.

Strong Starts coordinators provide direct support for families, educate judges and attorneys about early childhood mental health and available resources, and promote a more collaborative approach to the court process. Coordinators work with a caseload of up to 20 children providing support, comprehensive assessment, service referrals, education about early childhood development, guidance, case management, advocacy, and material assistance. Child- and family-level goals include reducing future dependency petitions for maltreatment, helping cases resolve more efficiently than they otherwise would, keeping or reunifying babies with their parents as much as is safely possible, and improving family well-being. In each of the Strong Starts sites, a dedicated judge or judges hears all the Strong Starts cases, in addition to their regular dependency caseload.

To be eligible, all children in these families must be under four years of age, and families cannot have prior child welfare cases. If the judge who first hears a case is a Strong Starts judge and there is space in the program, they can recommend an eligible family to the program. The family then decides whether or not to participate.

Strong Starts cases appear before the judge monthly, which is more often than in traditionally processed dependency cases. Before each court hearing, there is a clinical conference, led by the Strong Starts coordinator, where parents, other caregivers, child welfare representatives, attorneys, and clinical service providers discuss progress and work together to address any problems. After the clinical conference, the Strong Starts coordinator writes a report for the judge on what has happened in the case since the last conference. These more frequent court hearings, clinical conferences, and collaboratively generated reports do not happen in traditionally processed cases, and are aimed at keeping cases moving forward appropriately with a strong focus on child well-being.

Strong Starts cases either involve court-ordered supervision, where the child remains at home with the respondent parent, or removal of the child from the home. In the former, all parties work to safely keep the child in the home. In the latter, work is towards a specified permanency goal. Broadly, permanency is either achieved through reunification or in another final home for the child.

The Strong Starts program works to bring knowledge of infant brain development, attachment theory, and the biological impact of adversity in early childhood into the family court setting. As such, the coordinators are all social workers with a foundation in early childhood development, including knowledge of attachment and early childhood trauma. Strong Starts coordinators also provide professional education, regularly offered to all attorneys and judges in the family court. Through this education and sharing knowledge about available services, the program works to make an impact at the macro level, by giving judges and attorneys tools they can use in all their cases. Coordinators will also sometimes consult with judges and attorneys on dependency cases that are not in the program.

Through the program's activities, Strong Starts also works to promote procedural justice. Procedural justice is about how fairly people feel they are treated throughout the court process. The theory is applicable in numerous legal settings, including dependency cases. Procedural justice is achieved when people *understand* what is happening and what is required of them, feel they are treated with *respect* and have a *voice* in the process, and see the process as unbiased or *neutral*. In addition to a fair process being important for its own sake, people's experiences in court contribute both to their perceptions of the justice system and to their engagement in the process (Cleveland and Quas 2020; Lens 2017; Tyler 1990). Strong Starts tries to incorporate these principles into its work with participants while also generally advancing them in dependency proceedings.

Current Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate Strong Starts by addressing the following questions:[2]

1. Do Strong Starts cases have lower rates of future dependence petitions than other cases?
2. Do Strong Starts cases have a shorter time to case resolution than other cases?
3. To what extent and in what ways does Strong Starts participation improve overall family well-being?
4. To what extent and in what ways does Strong Starts lead to changes in practice and increases in knowledge about infant mental health among attorneys and judges?
5. To what extent are Strong Starts cases handled in a procedurally just manner?
6. What are program strengths and challenges?

---

[2] All data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Any changes in program operations resulting from the pandemic are not reflected here.

Research Design, Data, and Methods

This evaluation utilizes a mixed methods approach, analyzing data from three sources: court records from one Strong Starts site (the Bronx), a survey conducted with parents and other family caregivers who had been in the program, and semi-structured interviews with family court judges and attorneys in all three program sites which were operating during data collection.[3] Different kinds of data have different strengths and weaknesses. One motivation for using multiple kinds of data in a study is "complementarity," or the ability to draw on the strengths of various approaches while compensating for some weaknesses with other data sources (Small 2011).

Court Data

Administrative family court data were obtained from the New York State Office of Court Administration. Court data were specific to the Bronx; Strong Starts has operated in the Bronx the longest, allowing for the largest sample of closed cases. Sample sizes from the other boroughs would have been insufficient to analyze different boroughs separately, and combining samples from across boroughs was not considered feasible due to differences in how the court functions in each borough. The study uses data for cases between June 1, 2015, and December 31, 2019.

Variables

The main independent variable is Strong Starts participation, that is, whether a case is a Strong Starts case or a comparison case. There are two dependent variables, corresponding to the two outcome questions addressed with these data: subsequent petition—whether a subsequent abuse or neglect petition was filed in Bronx Family Court within the timeframe tracked in the data—and time to case resolution.[4]

---

[3] The Brooklyn site began operations after data collection was completed, and so is not included in survey or interview data.

[4] Approximately 2/3 of cases in the sample have one respondent parent and the remaining cases have two respondent parents. For simplicity, the singular "respondent parent" is used throughout this report.

Other independent variables in analyses include:

- **Demographics:** Child's age at filing (in months), the child's gender, the primary respondent's age at filing (in years), and the number of children in the family.[5] Notably, race data were not available for this study due to a high rate of missing data.

- **Allegation Types:** Neglect;[6] abuse, including physical and sexual abuse; mental illness; substance abuse; domestic violence; inadequate supervision; and derivative.[7] Many cases have more than one allegation on the petition; all allegations on a petition are included in analyses.

- **Case Events:** Whether the child is removed from the respondent's care at any point during the case; and final home, indicating if the child lived with the respondent parent or with somebody else at the end of the case (permanency, in cases with a removal). The group whose final home is with the respondent parent includes children who were never removed from the respondent parent's care (64% of this group) and children who were removed and later reunified (36%).

- **Follow-Up Time:** Indicates how long a case was followed in the data (months from case close date to December 31, 2019). This variable was used to compare follow-up time between the Strong Starts and comparison groups, and was not included in the main analytic models.

Sample

Sample Construction When an eligible family comes before a Strong Starts judge and the program has adequate capacity, the family is offered the program. According to program staff, if the program is nearing capacity and there are multiple eligible families, the judge generally offers the program to the family deemed to have more complex needs. According

---

[5] Only includes children who had family court cases filed on the same day and with the same primary respondent.

[6] Includes allegations of abandonment; failure to plan; failure to protect; medical neglect; failure to provide food, shelter, and/or clothing; and educational neglect; as well as general "neglect" and "other neglect" categories.

[7] A derivative allegation indicates that there is concern that a child is at risk for abuse or neglect based on allegations against their legal caregiver related to another child.

to program staff and stakeholders, almost all families given the option accept.[8] Therefore, among eligible cases, program capacity at the start of a case is the biggest determining factor of Strong Starts participation, though apparent complexity of needs also plays a role. That is, there may be some underlying systemic reasons predicting who will and will not be in the program, though the extent of this is unknown. Likely indicators of these complex needs are not available in the court data; observable background characteristics are compared below. The comparison group was therefore constructed by selecting eligible cases that were not in Strong Starts: subject child 3 years old or younger at filing; the first case for both the child and primary respondent; no children in the family age 4 or over; a case start of June 1, 2015 (the date Strong Starts started accepting cases), or later; and assigned to the Bronx Strong Starts judge. Since the available data do not identify families who were offered but declined Strong Starts participation, it is possible that some of these families are in the comparison group, though ideally they would be excluded. To the extent that Strong Starts cases present with more complex needs than comparison cases, any findings in favor of Strong Starts are likely to be conservative estimates of the program's impact.

Given the flexible nature of the program, a few Strong Starts cases do not fully meet these criteria: three cases have a primary respondent with non-Strong Starts prior cases, and one case involves a child who was 4 years old at the time of petition. These cases were included in the analyses to measure the impact of Strong Starts as actually implemented.

Additionally, to allow for at least a six-month follow-up period for subsequent petitions after case closure, Strong Starts and comparison cases were only included if the case was closed by June 30, 2019.

While Strong Starts coordinators work with an entire family which may include multiple child welfare-involved children, the court data are structured as having one child per case. Therefore, analyses of court data are at the level of the child.

Sample Description Table 2.1 compares key background characteristics between the Strong Starts and comparison group samples. The groups were also compared on follow-up time and case events. These comparisons are all bivariate. As can be seen in the table, there are some statistically significant differences between the groups. When compared with non-

---

[8] Anecdotally, a few eligible cases were not offered Strong Starts at the very start of the program, as working policies were still in flux. The statement that "almost all accept" is also anecdotal from program staff and stakeholders. The precise acceptance rate is not available.

Strong Starts cases, Strong Starts cases have younger children, a higher proportion of male children, a higher rate of substance abuse allegations, and a lower rate of domestic violence allegations. Strong Starts cases are also somewhat more likely to have inadequate supervision allegations, though this difference only approaches statistical significance. Additionally, comparison cases average more follow-up time than Strong Starts cases, meaning data on possible subsequent petitions are available for longer time periods after case closure.[9]

Table 2.1. Strong Starts and Comparison Groups Differed on a Few Key Background Characteristics

	Strong Starts	Comparison Group
N	48	93
Child & Family Demographics		
Mean child age at filing (months)	10*	15
Mean primary respondents age (years)[1]	28	28
Mean number of children in family	1	1
Child gender[2]	*	
Male	65%	45%
Female	35%	55%
Allegations[3]		
Inadequate supervision	81%+	66%
Substance abuse	54%**	31%
Neglect	42%	32%
Domestic violence	27%*	45%
Mental illness	23%	14%
Abuse	10%	16%
Derivative allegation	2%	6%
Case Events		
Child removed[4]	52%	41%
Final home with respondent parent[4]	90%	84%
Mean follow-up time (days)[4]	662*	811

+p≤.10,* p≤.05, ** p≤.01, ***p≤.001

[1] Data missing for four cases.

[2] Gender is coded as a binary (male/female) variable.

[3] Most cases have multiple allegations; data missing for six cases.

[4] These events took place after group assignment.

---

[9] Saying that these factors are statistically significant predictors means that there is at least a 95% probability that observed differences are real, and not the result of chance ($p \leq 0.05$); approaching significance means this probability is between 90%-95% ($0.05 \leq p \leq 0.10$).

Analytic Approach

SPSS software was used to conduct all quantitative analyses.

New Abuse/Neglect Petition With a dichotomous outcome variable, these analyses were conducted using logistic regression. However, since no children in Strong Starts cases had a subsequent petition within the designated timeframe, the statistical analysis has a problem called separation, or infinite coefficient slopes. Separation leads to untrustworthy tests of statistical significance (Mansournia et al. 2018). To address the issue, multiple models with different sets of predictors were estimated, and fit statistics of these models were compared, especially -2 log likelihood (Rindskopf 2002). Following Rindskopf, a difference between model -2 log likelihoods of 3.84 in model comparisons was the criterion used for determining the usefulness of an omitted predictor; the model with the lower -2 log likelihood is the better one.

Time to Case Resolution With a continuous outcome variable, these analyses were conducted using linear regression. Subgroup means and medians were also tabulated.

Missing Data Two variables had missing data. Four cases were missing primary respondent age, and six cases were missing allegation information. Two cases were missing both, resulting on eight cases with missing data. All eight of these cases are in the comparison group. Given the small number of cases (less than 6% of the full sample and less than 9% of comparison cases) and the assumption that these data are missing at random, complete case analysis was used. That is, these cases were excluded from all statistical models that included the variables with missing data.

Also, since the available data are all from Bronx County, any subsequent petitions filed in another jurisdiction are not captured in the data. However, there is no reason to think that in-county vs. out-of-county new petition trends would differ between groups, so this characteristic of the data is unlikely to bias the results.

Parent/Family Caregiver Survey

Between October 2019 and January 2020, researchers conducted a telephone survey with parents and other family caregivers who had been involved in Strong Starts. Caregivers who had participated at any site since the program's start in 2015 and whose cases had been closed were eligible. Because multiple caregivers may be involved with a single case, some

cases had multiple people eligible for the survey. This group was selected with the rationale that these individuals would both be familiar with the program and have some knowledge of the family situation from before their Strong Starts involvement. Surveys were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the participant's preference. Survey participants[10] were asked questions about family well-being, their sense of procedural fairness during their case, and the helpfulness of the program, and were given a $15 Visa gift card to thank them for their time and input. Survey responses were collected in SurveyMonkey and analyzed using frequency analyses.

Of the 77 people eligible to take the survey, researchers successfully contacted 52 (68%). Of these 52 individuals, 31 completed the survey. This means that 40% of those who were eligible took the survey. Demographic and case characteristics of participants are presented in Table 2.2.

Participants were able to skip questions they were unable or unwilling to answer. All percentages reported in the following chapters are based on valid responses, that is, out of those who responded. No more than two people declined to answer any single question.

Judge and Attorney Interviews

Between September 2019 and January 2020, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with four judges and 12 attorneys familiar with Strong Starts. This includes all four judges who were currently hearing Strong Starts cases across the three sites, as well as attorneys representing parents, children, and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS, New York City's child protective services agency), and practicing in all three program sites. Some attorneys representing parents and children work for the legal agencies contracted to provide those services; others are court-appointed private attorneys. Roles and sites of interviewees are detailed in Table 2.3.

Interviews focused on Strong Starts' influence on the judges' and attorneys' practices; what they have learned from the program; perceptions of procedural justice in Strong Starts and family court generally; and aspects of the program that they find to be particularly helpful or in need of improvement. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded when the interviewees consented (12 out of 16). Interview transcripts and notes

---

[10] Referred to as "participants" in the remainder of the report for brevity.

were analyzed using deductive coding and thematic analysis, utilizing the Dedoose application.

Table 2.2. Surveys Were Completed by a Diverse Group of Program Participants

	N	31
Background Characteristics		
Average age (years)		42
Race[1]		
Black		35%
White		32%
Latinx		32%
Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander		3%
Unspecified		3%
Gender[2,3]		
Female		77%
Male		23%
Language (spoken fluently)[1]		
English		97%
Spanish		29%
Other		6%
Education		
Did not complete high school		13%
High school/GED		35%
Some college or vocational school		39%
Bachelor's degree		13%
Financial support[1]		
Government programs		52%
Work (including legal, under the table, or illegal)		48%
Family/friend support		23%
Case-Related Characteristics		
Time in Strong Starts		
< 1 year		32%
1-2 years		36%
> 2 years		32%
Relationship to child[2]		
Respondent parent		40%
Non-respondent parent		20%
Other relative		40%

[1] Responses sum to > 100% because participants were asked to choose all options that apply.

[2] Data missing for 1 case.

[3] Five gender options were offered in the survey; all responses were binary.

Table 2.3. Interviewees Represent the Full Range of Court Roles and Program Sites

	N	16
Interviewee Role		
Judge		4
Attorney		
Attorney for parents		4
Attorney for children		3
Attorney for parents & children		2
Attorney for child welfare agency (ACS)		3
Interviewee Site		
Bronx		6
Queens		6
Staten Island		4

Child Welfare Outcomes

New Petitions

All cases in the dataset were closed by June 30, 2019, with data on subsequent filings through December 31, 2019, allowing for a minimum of six months after case closure. More specifically, cases were followed for between 188 and 1,664 days, with an overall mean follow-up time of 760 days and a median follow-up time of 699 days. As noted in Chapter 2, comparison cases had a statistically significant longer follow-up time than Strong Starts cases.

Eleven children in the comparison group, or 12%, had a new petition filed after the original case was closed. No children who had been in Strong Starts had a new petition filed. Ten logistic regression models were estimated and compared to further determine predictors of new petitions. Technical details of model comparisons and full model results are presented in Appendix A (Table A.1).

The summary findings are as follows: of all the variables tested, Strong Starts participation is the most important factor in predicting new petitions after case closure. However, due to the lack of new petitions among Strong Starts cases and the way statistical software estimates the size of effects, the exact size of Strong Starts' effect cannot be quantified. Other factors associated with subsequent petitions are:

- **Mental illness allegations**: Cases with these allegations have 21 times the odds of having future petitions as others;
- **Substance abuse allegations**: Cases with these allegations have almost 10 times the odds of having future petitions as others; and
- **Number of children in the family**: Each additional child in the family with a concurrent dependency case increases the odds of future petition 18-fold.

Additionally, no case with an allegation of abuse, a derivative allegation, or a final home away from the respondent parent had a subsequent petition, but these did not emerge as important contributors in the overall statistical models.[11]

As noted above, comparison cases were followed for longer on average than Strong Starts cases (see Table 2.1). This raises the possibility that Strong Starts cases simply were not followed for long enough for a subsequent petition to be filed. However, this is unlikely: of the 11 comparison cases with new petitions, in seven the new petition was filed less than 760 days after they were closed, the overall mean follow-up time. Also, more than half (6) had the subsequent filing after less than the Strong Starts mean follow-up time (662 days). As a further check, statistical models were estimated including follow-up time as a predictor. Results show that while follow-up time approaches statistical significance in predicting new petitions, the effect is negligible (full model odds ratio: 1.002). Additional checks regarding group differences in follow-up time are discussed in Appendix A.

Notably, subsequent petitions, where they appear in the data, occurred fairly long after the initial petition. For these 11 cases, time from initial case closure to new petition filing ranged from 200 to 1,473 days, with a mean of 647 days. In contrast, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention recommends following cases for a minimum of 12 months post-case resolution and counting new petitions that occur within that timeframe (Flango and Kauder 2009). Following that guideline, out of 105 cases followed for at least a year, only three comparison cases had new petitions within 12 months. These three represent 4% of the comparison subsample and less than 3% of the total sub-sample. Statistically, this is not significantly different from the zero Strong Starts cases with new petitions within 12 months of case resolution.

Time to Case Resolution

Stakeholder Hypotheses

The judges and attorneys interviewed were asked how they anticipated the program would be found to impact time to case resolution.[12] The majority (9/16) believed Strong Starts cases resolve more quickly than others, while four said it depends on other factors and three did

---

[11] It is possible that neither of these variables emerged as important predictors because of the relatively few numbers of cases having abuse allegations or final homes away from respondent parents.

[12] Stakeholder hypotheses are not reported on for the new petitions outcome because fewer than half the interviewees were able to suggest a hypothesis for that.

not feel able to offer insight. Two interviewees offered comments on the relationship between the program, case time, and final home:

> [In Strong Starts] there's always constantly eyes on it so they definitely progress faster and, I find, have a better result. [They progress faster] to permanency, or even if the child at some point does get removed, assisting the parent in getting services that they need so the child can be returned quickly. (Parent & child attorney)

> I think that it cuts both ways because … cases that would go to a termination of parental rights case, where the agency basically gives up on the parent, where Strong Starts is involved they're pointing out the parent's strengths and still working with the parent. That could actually lengthen the time that a case is open. (Child attorney)

Findings from Court Data

Initial analyses of court data showed the presence of six factors leading to longer case times (see Table 3.1, Model 1): Strong Starts participation, an allegation relating to parental mental illness, a domestic violence allegation, a derivative allegation, removal from the respondent parent's care during the case, and a final home with someone other than the respondent parent. The largest effect on case length is from final home.

The association between program participation and longer case times contrasts with what the majority of interviewees expected. At the same time, the magnitude of final home's effect suggests that this variable is particularly important, and the interview data suggest the possibility of an interaction effect. An interaction effect would mean that the effect of Strong Starts on case length depends on the child's final home.

Table 3.1, Model 2 shows the results when an interaction effect is added. The same six variables have a statistically significant effect on time to case resolution as in Model 1. Additionally, cases involving families with more children now take somewhat longer to be resolved, approaching statistical significance. Crucially, the interaction term for Strong Starts and final home is significant. That is, net of other factors, Strong Starts cases in which the child's final home is with the respondent parent take relatively longer than they would have without the program; Strong Starts cases take relatively shorter with other final homes. Specifically:

- Strong Starts cases are 159 days *longer* than comparison cases on average when the child's final home is with the respondent parent, and 175 days *shorter* on average

when there are other final homes. Differences in case length between Strong Starts and comparison cases depend on the final home.

- At the same time, case resolution with respondent parents is achieved more quickly than other final homes in both Strong Starts and comparison cases.
- Each additional child in the family adds 103 days on average to the case.
- Cases with mental illness allegations are 264 days longer on average than others.
- Cases with domestic violence allegations are 139 days longer on average than others.
- Cases with derivative allegations are 433 days longer on average than others.
- Cases with removals are 143 days longer on average than those without.

Table 3.2 shows mean and median case lengths across the two dimensions of Strong Starts participation and final home. Because cases involving child removals are qualitatively different from those without a removal, and last longer than those without removals regardless of final home, Table 3.2 further separates out those cases with no removal from those with a removal followed by reunification. Strong Starts cases are an average of 179 days longer than comparison cases when there is no removal, and an average of 115 days longer than comparison cases when there is a removal followed by reunification. Consistent with the interaction effect, Strong Starts cases are an average of 195 days *shorter* among those cases with a removal and no reunification.[13]

From the available data, it is unclear why the effect of Strong Starts on case length depends on the final home, that is, why Strong Starts cases are longer when the final home is with the respondent parent and shorter when it is not. One plausible explanation for reunification/non-removal cases lasting longer, drawing again from the qualitative data, is the possibility that some Strong Starts cases that end with the child together with the respondent parent would have had different outcomes if they were not Strong Starts cases. Put another way, the service referrals, case coordination, and other work that Strong Starts coordinators do may often lead to families being reunified or staying together, but this enhanced case management may come at the cost of longer times to case resolution. Conversely, Strong Starts coordinators may be able to more quickly identify when reunification will not be possible, and work with all parties to expedite an appropriate permanency arrangement (final home).

---

[13] The numbers here and in Table 3.2 are based on bivariate comparisons, with those above and in Table 3.1 are based on multivariate analyses, controlling for the other variables in the model.

Table 3.1. Strong Starts Participation, Case Events, and Certain Allegation Types Affect Case Length

	Model 1	Model 2
N	133	
Adjusted R^2	0.482	0.499
Model ANOVA	$F(14)=9.765$***	$F(15)=9.778$***
	B coefficients	
Strong Starts	112.446*	158.793**
Child & Family Demographics		
Child's age at filing (months)	0.287	.655
Male child	-12.105	-31.779
Primary respondents' age at filing (years)	1.052	1.633
Number of children in family	94.520	102.837+
Allegations		
Inadequate supervision	-17.991	-2.551
Substance abuse	17.745	15.486
Neglect	30.779	16.552
Domestic violence	146.294**	139.410*
Mental illness	267.374***	263.617***
Abuse, including physical & sexual	130.113	119.844
Derivative allegation	429.755**	433.377**
Case Events		
Child was removed	152.916**	143.272**
Final home not with respondent parent	532.091***	639.970***
Interaction (program x final home)		-333.518*
Constant	-10.727	-47.187

+p≤.10,* p≤.05, ** p≤.01, ***p≤.001

Table 3.2. Strong Starts Cases Are Longer Than Comparison Cases When the Final Home is with the Respondent Parent and Shorter When it is Not

		Strong Starts	Comparison Group
	N	23	55
Never removed			
Mean # of days		428	249
Median # of days		364	232
	N	20	23
Removed and reunified			
Mean # of days		507	392
Median # of days		473	327
	N	5	15
Removed and not reunified			
Mean # of days		830	1,025
Median # of days		832	1,006

Other Program Impacts

Family Well-Being

Survey participants said that Strong Starts had a positive impact on their family well-being in several ways. Across eight areas, participants were asked how much Strong Starts helped them (a lot, between a lot and a little, a little, or not at all). More than half said that Strong Starts helped them a lot in seven of these areas (see Figure 4.1).

The areas with the highest percentage saying that Strong Starts helped them a lot are:

- Understanding the importance of young children's attachment to caregivers (84%);
- Navigating ACS and the family court case (83%); and
- Understanding early childhood trauma (81%).

Figure 4.1. Strong Starts Helped Families in a Number of Areas
(% reporting the program helped a lot)
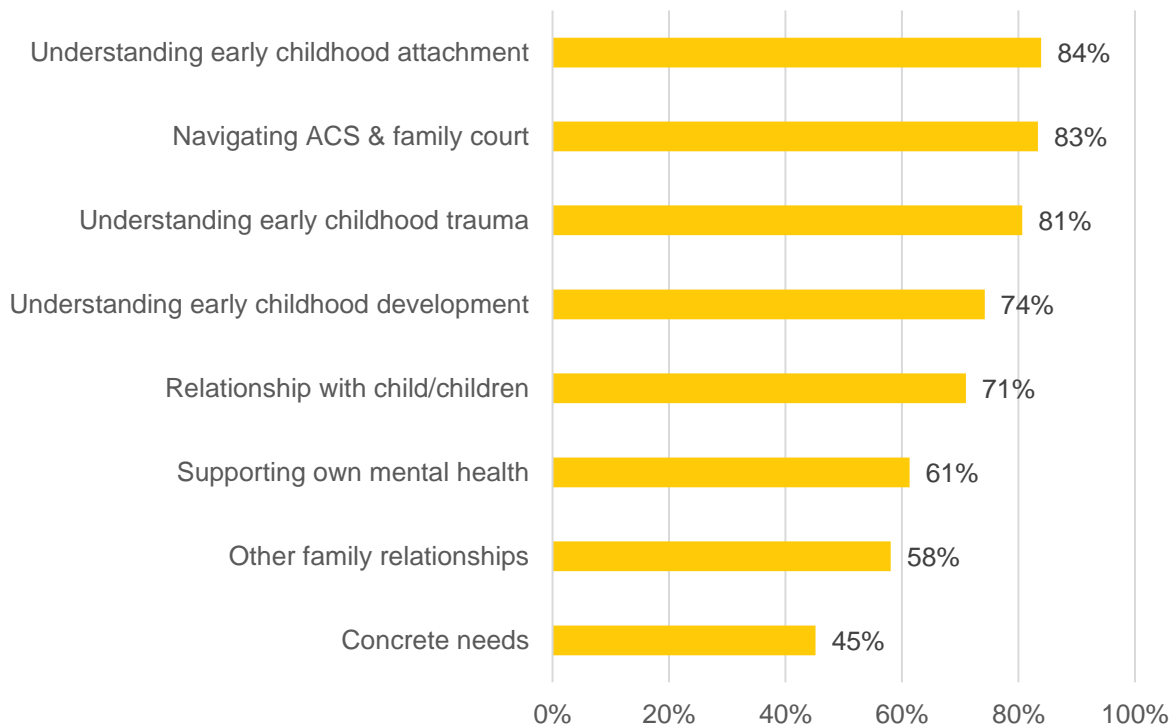
Participants were less likely to feel that the program helped them in other areas. The areas where they felt the program was least helpful are:

- Concrete needs, such as food, housing, employment, and medical care (39% program did not help at all);
- Family relationships other than the relationship with the child/children involved in the court case (23% program did not help at all); and
- Participants' mental health needs (13% program did not help at all).

It is possible that participants found the program least helpful in assisting with concrete needs because they may not have had these types of concrete needs. Suggesting this possibility, in another section of the survey around half of participants answered "don't know/not applicable" to how helpful the program was with housing (65%), public benefits (55%), and other basic needs (45%). Also, it is possible that some survey participants may not have been aware that Strong Starts case management or advocacy was behind some experiences and events.

Changes in Professional Practice

The judges and attorneys interviewed discussed three main areas where Strong Starts has affected their practice in dependency cases:

1. Knowledge about early childhood mental health;
2. Knowledge of available resources and interventions for children and families; and
3. Increased efficiency in processing cases.

The first two were reported to impact practice in both Strong Starts and non-Strong Starts cases; the third only impacts practice in Strong Starts cases.

Knowledge About Early Childhood Mental Health

Eleven out of 16 judge and attorney interviewees discussed having learned about early childhood mental health through their involvement with Strong Starts. Some attorneys mentioned specific aspects of infant mental health they had learned about; others noted increased knowledge more generally. Some shared specifically how this had impacted their practice. For example:

> It's given me a lot more information to base my advocacy on, without a doubt. It's helped me to make more informed decisions . . . in how I want to advocate for my young clients.

It's certainly provided me with a breadth of resources to make sure my clients are supported in certain transitions . . . that I otherwise would have been, "Oh what two-year-old doesn't throw a tantrum when their caretaker is not around?" (Child attorney)

The three judges who spoke on this theme all talked more about knowledge being reinforced than about learning new information. They already knew about infant mental health, but Strong Starts at times helped push them to apply that information in their cases. One judge who also noted that the program has made them more trauma-focused explained:

I think it's reinforced what I kind of thought I already knew about infant mental health. I've been doing this work for a really long time . . . so I don't know that I've learned a ton more about how important attachment is, how early attachment happens, how much a six-month-old baby can be picking up about what's going on around them in terms of violence or anger or separation. So I think it just reinforced what I always believed, but maybe put it more to the front of my mind when I'm handling cases. (Judge)

Knowledge of Available Resources and Interventions

In addition to learning about young children's developmental needs, eleven interviewees also discussed learning about services, psychosocial interventions, and other community resources. One attorney who represented parents said, "Knowing that these resources exist is really helpful." In the words of a judge:

I think I learned there are a lot more services available than we were aware of because before Strong Starts, often we would say, "Okay, why isn't the parent in this service?" And the agency might say, "Oh, we haven't been able to locate one," or, "It doesn't exist."… So, it did help. (Judge)

Some also specifically mentioned how knowledge of these additional resources helps support the ACS caseworkers. For example:

I think it helped inform our practice in terms of linking our families with higher quality services, which was really the intent of the program. And to have more support also for our caseworkers, when our caseworkers were running into walls with implementing those services. (Agency attorney)

Some interviewees also noted that once they learn about these resources, they are able to and often do recommend them in cases where Strong Starts is not involved.

Increased Efficiency in Processing Cases

Some judge and attorney interviewees (7) also discussed the ability to get more done in their Strong Starts cases, more efficiently. This has to do with the involvement of the Strong Starts coordinator and the structure of the program; therefore, this impact is only felt in Strong Starts cases. Interviewees cited monthly conferences, regular court hearings, better overall preparation for hearings, and tenacity and a hands-on approach from the coordinators as reasons for this higher productivity in Strong Starts cases. For example:

> So we have all the attorneys, we have all the parties . . . and we all sit together and we discuss what the issues are. Now, if it was not a Strong Starts case, if my client contacts me about an issue, it would be an email to the ACS attorney, "Look, this is what's going on," and sometimes we can't really resolve the problem and the only other way to resolve it at that point is to make a motion to the court to ask for some assistance, which takes quite some time. But now we've been meeting once a month and we all see the progress and we see what other services are needed and how things are going and what else we can do to help. (Parent & child attorney)

One attorney gave a specific example of how working with Strong Starts impacts how they work on cases:

> In my experience, the Strong Starts coordinator … jumps right in immediately to figure out, what are the referrals? What are the things? How do we make sure visitation is appropriate and happening regularly and happening well? How do we make sure, if it's appropriate, that the Power of Two service gets in place right away? And so anticipating … that ball will be moving quicker, I help make sure we help get the ducks lined up in a row so that the coordinator can make that happen. (Parent attorney)

Two interviewees also noted that parents often trust the Strong Starts coordinator more than they trust the ACS caseworker, which facilitates more ready engagement on the parents' part.

Procedural Justice in Strong Starts

Procedural justice is about how fairly people feel they are treated throughout the court process. It is achieved when people *understand* what is happening and what is required of them, feel they are treated with *respect* and have a *voice* in the process, and see the process as unbiased or *neutral*. Data from both the parent/caregiver survey and the judge and attorney interviews inform findings as to how well the program achieves this. However, since surveys were only conducted with caregivers involved in Strong Starts, responses cannot be compared with caregiver experiences outside of the program. Also, similarities and differences between how interviewees and survey participants rate Strong Starts across procedural justice tenets are suggestive, but given the intrinsic differences between surveys and in-depth interviews the responses are not truly comparable.

Much of the information in this chapter is not directly about services provided by Strong Starts— for example, caregivers' experiences with judges and attorneys. However, this information is still relevant in an evaluation of Strong Starts, because the program works to impact how judges and attorneys handle dependency cases more broadly.
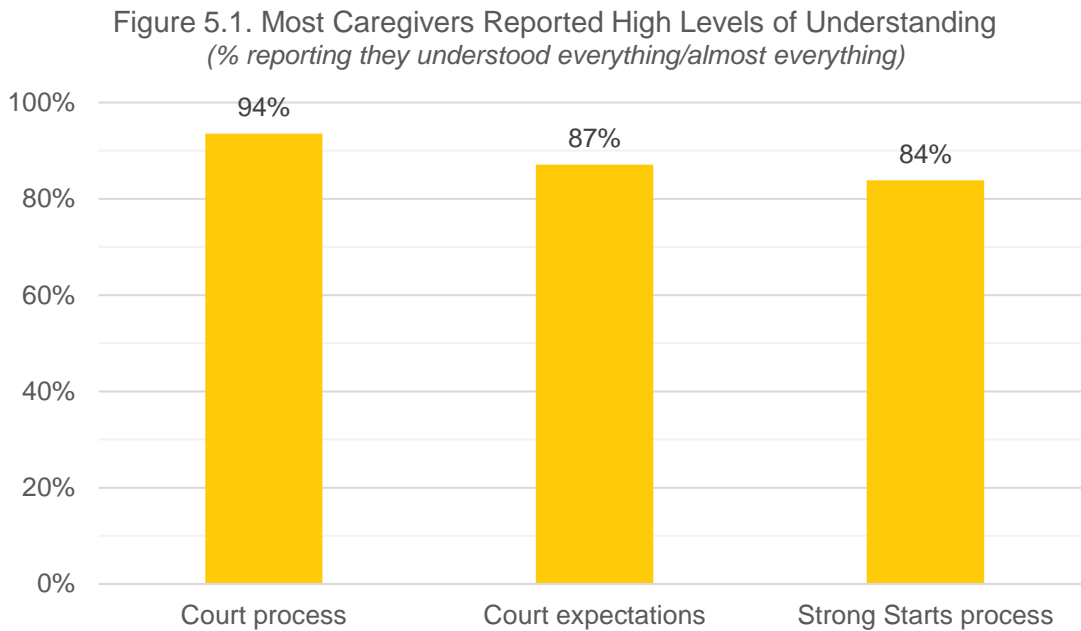
Understanding

Survey Findings
Survey participants largely understood what happened and what was required of them in family court and Strong Starts. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), they were asked how well they understood what happened in court, how well they understood what was expected of them in court, and how well they understood the Strong Starts process. Most participants rated their understanding high. As shown in Figure 5.1, 94% reported that they understood all or nearly all of what happened in court, 87% understood what was expected of them in court, and 84% understood what happened in Strong Starts (ratings of 4 or 5).

Participants were also asked who provided them with explanations: the Strong Starts coordinator, their attorney, the judge, and/or somebody else. The majority said that their attorney and the Strong Starts coordinator explained both what happened in court (84% for both) and what was expected of them in court (76% attorney; 77% coordinator). Almost all said that the Strong Starts coordinator explained the Strong Starts process (97%). Less than

half indicated that the judge explained any item to them (48% for what happened in court; 42% for what was expected of them in court; 23% for the Strong Starts process).

Figure 5.1. Most Caregivers Reported High Levels of Understanding
(% reporting they understood everything/almost everything)

Interview Findings

Explaining the court process to litigants is a core part of an attorney's role. As such, understanding was only addressed directly in interviews with judges. The judges interviewed felt that parents in Strong Starts cases do understand what happens in court and what is expected of them, largely reflecting the survey results. One judge observed:

> I haven't had any [Strong Starts] cases where they appeared completely confused as to what was going on. And you'll see that sometimes that they're like, "I didn't know this was happening. I thought I was supposed to get this." I think there's more of a sharing of information. (Judge)

Another elaborated on where the understanding comes from:

> I think so [that Strong Starts participants understand the court process and their rights in it], but I think that's really a lawyer quality issue. Like are they really getting all that information from their lawyers? They're certainly getting some things from the information they're given by Strong Starts and in conferences. Especially in [my borough] the parents' lawyers are pretty good, they're very good, so I think they really do give the parents a lot of very good understanding of what their rights are. (Judge)
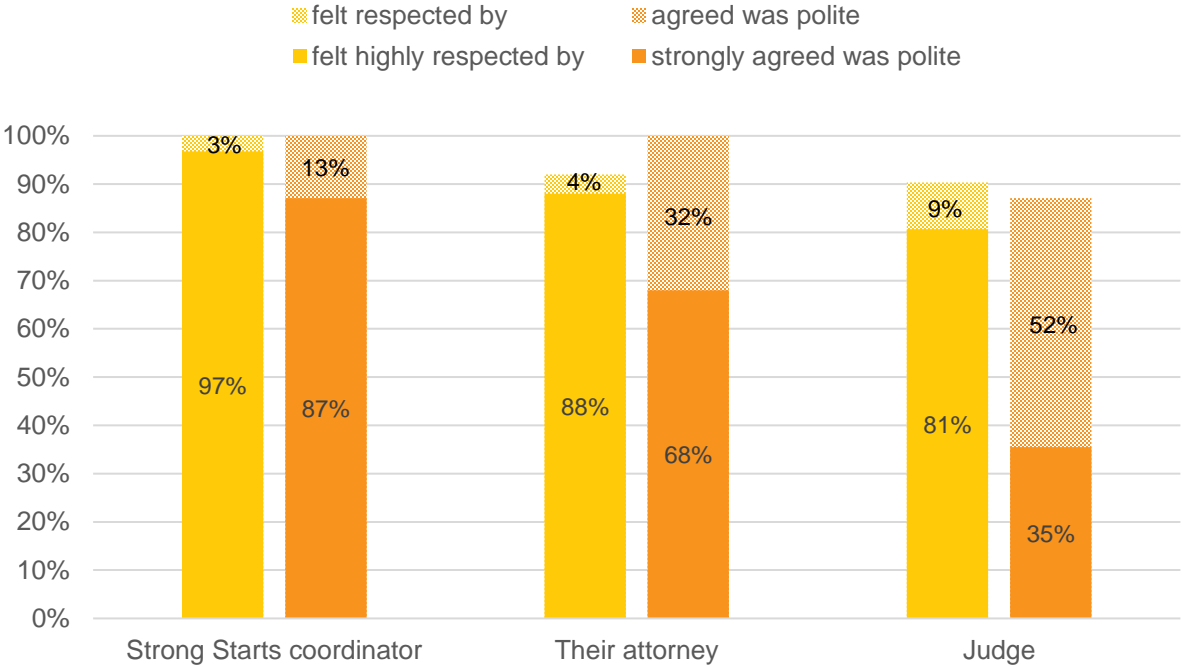
Respect

Survey Findings

Most participating parents and caregivers said they felt respected by coordinators, attorneys, and judges, with the Strong Starts coordinator rated higher than attorneys or judges. Interestingly, the results were different when participants were asked how *polite* these same people were to them—a common indicator of respect. As with perceptions of respect, overall ratings were high across all groups. However, there were differences in who participants *strongly* agreed was polite, with the Strong Starts coordinators again rated most highly, followed by attorneys, and then judges (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Most Caregivers Felt Respected
(% reporting that they...)

felt respected by   agreed was polite

felt highly respected by   strongly agreed was polite

Interview Findings

Consistent with the survey results, the overall perception among judge and attorney interviewees was that parents in Strong Starts cases are shown respect and feel respected, with many observing that respect is more widely shown and experienced in Strong Starts than in other cases. One interviewee explained their perception of Strong Starts parents:

> I get the sense that they [feel respected] from their reactions in the courtroom that I see.… Like good eye contact when I'm talking to them and responsive and "thank you."

And they don't seem shut down. And sometimes parents can seem very shut down and beaten down. And the Strong Starts parents by and large aren't seeming that way to me. (Judge)

Another said:

And just in general, [the coordinator's] reports are more strengths-based than the average report from ACS or foster care agencies…. It always leaves room for what's going well with the parent. And I think that's important, and that goes a long way towards showing respect. (Parent attorney)

There were some nuances within the overall sentiment regarding respect. For one, five interviewees noted that parents tend to experience respect more from some people than others. This observed difference reflects survey participants' differences in perceptions of politeness. The three attorneys for parents who discussed this framed it as some people acting more respectfully towards parents than others. The two agency attorneys framed the issue more as one of perception on the parents' part despite everyone acting respectfully.

Speaking about respect in Strong Starts cases beyond the coordinator's direct role, one attorney for parents said that while they can't speak for parents to say how they feel,

I think that once you accept Strong Starts, things soften for some of our clients in court a little bit.... [That's shown] through the judge asking how they're doing in a more personal way. I think getting to know someone who is part of the court, like they do the coordinator, makes it less scary. (Parent attorney)

Voice

Survey Findings

In this context, *voice* refers to individuals having the opportunity to tell their side of the story and to feel that their questions and concerns are heard and considered. While most caregivers felt they had a voice with the Strong Starts coordinator, their attorney, and the judge alike, there were also clear differences in responses for each group of professionals.

Survey participants widely felt that the Strong Starts coordinator tried to understand their needs (77% strongly agree, 19% agree). Nearly all participants (97%) felt the coordinator was interested in what they had to say (rating of 4 or 5 out of 5).

All participants represented by an attorney agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (58%) that their attorney tried to understand their needs. Of this group, 84% felt their attorney was interested in what they had to say (rating of 4 or 5).

More than three-quarters of participants felt that judges tried to understand their needs (37% strongly agree, 47% agree; see Figure 5.3). Slightly less than two-thirds of participants (61%) felt the judge was interested in what they had to say (rating of 4 or 5). Slightly more than half (51%) felt the judge tried to get to know them (rating of 4 or 5).

Figure 5.3. Most Caregivers Felt They Had a Voice
(% reporting that the person tried to understand their needs)
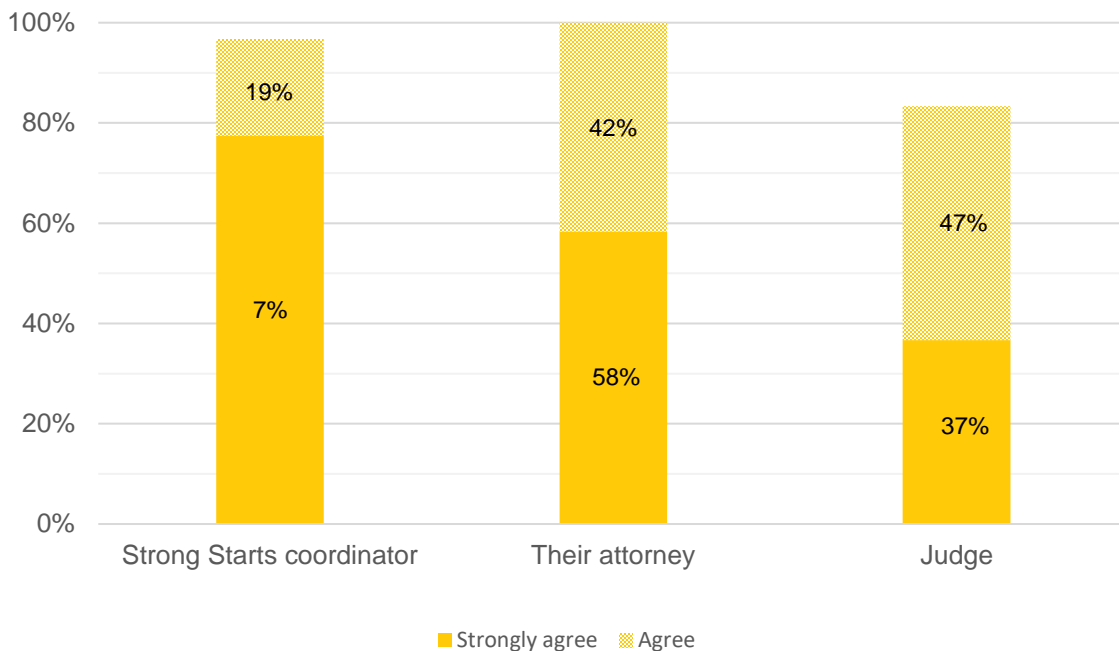
Interview Findings

Parents' experiences of voice are strong; judges and attorneys' perceptions of those experiences are even stronger. There was near unanimity among judge and attorney interviewees that parents have a voice in Strong Starts cases, and more so than in other cases. For example, given the greater opportunities for interaction and communication in Strong Starts, one judge observed that finding and having a voice is a process as the case goes on:

> A few months down the road after a Strong Starts case comes in, that parent suddenly becomes a participant. Not just somebody sitting there letting their lawyer do all the talking or shutting down and just kind of hoping it's over soon and somebody will tell

them what happened. They definitely get a sense of empowerment over time. It's good. We want folks to be a part of what is happening. (Judge)

Similarly, one attorney for children said, "Because they feel like they're being seen and listened to, they talk more. I actually see judges engage with them more one-on-one as opposed to through counsel." At the same time, a few attorneys noted that there are circumstances when a parent's attorney may feel that it is not in their client's best interest for their voice to be heard directly.
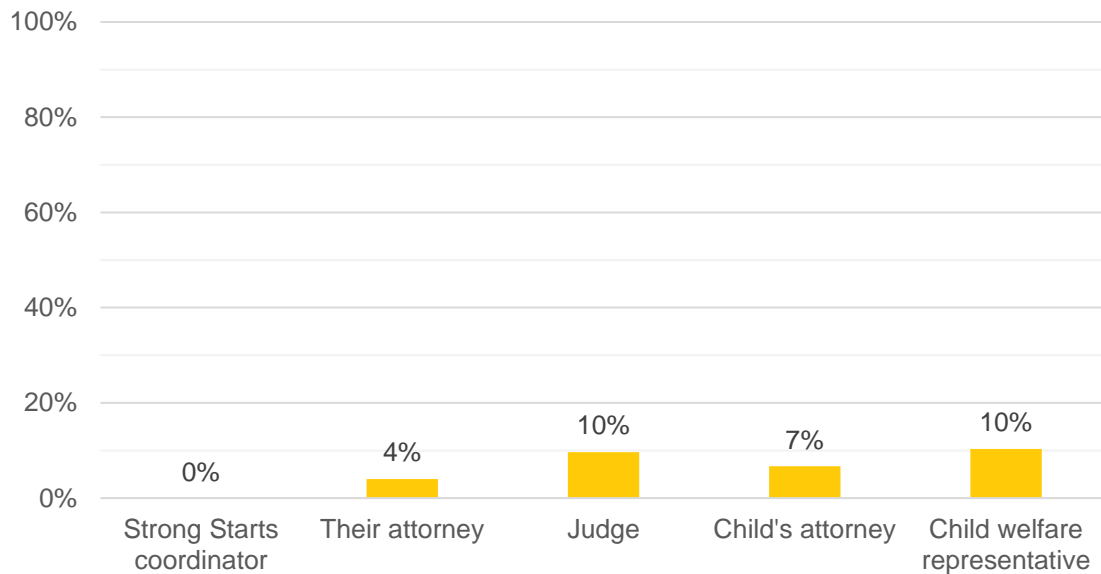
Neutrality

Survey Findings
Parents and caregivers who took the survey reported experiencing very little bias during their family court involvement. Participants were asked if they were treated worse than others based on their race, gender, age, language, or another reason, by the Strong Starts coordinator, their attorney, the judge, the child's attorney, or the child welfare representative. Participants largely rejected the idea that they experienced bias by any of these parties (see Figure 5.4). Asked whether the judge in their case treated them fairly, 87% of parents and caregivers agreed or strongly agreed.

Interview Findings
In contrast to caregivers' survey responses, there was a general sense among the judge and attorney interviewees that parents often perceive bias (i.e., lack of neutrality) in family court interactions, whether in Strong Starts or not. There was some disagreement as to whether there actually *is* bias or if it is only perceived. One interviewee, while not opining on whether bias is a reality, described where some of the perception may come from:

I've seen parents observe their lawyers to be chummy with the attorney for ACS and not understand that there's a professional—there's, lawyers are, their job is to play a role for their client which can be separated apart from their relationship with other professionals in the courtroom…. But that's hard to parse out, it's hard to trust anybody that you don't know. I could see walking into a courthouse and everybody here who may not be from your background, who you don't know, who seem to be all chummy with each other, who may not be outspoken in the courtroom, too, necessarily. (Child attorney)

Figure 5.4. Few Caregivers Experienced Bias, and None from the Strong Starts Coordinator
(% reporting that they were treated worse than others by the person)

Person	%
Strong Starts coordinator	0%
Their attorney	4%
Judge	10%
Child's attorney	7%
Child welfare representative	10%

This comment, like much of what interviewees said regarding bias and perceptions of bias, was not specific to Strong Starts but rather referred to experiences in dependency cases generally. This interviewee did also note that they have seen the "the [Strong Starts] coordinator go to great lengths to avoid" perceptions of bias.

A few interviewees also talked about bias in the form of racism and classism as an intrinsic component of the child welfare system. One attorney for parents explained, "Our clients are never given the benefit of the doubt, ever…. Every decision that our parents make once they're involved with the court system is scrutinized, and that's based on a lot of biases." Another attorney for parents, also speaking explicitly about race and class biases, said, "I think there's a huge disconnect between how those [working] in the system operate in the world with their friends and their own families and their own selves, and the expectations they have for the parents who are in the system."

Interviewees who spoke about this aspect of neutrality also noted race and class disparities in which families are brought into the child welfare system and consequent family court proceedings in the first place. While procedural justice is typically understood as referring to what happens in court and court-related interactions, these interviewees noted that it is also important to consider who comes to the attention of the court and who does not.

As with other tenets of procedural justice, and consistent with survey findings, there was some sense among interviewees that there is more neutrality—less bias—in Strong Starts than in other cases. Some interviewees commented that one way Strong Starts combats bias is through individualized hard work on behalf of each of their families. Those efforts, in one attorney's words, are "almost the best antidote for any bias, real or perceived."

> I think we do talk about bias in terms of class or color and how much that actually exists, and I'm sure there are lots of ways to see that it does exist. The court process is not supposed to do it and I think we all fight hard to make sure it's not happening, and I think the nice thing about Strong Starts is I think it really is . . . leaving no stone unturned. That kind of fights bias right there because you were trying as hard for everybody as you would for anybody and then the court responds. (Child attorney)

No interviewees discussed any bias on the part of the coordinators.

Overall, as noted, interviewees discussed bias more than survey participants reported experiencing it. One possible explanation for these apparent differences is the difference in question framing between surveys and interviews. While the interviewees were asked very general questions (e.g., "If you were a Strong Starts participant, do you think you would perceive any bias in the court process?"), survey questions were more specific (e.g., "How much do you agree or disagree: so-and-so treated you worse than others because of your race, gender, age, language, or some other reason?"). Specifying parties from whom caregivers may have perceived bias limited possibilities for noting systemic bias, which some interviewees discussed. Similarly, the survey did not solicit caregivers' thoughts about bias in who enters family court with dependency cases in the first place.

Parental Engagement

Seven judge and attorney interviewees also observed that parents in Strong Starts cases tend to be more engaged than parents involved in other dependency cases. While this greater engagement does not speak directly to any of the individual procedural justice tenets, the attorneys and judges who spoke about this suggested that the greater engagement comes from the coordinators' overall procedurally just approach. This observation is consistent with procedural justice theory.

One way increased engagement may manifest is by greater attendance at court hearings. For example, one attorney for parents and children said:

I find them to be more engaged because they feel like people care, there's so many people that are interested in what's going on…. I do feel that they come [to court] more because they see that people are interested and people care. A lot of people that are involved in the family court really feel like they have no one . . . that no one cares and now they see that we do care about them. I think it increases their confidence and I have seen it as a positive influence. (Parent & child attorney)

Chapter 6
Program Strengths and Challenges

Parent/Caregivers' Feedback

Survey participants were asked how helpful 16 different aspects of Strong Starts were to them and their families: very helpful, helpful, or not helpful. Almost all of the most helpful aspects involve direct interaction with the Strong Starts coordinators or referrals for services. At least 90% of participants found aspects related to the coordinators helpful or very helpful (see Figure 6.1). More than 85% of participants found service referrals helpful or very helpful (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.1. Caregivers Said Interactions with the Coordinator were Helpful
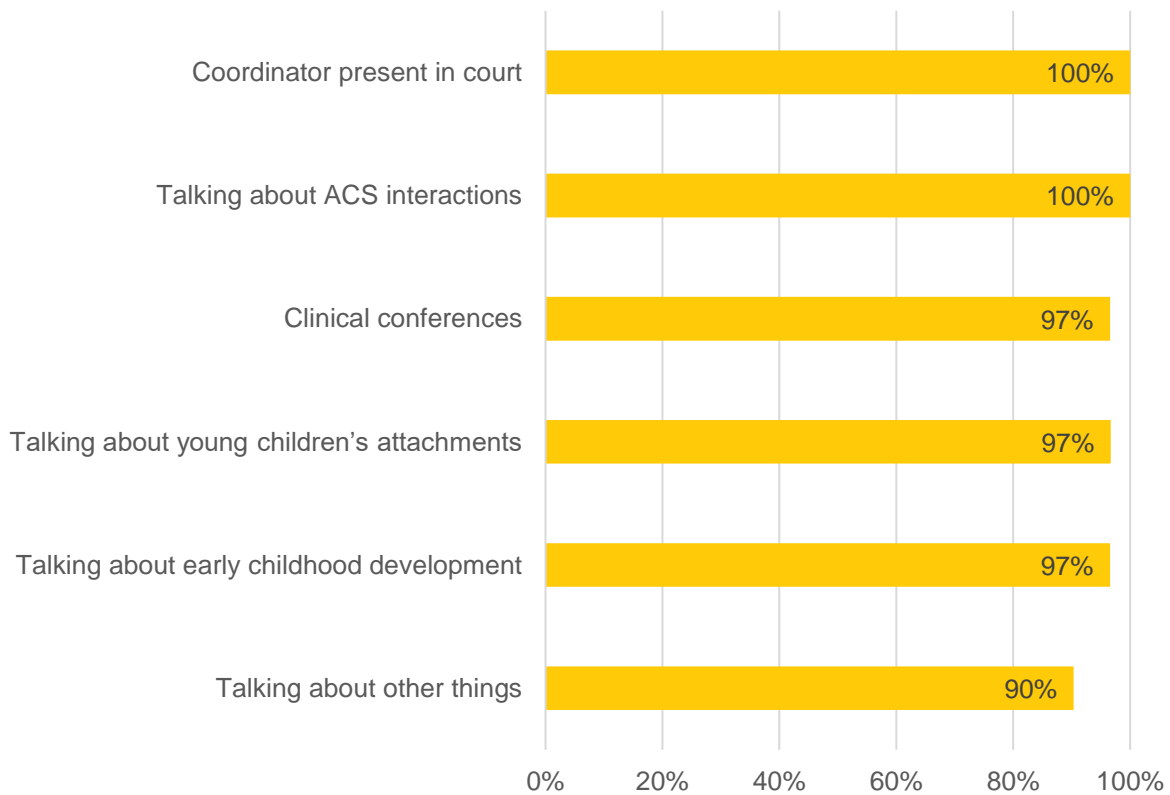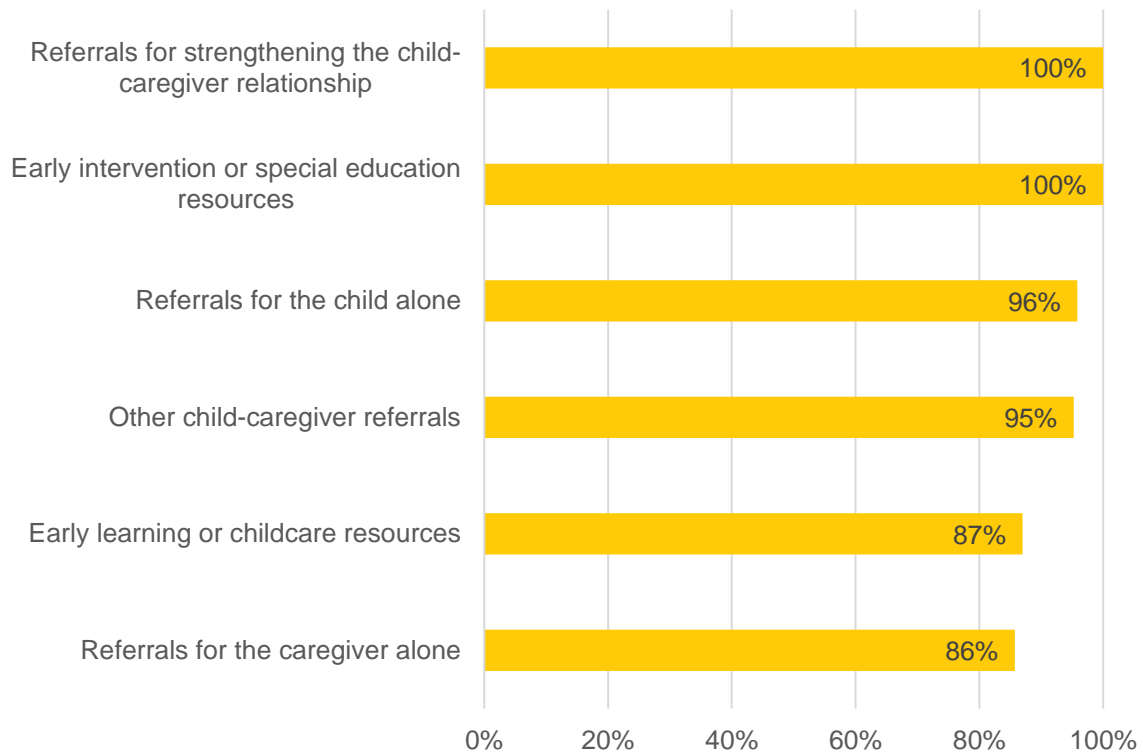*(% reporting these were helpful/very helpful)*

Figure 6.2. Caregivers Said a Range of Referrals were Helpful
(% reporting these were helpful/very helpful)

Category	Percent
Referrals for strengthening the child-caregiver relationship	100%
Early intervention or special education resources	100%
Referrals for the child alone	96%
Other child-caregiver referrals	95%
Early learning or childcare resources	87%
Referrals for the caregiver alone	86%

Further, survey participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the program overall: 94% responded that they would be *very likely* to recommend Strong Starts to somebody else in a similar situation to theirs, with the remaining 6% saying that they would be *likely* to do so. Additionally, more than half (55%) said that if they needed help with something in the future, they would be *very likely* to contact Strong Starts; an additional 23% said that they would be *likely* to do so.

Professionals' Feedback

Judge and attorney interviewees shared a number of specific aspects of the program which they either find particularly helpful or feel represent areas for improvement. While many of these were idiosyncratic—i.e., only one or two interviewees shared that particular perspective, or it pertained to a specific situation rather than the program overall—other strengths and challenges emerged as themes.

The two main areas of program strengths that interviewees identified echoed survey responses:

- **Program Coordinators** Eleven of the 16 interviewees discussed some aspect of the coordinators' role and how they approach the work. Aspects remarked upon included coordinators' diligence leading to thorough and timely service referrals and reports; intervention between court dates; neutral presence and coordinating role; presence as someone who respondent parents trust; and seeing parents as real, whole people in tough situations, and helping the court to see that.

- **Tailored Service Referrals** Four of the 16 interviewees spoke about this program asset. Comments included noting the strong relationships coordinators have with service providers and their ability to connect families to services that speak to families' specific needs.

Areas for growth the interviewees identified included:

- **Limited Program Capacity** Eight interviewees expressed a desire for Strong Starts to be available to more families; this included some who felt the eligibility requirements are unnecessarily restrictive.

- **Need for Greater Attorney Familiarity with the Program** One of the three interviewees who mentioned this as an area for improvement raised the possibility of having dedicated attorneys from each agency assigned to Strong Starts cases.

- **Insufficient Program Space** While only two interviewees spoke about this issue, they both tied it to specific challenges in the program, leading to the inclusion here of this concern. One of these participants, in Staten Island, discussed not having any meeting space for clinical conferences or other meetings inside the courthouse, which creates difficulties. The other, in Queens, expressed a belief that more people would attend the professional education offered by Strong Starts if the sessions were held in the court building.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Strong Starts program, with particular interest in future petitions, case length, family well-being, changes in court practice, procedural justice, and program strengths and challenges. This chapter provides a summary of the findings, recommendations based on those findings, and study limitations.

Summary of Findings

1. **Future Petitions** Strong Starts participation is associated with reduced odds of future abuse or neglect petitions. Also, families with more children and initial allegations pertaining to substance abuse and/or mental illness are associated with higher odds of future petitions.

2. **Time to Case Resolution** Strong Starts participation is associated with longer case times when the child's final home is with the respondent parent, and with shorter case times when the case results in the child living with another caregiver. Seven additional factors are associated with longer case times: more children in a family; abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and derivative allegations; child removals; and a final home away from the respondent parent.

3. **Family Well-Being** The parents and other caregivers who completed the survey reported that Strong Starts improved their family well-being. Improvements were noted in a number of areas, including:

   - Increased knowledge about early childhood, including early childhood development, early childhood trauma, and the importance of attachment to caregivers;
   - Improved relationships between caregivers and the children in the case; and
   - Supported navigation of the child welfare process.

4. **Professional Practice** Strong Starts impacts the practice of judges and attorneys in three main areas: education about early childhood mental health, knowledge of

available resources and interventions for children and families, and improved efficiency in Strong Starts cases.

5. **Procedural Justice** Overall, though not universally, survey participants understood what was happening in their case and what was required of them, felt they were treated with respect and had a chance to tell their side of the story, and saw the process as unbiased. Interviewees also perceived high levels of procedural justice in the program, while observing bias in the child welfare process generally. There are some apparent gaps between participant experiences and professionals' perceptions. Most notably, survey participants expressed some nuances regarding respect and voice that were not expressed by the interviewees.

6. **Program Strengths** Survey participants and interviewees alike found the Strong Starts coordinators and tailored service referrals to be particularly strong program components.

7. **Program Challenges** Suggestions made by interviewees for program growth include increasing the number of families served, ensuring that all attorneys on Strong Starts cases are familiar with the program, and obtaining adequate space for all program activities.

Recommendations

Study findings suggest a number of recommendations, in three categories: recommendations for continuity, program improvement, and areas for further research.

Keep What's Working

Given the positive study results, many of the recommendations are about continuing on the current course. Strong Starts should continue to emphasize the coordinators and their work with families; connecting families with services targeted at their particular needs; and collaborating with and educating judges and attorneys in the family court.

Program Improvement

Additional program recommendations come from interviewee feedback:

- Work to increase the program's capacity to work with more families.

- Work to secure adequate space for all program activities, including conferences and professional education, in all sites.
- When an attorney is assigned to a Strong Starts case for the first time, provide a brief orientation about the program and how Strong Starts cases differ from traditionally processed cases. Additionally, the program could create materials for all family court attorneys to learn more about the program.

Further Research

Further research is needed to make informed program recommendations in other areas:

- **Explore the relationship between case time, final home, and Strong Starts.** There is a need to explore the reasons for longer case processing time when the child's final home is with the respondent parent. One plausible explanation is that some Strong Starts cases take longer because they are working toward reunification, in cases where that would not happen otherwise.

- **Understand and address needs in mental health and substance abuse support.** Families with mental health substance abuse-related allegations have much higher odds of having new petitions than families without these allegations. Further research is needed to understand what further supports families need to address this, so these supports can be implemented.

- **Understand gaps in procedural justice.** Research would be useful to more fully understand where there are gaps between professionals' perceptions and families' experiences of procedural justice in dependency cases, and what is behind these discrepancies. This knowledge could be leveraged to close gaps, further improving procedural justice in Strong Starts cases and family court generally. Also, while caregivers largely rated their experiences highly on the tenets of procedural justice, there is still room for improvement.

- **Examine racial inequities.** While, as raised by some interviewees, racial disparities are an important issue in child welfare, this study was not able to look at possible racial disparities in outcomes. Regular collection of race data by the court would allow for analyses of racial disparities generally and of how programs such as Strong Starts address them. Such data could also be used in addressing racial disproportionality in which families have dependency cases in the first place, another interviewee concern.

Study Limitations

As with any study, this evaluation has some limitations. One, the small samples of both court data and survey participants could limit the generalizability of the findings. Two, including only cases from a single courtroom for the court data-based analyses, while purposeful and necessary for the research design, could also limit the generalizability of results. Having follow-up data limited to one county—the same county where initial petitions were filed (Bronx Co., NY)—means that some subsequent petitions in other jurisdictions were likely missed for both the Strong Starts and comparison cases. To the extent that Strong Starts is referred cases with particularly complex needs, the program and comparison groups could differ in ways for which information was not available.

Additionally, there is the possibility that caregivers with less positive experiences may have been less inclined to take the survey, potentially leading to biased survey results. Another limitation is that the small survey sample did not allow for sub-analyses based on relationship to the child (e.g., respondent parents, kinship foster parents), though people in these groups may have different experiences from each other.

These limitations notwithstanding, the multiple data sources and analyses used in this study allow for a robust evaluation of the Strong Starts Court Initiative. The evaluation provides evidence that Strong Starts successfully supports children, strengthens families, and advances attention to early childhood needs in dependency cases involving the youngest children.

References

Afifi, Tracie O., Samantha Salon, Isabel Garcés, Shannon Struck, Janique Fortier, Tamara Taillieu, Ashley Stewart-Tufescu, Gordon J. G. Asmundson, Jitender Sareen, and Harriet L. MacMillan. 2020. "Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Among a Community-Based Sample of Parents and Adolescents." *BMC Pediatrics* 20:178. doi: 10.1186/s12887-020-02063-3.

Anda, Robert F., Vincent J. Felitti, J. Douglas Bremner, John D. Walker, Charles Whitfield, Bruce D. Perry, Shanta R. Dube, and Wayne H. Giles. 2006. "The Enduring Effects of Abuse and Related Adverse Experiences in Childhood: A Convergence of Evidence from Neurobiology and Epidemiology." *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 256:174-86. doi: 10.1007/s00406-005-0624-4.

Casanueva, Cecilia, Jennifer Goldman Fraser, Adrianne Gilbert, Candice Maze, Lynne Katz, Mary Ann Ullery, Ann M. Stacks, and Cindy Lederman. 2013. "Evaluation of the Miami Child Well-Being Court Model: Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being Findings." *Child Welfare* 92(3):73-96.

Casanueva, Cecilia, Sarah Harris, Christine Carr, Chelsea Burfeind, and Keith Smith. 2017. *Final Evaluation Report of the Quality Improvement Center for Research-Based Infant-Toddler Court Teams*. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.

Cleveland, Kyndra C., and Jodi A. Quas. 2020. "What's Fair in Child Welfare? Parent Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences." *Child Maltreatment*, advance online publication:1-13. doi: 10.1177/1077559520975499.

Coan, James A. 2016. "Chapter 12: Toward a Neuroscience of Attachment." Pp. 242-69 in *Handbook of Attachment, Third Edition: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications,* edited by Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver. New York: The Guilford Press.

Cyr, Chantel, Eveline M. Euser, Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, and Marnius H. van Ijzendoorn. 2010. "Attachment Security and Disorganization in Maltreating and High-Risk Families: A Series of Meta-Analyses." *Development and Psychopathology* 22:87-108. doi: 10.1017/s0954579409990289.

Dettlaff, Alan J., and Reiko Boyd. 2020. "Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System: Why Do They Exist and What Can Be Done to Address Them?" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 692:253-74. doi: [10.1177/0002716220980329](10.1177/0002716220980329).

Faria, Ann-Marie, Jill Bowden, Jameela Conway-Turner, Jingtong Pan, Tina Ryznar, Laura Michaelson, Taletha Derrington, and Jill Watson. 2020. *The Safe Babies Court Team Evaluation: Changing the Trajectories of Children in Foster Care*. Washington, DC: American Institute for Research.

Flango, Victor E., and Neal Kauder. 2009. *Court Performance Measures in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases: Key Measures.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Florida Courts. 2018. *Early Childhood Court Comparative Analysis.* Retrieved March 23, 2021, from https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/426436/file/early-childhood-court-comparative-analysis.pdf.

Fong, Kelley. 2017. "Child Welfare Involvement and Contexts of Poverty: The Role of Parental Adversities, Social Networks, and Social Services." *Children and Youth Services Review* 72:5-13. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.011.

James Bell Associates. 2009. *Evaluation of the Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers: Final Report*. Submitted to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

Lens, Vicki. 2017. "Engaging Parents in Family Court: Lessons from an Observational Study of Child Protection Cases." *Journal of Social Work* 17(2):129-46. doi: [10.1177/1468017316637589](10.1177/1468017316637589).

Magruder, Lisa, Marianna Tutwiler, and Jessica Pryce. 2019. *2018-2019 Early Childhood Court Evaluation: Final Report to the Office of Court Improvement.* Tallahassee, FL: Florida Institute for Child Welfare at Florida State University.

Mansournia, Mohammad Ali, Angelika Geroldinger, Sander Greenland, and Georg Heinze. 2018. "Separation in Logistic Regression: Causes, Consequences, and Control." *American Journal of Epidemiology* 187(4):864-70.

McCombs-Thornton, Kimberly L., and E. Michael Foster. 2012. "The Effect of the ZERO TO THREE Court Teams Initiative on Types of Exits from the Foster Care System – A Completing Risks Analysis." *Children and Youth Services Review* 34:169-78.

Merritt, Darcey H. 2020. "How Do Families Experience and Interact with CPS?" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 692:203-26. doi: [10.1177/0002716220979520](10.1177/0002716220979520).

Shonkoff, Jack P., and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. 2000. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Rindskopf, David. 2002. "Infinite Parameter Estimates in Logistic Regress: Opportunities, Not Problems." *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics* 27(2):147-61.

Small, Mario Luis. 2011. "How to Conduct a Mixed Methods Study: Recent Trends in a Rapidly Growing Literature." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:57-86.

Sroufe, L. Alan. 2005. "Attachment and Development: A Prospective, Longitudinal Study from Birth to Adulthood." *Attachment & Human Development* 7(4):349-367. doi: [10.1080/14616730500365928](10.1080/14616730500365928).

Stacks, Ann M., Kristyn Wong, Carla Barron, and Tina Ryznar. 2020. "Permanency and Well-Being Outcomes for Maltreated Infants: Pilot Results from an Infant-Toddler Court Team." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 101(104322):1-10.

Thompson, Ross A. 2016. "Chapter 16: Early Attachment and Later Development: Reframing the Questions." Pp. 330-48 in *Handbook of Attachment, Third Edition: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications,* edited by Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver. New York: The Guilford Press.

Tyler, Tom R. 1990. *Why People Obey the Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. 2021. *Child Maltreatment 2019.* Available from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2019.

Widom, Cathy Spatz, Sally J. Czaja, Tyrone Bentley, and Mark S. Johnson. 2012. "A Prospective Investigation of Physical Health Outcomes in Abused and Neglected Children: New Findings from a 30-Year Follow-Up." *American Journal of Public Health* 102(6):1135-44.

Appendix A
Statistical Findings for New Petitions

Table A.1. Strong Starts Participation, Allegation Types, and Family Size Affect Future Petitions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
N	141	141	133	133	133	133	133
-2 Log Likelihood	67.608	77.238	35.640	51.834	42.949	40.960	41.128
Cox & Snell pseudo-R^2 [1]	0.596***	0.568***	0.673***	0.631***	0.655***	0.660***	0.659***
			Odds Ratios				
Strong Starts	0.000 [2]		0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
Child & Family Demographics							
Child's age at filing (in months)			0.957	0.996	0.982	0.978	0.954
Male child			0.354	0.322	0.770	0.431	0.509
Primary respondent's age at filing (in years)			1.078	1.049	1.043	1.056	1.035
Number of children in family			18.024*	5.148+		7.837*	7.827*
Allegations							
Inadequate supervision			0.602	0.564	0.506	0.568	0.793
Substance abuse			9.989*	2.644	4.445+		8.191*
Neglect			2.191	0.637	2.031	3.277	1.481
Domestic violence			3.836	2.469	2.176	2.322	3.125
Mental illness			21.001*	4.274	7.598+	14.187*	
Abuse, including physical & sexual			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Derivative allegation			5.361	1.830	.717	1.946	2.634
Case Events							
Child was removed			0.580	1.128	0.839	1.025	1.463
Final home not with respondent parent			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Constant	0.134***	0.085***	<0.001*	0.002*	0.025	0.002*	0.003*

+p≤.10,* p≤.05, ** p≤.01, ***p≤.001

[1] Asterisks indicate statistical significance of model chi-square.

[2] Calculated odds ratios of 0 indicate an infinite coefficient slope for the parameter, i.e., that no cases where the variable equals 1 had a subsequent petition filed.

Table A.1 shows the results for seven logistic regression models. First, there is a model including only the intercept and Strong Starts participation (Model 1), an intercept-only model (Model 2), a model including all variables (Model 3), and a model with all variables except Strong Starts (Model 4). Then, there is an additional model excluding each of the statistically significant Model 3 predictors in turn: number of children in the family, mental illness allegation, and substance abuse allegation (Models 5, 6, and 7, respectively).

Since the slope of the Strong Starts coefficient is infinite, SPSS produces an unreliable parameter estimate and an incongruous p-value. Therefore, fit statistics of multiple models need to be compared, especially -2 log likelihood (Rindskopf 2002). Rindskopf gives a difference between model -2 log likelihoods of 3.84 as the criterion for determining the usefulness of an omitted predictor; the model with the lower -2 log likelihood (hereafter, -2LL) is the better one.

First, comparing Model 1 to Model 2, Model 1 has a lower -2LL with a difference of 9.63 (77.238-67.608), indicating that Model 1 is the better one, and Strong Starts is a useful predictor of a subsequent petition filing. Turning to the multivariate models, Model 3 (-2LL=35.640) is a better model than Model 4 (-2LL=51.834; difference of 16.194); once again Strong Starts is a useful predictor. Further, Model 3 – the full model – is a better model than Model 1 (intercept and Strong Starts only). The difference between these -2LLs is 31.968.

Model 3 also has 3 statistically significant predictors of subsequent filing: number of children in the family (OR=18.024), mental illness allegation (OR=21.001), and substance abuse allegation (OR=9.989). To be consistent, these variables were removed from Model 3 in turn in order to again compare the -2LLs. Model 5 (omitting number of children) has -2LL of 42.949. Model 6 (omitting substance abuse allegation) has -2LL of 40.960. Model 7 (omitting mental illness allegation) has -2LL of 41.128. These are higher than Model 3 by 7.309, 5.320, and 5.488, respectively. Each of these differences is higher than the 3.84 threshold, confirming the variables' usefulness, but lower than the difference in -2LL when Strong Starts was omitted from the full model. The lower magnitude of these differences suggests that Strong Starts, with its infinite parameter, is the most important predictor of these four.

Several additional models were also estimated (not shown). In Model 3, the abuse allegation, derivative allegation, and final home variables also have empty cells, and therefore infinite slopes. These were each omitted in turn to observe the resulting differences in -2LL. None of

Appendix A

the differences met the threshold, showing them not to be useful predictors (differences of 1.531, 0.000, and 2.667, respectively).

Since comparison cases averaged longer follow-up times than Strong Starts cases (see Table 2.1), other estimated models are checks to see if the difference in follow-up time between groups accounts for the observed difference in new petitions. First, a pair of models was estimated including follow-up time as a predictor. While this variable is significant in the full model (albeit with a negligible OR of 1.002), removing the Strong Starts variable again leads to a large difference in -2LL (41.480-31.761=9.719).

Next, a pair of models was estimated on a subsample of cases, first with all predictor variables and then with Strong Starts removed. This subsample included all Strong Starts cases and those comparison cases with follow-up times within the range found in the program sample. Again, the difference in -2LL between the models (33.428-20.630=12.798) is sufficient to show Strong Starts as an important variable in predicting future petitions, despite group differences in follow-up times.

Appendix A