



## Judge Cindy Lederman

These days, babies may be heard cooing, screeching, giggling, and crying in Judge Cindy Lederman's busy Miami-Dade County Juvenile Court room. But it was not always so. Before publication of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Lederman's court was a baby-free zone. A sign outside even warned, "No Food, No Cell Phones, No Babies," as if the most vulnerable members of the families with whom Lederman works every day were just another unwelcome distraction.

It took the ground-breaking *Neurons* report for Lederman to see that babies and toddlers were "absent from every family and juvenile court in America, and we did not worry about that because we assumed they were going to be OK."

*Neurons* confirmed that early environments matter, that nurturing relationships are essential to child well-being and that children from birth to age 5 can be harmed by chronic stress, by witnessing trauma, by neglect and more, was like a light bulb turning on for Judge Lederman. She says unequivocally: "*Neurons* profoundly changed my professional life."

As a member of the Board on Children, Youth and Families during the time that *Neurons* was being developed by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Lederman got to see a world far removed from the one in which she regularly dwells, the one full of dysfunctional families where poverty, mental health problems, lack of education, and substance abuse contribute to toxic environments.

Though she has extensive legal experience and training, the world of research was new to Lederman. "I didn't know why it was important," she says. But she soon learned that research, particularly from the neurosciences, showed how babies born into the kind of disadvantaged families she was seeing in her court room could grow into the

hundreds of damaged children and youth who sit silently or sullenly before her every year. She also soon understood that science could help improve her decisions for very young children.

Thanks to the research reported in *Neurons*, the well-being of babies and toddlers is now paramount in Judge Lederman's court. She keeps a copy of the 588-page report next to the statutes book on her bench. She has given countless copies of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* away. "I am a frontline observer of human misery," Lederman said, so she uses the research in *Neurons* to help her decide, for example, whether a baby should be returned to a violent home or placed with a foster family or whether an aging or ill grandmother can care for a neglected toddler whose mother is a drug addict.

"What we did was change the culture in the court from ignoring infants and toddlers to focusing on them," Judge Lederman said. "In Miami today...infants and toddlers get more attention than other children. Whether that is right or wrong, I don't know. But we completely transformed [our approach] because we know [from *Neurons*] that if we do our job from the moment these children come in [to the court], they can be healed; they can be ready to learn when they go to school."



"Because of (*Neurons*) I know how important those first few years are. These children come to us so very harmed and before *Neurons* I used to say, 'Oh, they'll be OK,' and now I know they won't."

Judge Cindy S. Lederman serves in the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court including 10 years as the presiding judge. Her commitment to bringing science into the courtroom resulted from her 10 year involvement with the Board on Children, Youth, and Families.

Intervention and the healing that goes with it are important pieces of the program Judge Lederman has built in her court. She explains: “The horrors of maltreatment can be an opportunity in Miami because we are going to focus on the youngest children. We know from the research that there probably is something wrong, so we assume something is wrong and we’re going to try to find it.”

Lederman’s court also uses the science of early childhood development to evaluate whether interventions with the children who come to court are working. “How do they look when they come to us?” she asks. “We learn exactly what our population looks like compared to the general population so we know how to intervene; and we intervene.”

“We have introduced child care and psychotherapy. One intervention we use is a one-on-one parenting program, modeling good parenting,” Lederman says. She talks about showing young mothers, who may have grown up in homes without one or both parents, how to smile at their babies and talk to them and how to get on the floor to play with them.

Lederman has spread the work of *Neurons* and the need for judges to stay abreast of all related science. She works through her association with the largest and oldest organization of family court judges – the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges – and through her frequent journal articles.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), through the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, awarded a grant for the implementation of Judge Lederman’s program, “Translating Child-Parent Psychotherapy Into the

Juvenile Court System: The Miami Child Well Being Court Model Project.” The program has now been implemented in another Florida city, Tallahassee, as well as in Detroit, Michigan.

“The purpose of the grant is to replicate what we’re doing [in Miami],” Lederman said.

Even before the CDC grant, Judge Lederman was advocating for more attention to the needs of vulnerable infants. She was instrumental in the creation of an important video, *Helping Babies from the Bench*.

“We went to (the organization) ZERO TO THREE and said, ‘you are dealing with people with a legal education. When you tell people with a legal education that a baby at six months of age can be depressed, they don’t believe you. So you have to show them.’ Our concept was to have translational research shown in a way that a judge could see the science.” She said that “the most effective thing . . . is the ‘still face’ experiment.” In this video, a baby happily responds to interaction with her caregiver. But when the caregiver conveys no emotion or interaction — presenting a still face — the baby very quickly becomes increasingly distressed.

“It’s heart wrenching,” said Lederman, “and I can’t tell you how many judges have seen me years later at a conference and they say, ‘You know, I remember that and it changed the way I thought about it.’ But if they had read about it they wouldn’t believe it. They had to see it.”

Because of *Neurons*, Judge Lederman continues to be an ardent advocate for, as she calls it, “the marriage of law and science in the courtroom to help us make better decisions.”

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### For More Information

Copies of the report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (888) 624-8373 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) or via the NAP homepage [www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods](http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods). Full text of the report and a free pdf copy of the Summary are also available at [www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods](http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods).

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*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* is a report from the Board on Children, Youth, and Families in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. For more information, contact the board at 202-334-1935 or [www.bocyf.org](http://www.bocyf.org)