

Building Evidence for Family First Programs and Services: *Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)*



Background

The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) incentivizes child welfare approaches that prioritize keeping kids safe and families together. This legislation authorizes federal reimbursement to states for the delivery of evidence-based programs and services that prevent the need for foster care. In October 2022, the Administration for Children and Families approved Colorado's bold [Five-Year Family First Prevention Services Plan](#) (Colorado's Plan) to maximize prevention investments in child welfare that help Colorado's children, youth, and families thrive, together.

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to serve as the [Family First Evidence-Building Hub](#). In this role, the Colorado Lab ensures strategic investments in evidence building for Family First programs and services. The Hub coordinates evaluations that are designed to both meet Colorado-specific learning goals and advance [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) (Clearinghouse) evidence designations.

Why TF-CBT?

[TF-CBT](#) is a clinical intervention designed to treat children and youth who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, dysfunctional feelings or thoughts, or behavioral problems. The intervention also supports caregivers in overcoming their personal distress, implementing effective parenting skills, and fostering positive interactions with their child or youth. TF-CBT was prioritized as an anchor service within Colorado's [mental health service array](#) to ensure wide availability of a service that targets an expansive age range with multiple access options. TF-CBT is implemented by 40 certified therapists in Colorado, primarily in clinics, therapist offices, and treatment centers. In addition, there are many trained (but not certified) TF-CBT therapists across the state delivering the therapy.

Evidence Building for TF-CBT

TF-CBT has received a "promising" evidence designation from the Clearinghouse and is not yet in Colorado's Plan. Aligned with Step 5 on the [Steps to Building Evidence](#), the [Center for Policy Research](#) (CPR) implemented a school-based, quasi-experimental study with the goal of increasing the Clearinghouse rating and testing how best to leverage a school-based mental health delivery setting.



This study aimed to assess the impact of TF-CBT on child well-being (behavioral, emotional, and social functioning) outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms.

This study began in June 2022. Due to external constraints and implementation challenges, CPR and the Colorado Lab, in consult with CDHS, decided to pause the study in early 2024. CPR documented lessons learned to inform the Family First strategy and future evaluation designs.

The evaluation was conducted by CPR on behalf of CDHS, under the coordination of the Colorado Lab's Family First Evidence-Building Hub.

